Family Interaction Patterns Among Families with Normal, Disturbed, and Drug-Abusing Adolescents

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The relationships between family interaction patterns and the symptomatology of the individual family member are central to many therapeutic approaches. This study was designed to determine whether family interaction patterns differ significantly among three groups of families defined according to the adolescent offspring's symptoms. Thirty families were evaluated in a one-hour interview while three observers behind a one-way mirror rated verbal behavior and the quality of interaction between father, mother, and adolescent. Assessed behaviors included the ability to reach a decision, decision time, scapegoating, and double-bind messages. In addition, the quality of the family's interaction was assessed at four different times during the interview. The results established that the three family groups did not differ demographically. A comparison of the two disturbed family groups yielded no significant differences, with the exception of the adolescent's presenting problem and behaviors. The normal group was significantly different from the other two groups in frequency of scapegoating of the adolescent and the ability to reach a decision. Additionally, the normal families displayed clearer communication, more freedom of expression, more cooperation, and greater sensitivity among members. Several variables did not discriminate the normal group from the disturbed family groups.

INTRODUCTION

This study is aimed at investigating the family's importance during adolescence by empirically establishing patterns of family interaction in different types of families separated by the adolescent's symptoms and behavior.

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2 Research was conducted from November 1975 through February 1976.
One goal was to evaluate whether drug-abusing adolescents were different from emotionally disturbed adolescents by determining if these groups' families interact in significantly different patterns. A second aim of the research was to investigate how the families of these disturbed adolescents differ in interactional patterns from families with a normal adolescent. If drug abuse is merely a manifestation of an emotional problem, we would expect the drug-abusing adolescent and his family's interactions not to differ from those of the emotionally disturbed adolescent and his family. Furthermore, these families were anticipated to interact in patterns that would be significantly different from those of families with a nonsymptomatic adolescent. The type of interaction pattern prevalent in these disturbed families could then be established empirically.

It was hypothesized that the interaction styles of families with a drug-abusing adolescent would not be significantly different from those of families with an emotionally disturbed adolescent. Specifically, between these two family groups no significant difference was expected in the levels of decision-making ability, scapegoating, accuracy of perceptions, freedom of expression, cooperation among members, and clarity of communications. The frequency of double-bind messages and positive communications was also predicted not to differ significantly. The second major hypothesis stated that the families with a normal adolescent would differ significantly in interaction style from the families with drug-abusing and emotionally disturbed adolescents. Thus, the expectation was that there would be a significant difference in the variables measured when compared according to normal versus drug-abusing and emotionally disturbed families. The variables were identical to those on which the drug-abusing and emotionally disturbed families were compared.

**METHOD**

**Setting and Sample**

The study was conducted at a mental health/mental retardation center servicing a four-township area in a suburban Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, county. The structured interview with father, mother, and adolescent was conducted in a large room equipped with a one-way mirror and a sound system. All family members were informed of the mirror and the microphones and the fact that they were being observed and heard by three trained observers.

Thirty families were selected from a geographic area populated predominantly by White middle- and upper-middle-class families. Appropriate families had to be intact with an adolescent offspring between the ages of 14-18. Three subsamples of families were drawn in relation to the presenting behaviors of the adolescent.