

# Family Interventions

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This column is devoted to reporting counseling and therapeutic interventions related to working with families and couples. Special attention is given to reporting interventions that are innovative and practical. Potential contributors to this column should contact Betty Lou Bettner at 1 Old State Road, Media, PA 19063, USA.

## Using Early Memories to Emphasize the Strengths of Teenagers

**Rachel Shifron and Betty Lou Bettner**

Early memories are used in a variety of ways by Adlerian therapists. The purpose of this column is to elaborate on the use of early memories to show teenagers their strengths and creative abilities. This is an efficient way for school counselors, teachers, and teenagers to collaborate to identify and uncover abilities and talents.

Alfred Adler (as cited in Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956) wrote, "I am convinced of the free creative power of the individual in his early childhood" (p. 186). Each of us has a way of implementing this theory in practice. This model is the result of our combining our individual approaches.

Bettner brought the model of *The Crucial Cs*—to connect, to feel capable, to feel as if I count, and to have courage (Bettner & Lew, 1989). The Crucial Cs provide a creative, clear, and simple method to teach adults, parents, teachers, counselors, and therapists how to respect and enhance a child's self-worth. Adler saw the creative abilities behind all distorted behaviors, and Shifron's work in addictions discovered that feelings of worthlessness divert creative abilities toward "creative addictions." The use of early memories in Shifron's work gradually became a powerful tool to identify people's strengths and creativity.

It was a natural step for our own professional development to collaborate and to combine our thinking and doing. Creativity is used to achieve all of The Crucial Cs. We use early memories in our collaborative work to

emphasize the person's self-worth, to identify the person's ability to connect, to feel capable, to feel that one counts, to become confident in one's abilities, and to have the courage to actualize one's creative abilities.

### Adolescents

In 1933 Adler (as cited in Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956) wrote about adolescence:

There are whole libraries of books on adolescence, and almost all of them deal with the subject as if it were a dangerous crisis when the whole character of this person could change. There are many dangers in adolescence, but it is not true that it can change character. It provides the growing child with new situations and new tests. He feels that he is nearing the front of life. Mistakes in his style of life may reveal themselves that have been [previously] unobserved. For almost every child adolescence means one thing above all else—he must prove that he is no longer a child. If we could persuade him that he could take this for granted, a great deal of the tension would be . . . removed. But if he feels he must prove it, naturally enough he will overstress his point. Very many of the expressions of adolescence are the outcome of the desire to prove manhood and womanhood, to show independence, and to experience equality with adults. The direction of these expressions will depend on the meaning that the child has attributed to being “grown-up.” If it has meant to be free from control, the child will fight against restrictions. Many children at this time begin to smoke, to curse, and to stay out late at night. Some of them reveal an unexpected opposition to their parents; and their parents are puzzled to know how such an obedient child could suddenly grow so disobedient. It is not really a change of attitude. The apparently obedient child was always in opposition to his parents; but when he had more freedom and strength, he felt able to declare his . . . hostility. For the most part a child is given more freedom and independence during his adolescence. If the parents try to continue their supervision, however, the child will make still stronger efforts to avoid control. We are then provided with the typical picture of “adolescent negativism.” All of the dangers of adolescence come from a lack of proper training and equipment for the three problems of life. If the children are afraid of the future, it is natural enough that they should try to meet it by the methods that call for the least effort. The more such a child is ordered about, exhorted, and criticized, the stronger becomes his impression that he is standing before an abyss. Unless we can encourage him, every effort to help him will be a mistake and damage him still further.

Although a few children at this time wish to remain children, by far the great majority will make some sort of attempt to behave in an adult fashion. If they are not really courageous, they offer a sort of caricature of the adult; they imitate the gestures of men, like to spend money freely, begin flirtations and have love affairs. In more difficult cases, where a boy does not see his way to meet

the problems of life yet keeps a certain degree of activity, he begins to embark on a criminal career. This is especially likely if he has already committed delinquencies without being found out and thinks that he can be clever enough to avoid detection again.

*If the degree of activity is small, the easy way of escape is neurosis. . . . Neurotic symptoms appear when an individual is confronted by social problems, which he is not prepared to meet in a social way.*

A great number of failures in adolescence come from the pampered children; the approach of adult responsibilities is an especial strain to the children who have been accustomed to have everything done for them by their parents. At this time we find apparent reversals of progress. . . . Perhaps a child who was very promising now begins to feel afraid of disappointing the expectations with which he has been burdened. So long as he was helped and appreciated, he could go forward, but when the time comes to make independent efforts, his courage fails, and he retreats. Others are stimulated by their new freedom. They see the road towards the fulfillment of their ambitions clear before them. They are full of new ideas and new projects. Their creative life is intensified and their interest in all the aspects of our human process becomes more vivid and eager. There are the children who have kept their courage, and to whom independence means, not difficulty and the risk of defeat, but wider opportunity to make achievements and contributions.

