

Case Study: Mike

School Interventions

A 13-year-old boy, Mike, was referred for therapy by his school counselor. The presenting problem was Mike's refusal to go to school over the last 6 months. The family had moved from a small town in Georgia to an Atlanta suburb, and Mike was enrolled in a large suburban high school. He attended only one day before the truancy began.

Before referring Mike for outpatient psychotherapy, school professionals had attempted the following interventions:

1. Phone contacts to the mother, Mrs. Wright, from Mike's teachers and the school principal, asking about his health and offering assistance.
2. Letters to the family from the school principal and county superintendent of schools, requesting that the parents contact school officials about their son's repeated absences.
3. Referral to a child study team, which enlisted Mike in homebound instruction after 3 months' absence. The referral for psychotherapy was made after 6 months' absence, as was a request for the therapist's opinion about whether homebound instruction should be continued.
4. Referral to a probation officer because of the school truancy.

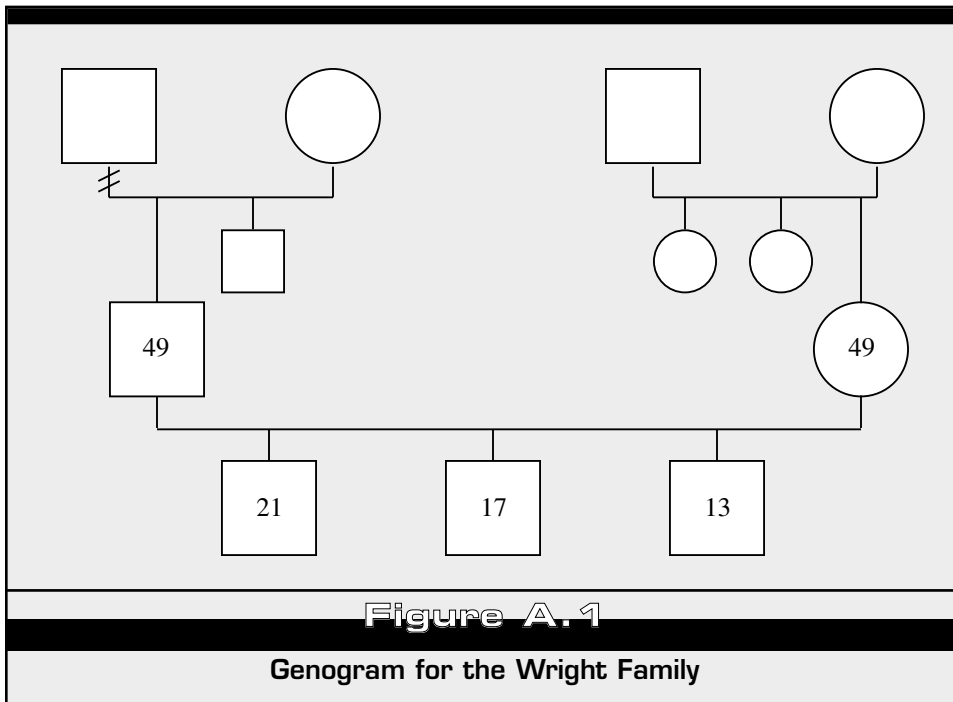
The latter intervention resulted in a home visit by the probation officer and threats of a jail term for the mother if Mike did not begin attending school. But there had been no follow-through.

Family Information

The outpatient therapist initially met with Mrs. Wright to gather information about Mike's problem. Although the appointment had been scheduled for both parents, Mrs. Wright stated that her husband refused to attend the therapy. The therapist then contacted Mike's school counselor and his probation officer. From these three conversations, the therapist gathered the following information about Mike and his family:

Mike is the youngest of three sons of Mr. and Mrs. Wright. His parents were high-school sweethearts and married immediately following their graduation from high school. Married for 22 years, they lived in the same home in a small town in rural Georgia until the recent move. Both sets of Mike's grandparents lived in the same small town and maintained close ties with Mike's nuclear family. The family genogram is depicted in Figure A-1.

