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PERSPECTIVES

Equity and e-Learning for Children: Therapists as Advocates

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Marcus, a 49-year-old widower and a single parent, was referred to therapy because he was concerned that his 10-year-old son, Edwin, and 13-year-old daughter, Bitu, lagged behind academically during Spring 2020 distance learning. Marcus works two jobs and cannot be available to help his children stay on task with schoolwork due to his work schedule. The children use two refurbished electronic devices that are not reliable. He constantly worries that he is not able to monitor all that is going on at home when he is not there.

While Marcus speaks fluent Spanish, and functional English, his children are primarily monolingual but understand Spanish. The family has some close friends in town, but the family's other relatives live out of state. Additionally, Marcus does not have the money to obtain all the equipment and necessities needed for his children to take advantage of all the school district's resources to ensure a successful distance learning plan. He is starting to worry about Edwin becoming interested in online content that is inappropriate for his age and feels ill-prepared to help Bitu as she is going through puberty.

Who gets left behind? Who is brought in within the folds of established systems? Inequities, and their implications should be central concerns of every clinician during these difficult times, yet for one reason or another, they are often overlooked. On one hand, we read about families who have hired private tutors to oversee their children's remote learning, and on the other hand, there are families like Marcus' who struggle to keep up with learning. Many families, despite their best intentions, simply do not have the resources to be on an equal footing with their more privileged counterparts when overseeing their children's education. Access to electronic devices, a safe learning environment, and appropriate adult engagement are sadly not guaranteed to children in every household. This can have a far-reaching impact on the quality and experience of e-learning for children. The National Center for Education and Statistics (U.S. Facts, 2020) has released U.S. data showing that a staggering 14% of school aged kids will not have any internet access to complete e-learning and more than 9 million will have challenges completing their online assignments. These numbers are significantly higher in other parts of the world (Unicef, 2020).

It might be easy for a therapist to get discouraged and feel overwhelmed by the odds faced by families like those of Marcus, because this family's challenges exist within multiple systems. It's hard enough to shift patterns of interaction within a family, but changing interactions within larger, inequitable systems seems insurmountable. Should the therapist focus on the father-daughter relationship? Or should she help Marcus obtain better electronic devices from a local NGO? Using the Inclusive Systemic Framework (Rastogi, 2020) we recommend therapists assess family needs at multiple levels, including paying attention to individuals, family relationships, client identities and larger social forces. Part of the therapist's job when working with families like this is to identify systemic constraints, serve as an advocate, and provide community resources so that Marcus and his family can function adequately through the pandemic and e-learning.

Here are the areas addressed by the therapist, along with specific interventions used to help Bitu and Edwin's needs

1. Consideration of the larger systemic issues at play:

- Marcus's work schedule will play a huge role in how the family will navigate remote learning. The therapist is encouraged to help Marcus think about the indirect systems that include extended family members for help. Alternately, he can swap child/school-care with another neighbor.
- Many employer organizations have Employee Assistance Programs that can help caregivers find resources, such as a babysitting service, or a medical specialist. This would be an important area for Marcus to explore with his employer.
- Last but not the least, recent protests, and violence against BIPOC individuals, will likely have created emotional turmoil for this family. The therapist needs to be attuned and sensitive to racial issues, media coverage, and depiction of ethnic minorities. Societal issues impact children's everyday interactions, and the ability to participate and be emotionally present in learning environments. It is critical that the therapist be prepared to assess the family's racial stressors, and show an openness and willingness to listen, bear witness and validate their feelings. This requires more than reading and practicing therapy skills. We hope therapists will engage in self-of-the-therapist reflection to help them serve as anti-racist allies. (www.parentlens.com/blog)

2. Familial:

- If the family has a first-day-of-school tradition from the time the children's mother was still alive, encourage them to continue to follow through as any other year, which also helps to honor their mother's memory. If they don't have a tradition in place, this might be a good time to start a special ritual or way to mark the beginning of the school year.
- Navigating the responsibilities and boundaries of the dual roles of "teacher/aide" and "parent" is not an easy task, especially when you are a single parent. Marcus needs to accept that he needs help, too! This means clearly stating expectations to both Edwin and Bitu, including sharing chores, and routines is imperative in maintaining the peace and a working routine. Regular family meetings can be a forum to discuss everyone's needs.