*Children who have previously felt slighted and neglected now, perhaps, when they are more widely connected with their fellows, conceive the hope that they can find appreciation . . . (pp. 439–441).*

### **The Crucial Cs**

All human beings are socially embedded and need to believe that they belong. Adler (as cited in Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956) said, “The development of the child is increasingly permeated by the relationships of society to him. The feeling of belongingness, the social interest, takes root in the psyche of the child and leaves that individual only under the severest pathological changes of his mental life” (p. 138).

Second, everyone needs to feel that they are moving forward, growing, improving. Adler (as cited in Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956) said, “There is one basic dynamic force behind all human activity, a striving from a felt minus situation towards a plus situation, from a feeling of inferiority towards superiority, or perfection” (p. 1).

Third, each individual searches for significance. Adler (as cited in Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956) said, “Every human being strives for significance, but people always make mistakes if they do not see that their whole significance must consist in the contribution to the lives of others” (p. 156).

Adler also taught about the necessity of encouragement. He and Rudolf Dreikurs (Dreikurs & Soltz, 1964) wrote on this topic extensively.

When we attempt to teach Adler to others, we look for ways to make the theory easy to remember. One model that fits and can be taught to children and adults is The Crucial Cs (Bettner & Lew, 1989):

Belonging becomes CONNECT.  
Improve becomes CAPABLE.  
Significance becomes COUNT.  
Encouragement becomes COURAGE.

It is important to help children develop the perceptions that go with each of The Crucial Cs (Lew & Bettner, 1995):

I believe that I have a place. I belong.  
I believe that I can do it.  
I believe that I can make a difference.  
I believe that I can handle what comes.

With these perceptions in place, children have what they need. They need others. They need to be independent and self-sufficient. They need to be needed and valued. They need to be resilient and confident.

The Crucial Cs are the four cornerstones of emotional well being (Lew, 2002). When one or more of them are missing, feelings of discouragement emerge. These feelings always interfere with the development of social interest. You cannot be available to others when you are feeling alienated, inadequate, unnecessary, or inferior.

Bettner and Lew (1989) point out that children will get the first three Crucial Cs no matter what we do. Hopefully, they will get them in a loving, supportive family. If that's not available, a gang or a cult can provide all three.

With courage, children are more likely to develop respect for self and others and develop creative, useful solutions to whatever problems arise. When children feel connected and capable, when they perceive that they count, they are encouraged and have the courage to actualize their creativity on the useful side of life.

### **Creativity and Strength**

One definition of the term "creativity" might be: the courage to do things in a different way. There is creativity in each person. To discover creative abilities each child needs to be encouraged to act. The feedback of a significant adult is essential for children to become aware of their ability to contribute to others. Adults need it as well, in the world of work, in the family, and between partners. Contributing to the group enhances the feelings of self-worth. When the encouraged child grows up and enters adolescence, actions will

**Table 1**  
Potential Results of Discouragement Among Teenagers

When the child is not feeling:	The child may feel:
Connected	isolated/alienated
Capable	inadequate
as if he or she Counts	unnecessary
Courageous	inferior

be directed towards activities that will enable him or her to develop identity and uniqueness. Encouraged adolescents know how to contribute to others from their "private treasure" and, thus, feel part of the group. Discouraged children might grow up to become angry teenagers who choose the path of revenge—which means to destroy self and others. When these perceptions are missing among teenagers, discouraged feelings may begin to form (Lew & Bettner, 1995; see Table 1).

There is a correlation between creative abilities and the probability of developing destructive behaviors like addictions. "Addictive behaviors are creative ideas one chooses in order to escape existential fears" (Shifron, 1999, p. 114). An addictive behavior like drinking or smoking becomes the remedy, the escape, and the rescue from the terrible pain of feeling worthless and rejected.

Many programs that have been developed for teens in order to prevent addictive behaviors were not very successful. In most of the programs the emphasis was on scare tactics emphasizing the danger and the worst possible consequences of the behavior. As a result these programs often made drugs and alcohol more attractive as they provoked the teenager's imagination, curiosity, and search for excitement.

The task of the adult is to trigger the youngster's talents and to show them how they are needed and can contribute to their families, schools, friends, and communities.

