ABSTRACT: This article supplies specific interventions and illustrative dialogue to implement a systematic approach to family therapy. This approach is comprised of five steps which are: (1) elicit concrete behavioral goals; (2) elicit information about how the client has tried to implement these goals in the past; (3) elicit his ideas about why the behavior is occurring; (4) interpret how these ideas prevent the clients from insisting the child change his behavior; (5) undermine these ideas through appropriate questioning.

The following is a description of five steps comprising a systematic approach to a form of family therapy. I have used this approach for the last six years and have found it to be extremely useful and effective. The steps are: (1) elicit concrete behavioral goals from the parents; (2) elicit information about how they have tried to implement these goals in the past; (3) elicit their ideas about why the behavior is occurring; (4) interpret how these ideas prevent the parents from insisting the child change his behavior; (5) undermine these ideas through appropriate questioning. The purpose of this article will be to supply specific interventions I make to implement this systematic approach. I have delineated the theory and rationale behind this approach in another article (Lesoff, 1975).

(1): Elicit Concrete Behavioral Goals

In order to elicit concrete behavioral goals, I ask, “What are your complaints about Johnny’s behavior?” The word “complaint” is used deliberately to imply to the parents that they will be discussing behavior they object to and are likely to be angry about.

Sometimes the parent will answer succinctly, “Stealing, running away, won’t go to school, won’t do chores around the house, etc.” Then I have completed the first phase of step (1): i.e., getting the
parents to state what they want or don't want in behavioral terms. I can then go on to the second phase of step (1); i.e., getting the parents to perceive themselves as the agent of change. I do this by asking the parent, "Would you be interested in getting Johnny to stop stealing?" Parents usually say, "Yes," and thereby agree to be the agent of change.

There are various difficulties that arise during these phases; i.e., parents do not always have behavioral goals and do not always agree to be the agent of change. The following are some typical examples of the various objections parents raise and how I handle them.

Some parents will deny they have any complaints. "Johnny is fine at home; it is just the school that has complaints." The task is then to establish the fact that it is the parents who have the complaints. I do this by asking the parents if it is acceptable to them that Johnny do whatever the school is complaining about; i.e., fighting, not staying in his seat, etc. Sometimes parents will argue that the school is at fault and imply that the behavior is reasonable or justifiable in such a school. Then I say, "Even though the teacher is very strict (or whatever their criticisms are) do you want Johnny to fight, run around the room, etc.?" They usually say "No," and I have then established the fact that they are here to talk about behavior that they do not want.

Sometimes parents will say they do not have any complaints. They are here to help Johnny. Then I can say, "What is Johnny doing that makes you feel he needs help?" Once the parent cites certain behaviors, I can say, "If you got Johnny to stop crying all the time, stop pacing his bedroom floor at night, etc., how would you know he needs help?" Parents usually respond, "We wouldn't." Thus I have established the concrete behavioral goals.

Sometimes parents cite vague abstract goals, e.g., "We want Johnny to respect authority and increase his self-esteem." To concretize such abstract goals, I can say, "What would Johnny have to do for you to feel he respected authority and had increased his self-esteem?"

Sometimes parents are too concrete about their complaint; e.g., a parent can complain about an incident that took place only once and does not seem likely to occur again, at least to me: "Johnny broke his toy train last month but we have decided not to get him another toy train." I can generalize this complaint by asking, "Does he usually break his toys? Are you concerned he will break other things in the future? What was your point about his breaking his toy train?"

If a parent rambles from complaint to complaint and never sticks to any one, I can focus the discussion onto one goal by asking, "I have heard all your complaints but, unless we deal with just one, you won't know anymore about how to handle it when you leave than when you came in. Which one would you like to talk about and work on now?"

Problems also frequently arise with regard to the issue of who will