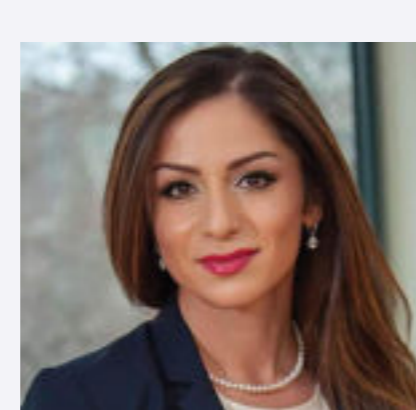
3. Interpersonal:

- Focusing on building time into Bitu and Edwin's daily schedule for virtual social connections with friends to check in about homework and/or just have a space to talk is another important factor to discuss. Since Marcus is so busy working two jobs and trying to provide for his children, he may overlook the emotional impact of being at home and ways in which it can be quite taxing and may contribute in detrimental ways for many children feeling socially isolated. School is not just a place for academic growth, but also social and peer growth that helps to create communities, so try to foster that even when distance learning. For Edwin, the times for connections with his friends can be more explicit and fun as a way to engage him in other activities in which he can become more interested.
- Marcus is encouraged to consider forming a virtual social hub with other parents in his children's lives who are willing to share the same schedule, so that Bitu and Edwin and their friends have a universal lifestyle. On a small scale, this effort is intended to recreate the social and emotional learning (SEL) model for a whole school approach to mental health where everyone who is part of the system is enrolled and experiencing the process. With a safe plan for social connections, children will be able to adapt in new and innovative ways to remain social, build relationship skills and resiliency, and feel connected as they are naturally more flexible and adaptable than adults.

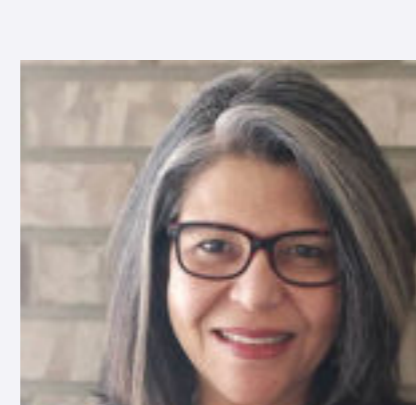
4. Accessing material resources:

- Marcus and his children can sit down together and make a list of equipment that they will need as a family and/or request from school:
 - In the event that the school does not have the budget for providing students with all they need, nonprofit organizations such as EveryoneOn.org help connect low-income families with more affordable internet service and computer equipment
 - Similarly, organizations such as CommunityVS.org are mobilized by volunteers to aggregate resources and build solutions for communities that lack the essentials needed for successful e-learning efforts
- It is possible that the child's learning needs were not met earlier when schools went online suddenly. Since Marcus is concerned that the children have fallen behind in their learning during the last year, it is critical to ask the school for help early or at any point in the process to assist the children to catch up. Marcus can be coached to join hands with other parents in his neighborhood or via social media to ask for resources from his school district, elected representatives, or non-profits. Since the beginning of COVID-19, some schools have made tablets available to all students who need one. Other schools have provided meals that can be picked up through a contactless system. Still other communities have organized back-to-school supply drives. If the school is not equipped for extra tutoring, there are a number of online resources that can pair students with mentors and provide affordable tutoring and many free resources. Some of these great organizations include: Coved.org, Tutor.com, CovEd.org, and TutorMe.

During the global pandemic era, approaching each client's individual clinical presentation from a more systemic lens that tells the story of what is contributing to the degree of the person's stress will be immensely more helpful in setting effective therapeutic goals that aim to impact the entire client system. The therapist role can serve as a guide and the therapeutic setting as a place to remain accountable toward the goals and a place to check in to practice flexibility and consistency during these uniquely challenging times.



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Integrative Approaches to Play Therapy

Symptoms of ADHD may be diminished using the Gottman Method when integrated with Reality Play Therapy (RePT) and/or Circus Arts Therapy play and play therapy, the therapist may utilize questioning methods from the Gottman Sound Relationship House's (SRH; Gottman & Silver, 2015) seven phases in supporting parents and children to discover more about one another.

Sandra Fragomeni, MA and Michael Whitehead, PhD



Perspectives

Helping Clients How to Argue Properly with the Use of a Worksheet

Picture this ... a couple in your office is arguing. One starts to dominate the session with a filibuster onslaught, berating the other partner, because you waited a hair too long to interject while observing their negative interaction pattern. Now you're scrambling to take back control of the room... Sound familiar?

Lauren Kymberly Hill, MS



A Message from the President

In January, I reflected on hope for 2021 with vaccines on their way and the promise of perhaps moving as an entire worldwide system to the other side of COVID-19. In a few days, I will receive my second "jab" and be filled with gratitude that I have the ability to receive a life-saving miracle-of-science and begin going out and about once again.

Shelley A. Hanson

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