Using early memories as a tool to identify one's creative abilities and strengths is very effective. It is a safe approach to be used in educational settings because it enables teachers and counselors to focus on the positive rather than the negative and to emphasize the pluses rather than the minuses.

### Early Memories

An early memory is a story about the past, told in the present, as the person perceives it at the time he or she tells the story. Therefore, early

memories are metaphors that describe the person's emotional situation at the present. Metaphors disclose their strengths, creativity and places where a child feels stuck. In this model early memories are used to disclose these strengths. When children are able to identify their strengths there is the possibility of enhancing a more positive self-image. In therapy, early recollections are used to explore ways to identify alternative behaviors.

Adler (as cited in Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956) considered early memories to be one of the most important pieces in exploring the personality of an individual and used them extensively in therapy. Early recollections come from the past and are used as metaphors for understanding the present situation in the person's life and also as possibilities for making predictions and counseling for the future (Shifron, 2001). We use early memories as a tool to identify the potential and the creativity of the individual and then we can encourage the actualization of strengths and talents.

### **Description of Technique**

Early memories as a technique for finding the teenager's strengths can be used both in individual work and in groups. We describe here the use of this technique in a large group. Several volunteers share with the large group at least three early memories. The group members write the detailed memories and are asked to find strengths and creative abilities. The next step is to have the group members state their findings to each volunteer. One presenter asks one person to compile the list of strengths and show it on a transparency to the entire group and to the volunteers. After listening to the group's interpretation, each volunteer is asked to share with the group how they feel about the findings and the process. Each volunteer is given a copy of the written list of strengths. The following are the memories of three volunteers, the audience feedback, and our summaries of the memories.

### **A's (age 18) Early Recollections**

1. My earliest recollection is of me at my uncle's wedding. I had gotten socks with pink bows, and I felt I had to share this with my aunts who were sitting behind me. They told me it was rude to put my feet up in a church so I put them back down. I wanted to watch the wedding. I think I realized it would be an important memory later, but I fell asleep. I was upset though.
2. When I was young I was very frightened of thunderstorms. There was one going on one day at my house in Oracle, and my grandma Sweetheart was over. Instead of concentrating on the

storm, she showed me an afghan she had made me. It was made with all the colors of my "Momma cat." I was delighted and slept with it from then on. I thought she said "African" so I called it my African from then on.

3. We used to go to the dump in Oracle to get rid of our trash. I had a red, Duplo bunny that I would bring with me. I enjoyed looking over into the giant abyss, but one day I dropped my bunny. It was so far down I felt completely hopeless the moment it happened, but I cried out anyway. Somehow I got that bunny back. I was absolutely delighted and assured that I was important even though I was little.
4. I used to ride to a Montessori school with my Dad on his way to work. I remember the National Public Radio song playing and our finger puppets on the door as the sun rose from behind the mountains. I felt at ease and happy which I didn't feel often.

*Comments from group.* She is spontaneous, outgoing, persistent, capable of asking for help, confident, has initiative, ability to recognize alternatives, shares with others, ability to act in difficult situations without concentrating on the fear. She knows that problems can be solved. She keeps her faith.

*Our comments.* A. knows what she wants. She doesn't waste her time doing things she doesn't like to do. She has her own value system. She respects others' values but doesn't have to agree. She has the ability to experience fear and knows how to become actively creative in order to avoid being absorbed in the fear. She knows how to create her own safe place and how to combine that with her own private language. A. likes familiarity. She doesn't like being separated from what she loves. She can believe even in hopeless moments. Even in hopeless moments she is not passive; she is active. Her activity is rewarding and has a happy outcome.

### D's (age 17) Early Recollections

1. I remember being with an older friend near his house playing around with a butterfly net. It was a summer day just before lunchtime and we were walking back to his place to have lunch or something. He was in front of me walking on the stone path surrounded by grass. We stopped in front of a row of yellow flowers because he saw some bumblebees to catch in his red and blue net. I remember that he waited for a moment with the net above the flowers, and all of a sudden, in a very fluid movement,

he caught about three bees and placed the net on the ground so that we could see them. I was impressed with his catch and of the noise the bees were making trying to fly out of the net for it was a very loud and scary buzz. Then he finally released his bees and my mother called me to come for lunch.

2. My mother was taking lessons in Geneva or Lausanne (about an hour's drive from where we lived). Instead of taking me with her she used to put me with a family where I would be looked after for the day. And I remember playing this shark game with the children there. The shark was moving on the board with its mouth open and the game was to avoid being eaten by this shark. We got eaten quite often, but we kept on playing because this shark moving on the board was fun to watch, and the excitement of going as quickly as possible to avoid that shark was entertaining.
3. The first time I saw a caterpillar was a really interesting experience. My Father and I were gardening near my house in the summer. I remember being near a little tree watching the leaves and I suddenly saw a little green caterpillar on one of them. My first emotion was fear because I was completely ignorant of what that thing was. My father came up to me and explained how harmless this creature was. He grabbed it and put it in my hand. I was so interested in seeing such a small thing moving and living.

*Comments from group.* D. is very connected to animals and people, impressed with nature and strength of others, poetic, can see what others cannot see, adjusts quickly, fully engaged in the process and can enjoy it and appreciate it, appreciation for all living creatures in the world, loves excitement, loves learning. He can lose without losing self-esteem, likes discovery and fun, empathy to all living creatures.

*Our comments.* D. is very observant, curious, interested in zoology and nature, enjoys the process and not just the end result. He realizes that life is dangerous. He even experiences "being eaten," but he's not afraid, even in a fearful situation. He continues to create exciting events for himself and might get fearful, but if he has a trustworthy adult he can feel safe and continue to explore. He shows how important parents are for independent teens.

### S's (age 18) Early Recollections

1. I remember when I was very young—a baby. My Father once placed me on the counter and took my feet that had baby booties

- on them and began to make my feet dance, and sang, "Shake Your Booty" to me, and I just laughed and laughed.
2. When I was in kindergarten I had a good friend named Alison and she told me once that she had gotten a racecar for her birthday. I immediately got a big Power Wheels car in my head that you could get into and drive yourself. Well, she asked if I wanted to come over and play with it one day after school so I said yes. All day I looked forward to being able to go to her house and drive in a Power Wheels. I had always wanted one, so when I got there I was very excited and couldn't see where it was outside, so I asked and my friend Ali said it was inside. Confused, I went into the house to find a small remote control car and not the large Power Wheels racecar. I was very disappointed.
  3. When I was very young, before kindergarten, I remember we (my sister, brother, and neighborhood friends) were all making our own houses out of cardboard boxes in one person's garage. It was raining outside. However, I was the youngest and I usually did that stuff with one older girl, Wendy, who looked after me. We are still very close. She is about 22 now. Well, this one particular time she would not let me come in and share her cardboard box with her and so I went to my sister's and she would not let me either. So, eventually I went to another girl's box and she let me in. I was still very hurt by Wendy and my sister for doing that to me despite being with someone else in her box.
  4. When I was little (before kindergarten) I used to have rails on my bed to keep from falling out. I found a way to make it like a gate to my bed and would ask my parents to lie down on each side of me when saying good night and they would have to pass through. When they would lie down with me I would tell them that I was the hot dog and they were the hot dog buns.

*Comments from the audience.* S. is a go-getter, never gives up, playfulness, can fantasize, high sense of justice, sense of wholeness, ability to influence others, she finds solutions, very creative, feels safe around parents. S. can be the director of her own play. S. shows what parents should give us. A great parent model.

*Our comments.* S. enjoys being with others, appreciates the ideas of others, uses music and movement creatively, is able to enjoy "as if." She is imaginative, anticipates trust in self, independent, goes along with others until new facts develop. Once S. has an idea she looks for more information to support the idea. She is a researcher, has perseverance, not satisfied until she reaches her goal. She is a go-getter, connects as an equal, and tuned in to her feelings. When she is hurt she admits it. She can live with pain and not need to escape

through addictions. If you were her friend and hurt her, she could forgive you. She has a nice metaphor for what parents should be. She directs the play!

### Summary

Each of the teens expressed surprise at how much information others could retrieve from so few memories. Some of the strengths they were very aware of while others were new and interesting. It's difficult for individuals to use their strengths and creativity until they are made aware of them. Each teen felt the experience to be very encouraging. They were appreciative of the time that a large group spent on each of them in a supportive and caring way and spoke to them only about their strengths.

The common factor we found in all of the teens' memories was the desire to be close to the parents in order to feel safe and secure. The presence of a meaningful adult is a necessary condition for actualizing each one's creativity and the basic requirement for feeling worthwhile.

A literature survey was conducted on the topic "creativity and adolescence." The following references include articles from psychoanalytic journals; each one emphasizing the basic Adlerian hypothesis that creativity has to be triggered by significant adults and within a healthy social environment. It is interesting to discover that the Adlerian concept that encouragement within the appropriate social group triggers creativity is recognized in the current psychoanalytic field.

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