Mr. Wright is the older of two boys; Mrs. Wright is the youngest of three girls. She is extremely close to her family, the Thomases. She reported having at least one telephone conversation with each sister and her mother every day since her marriage. During their years in the same small town, the Thomas family attended the same church as the Wrights and socialized together. In addition, when her boys were growing up, Mrs. Wright shared



baby-sitting with her sisters and mother. As she was the only sister who was not employed outside of the home, Mrs. Wright kept her sister's children during the week, and her children spent time with her parents and sisters on the weekends. Mrs. Wright described her father as a "stable, devoted" man who supported the family and "spoiled" her. Owner of a store in the community, he is well respected.

Over the years, Mr. Wright's family has been involved with Mike's family through more "male" activities. The uncle and Mr. Wright have regularly taken the boys fishing or hunting and attended sporting events together. Mr. Wright is close to his mother, who worked two jobs all of her life to support him and his brothers. As a child, Mr. Wright served the role of "man of the house" because his father, an alcoholic, disappeared when Mr. Wright was 6 years old and left the family penniless. Mr. Wright worked after school and became a manager in a local grocery store. If he had not met his wife and decided to get married, he planned to go to college on a business scholarship the store offered. As it was, within a year after high school graduation, he became a married man and a father. He remained a manager for all the ensuing years before the recent move.

According to Mrs. Wright, she had never learned to drive because she was able to depend on her husband or her family for transportation. She had never worked outside of the home, although her sisters had paid her for baby-sitting their children while they were working. In addition, her father gave her money whenever she asked. Mrs. Wright used her creative energies to sew, cook, garden, and make crafts. She stated that she always kept busy with these activities because her husband was working 60 to 70 hours a week for most of their married life.

History of Presenting Problem

Mike's father eventually saved enough money to buy his own store. This had been a dream of his for a long time. After a year of searching, he found a gas station for sale in the suburbs of Atlanta, about 80 miles from his hometown. Against his wife's wishes to stay close to her parents and sisters, he bought the business 6 months later. In May, he and the oldest son left for Atlanta to work in the gas station. The two of them rented an apartment in Atlanta, where they lived while Mrs. Wright and the remaining two sons stayed in their original home.

The business took almost all of Mr. Wright's time, and he was unable to travel back to see his family between May and August. Mrs. Wright and one of her sisters went to Atlanta for a weekend, and Mrs. Wright decided that she "hated the city." When she confided to her mother and sisters that she missed her husband, though, they urged her to move to Atlanta as soon as possible to support her husband's decision.

In September, the oldest son moved back into the family home and began attending a local junior college, and Mrs. Wright and Mike moved to Atlanta. The 17-year-old son moved in with his maternal grandparents so he could complete his senior year of high school in the same school.

Mike was enrolled in the eighth grade in a large suburban high school. His mother took him to school on the first day to make sure that he arrived safely. He attended that one day of school but refused to return to the high school for the next 6 months. At first he

complained of being sick. His aunt came to Atlanta and took him back to their hometown to see the family doctor. He was pronounced healthy and was urged to return to school.

After a month's absence from school, Mike's father began urging him to return to school. According to Mrs. Wright, Mr. Wright threatened Mike with grounding, taking away his allowance, and, finally, physical punishment. Mrs. Wright, who described her husband as "hot-tempered," forbade her husband to spank Mike. In addition, although Mike was grounded by his father, Mrs. Wright was the one who was left to enforce the grounding while her husband worked in the store. Because Mrs. Wright felt sorry for Mike, though, she didn't enforce the grounding.

When Mr. Wright learned that Mike and his mother had been returning to their hometown surreptitiously on weekends, where Mike was spending time with his friends, Mr. Wright became angry and confronted his wife. She accused him of being gone all the time and being unwilling to support her emotionally. Further, she said she wouldn't deny Mike time with his friends because she thought he was refusing to go to school because he was depressed about moving. She hoped that if he could enjoy time with his friends, he would become less depressed and more accepting of the move. In her eyes, he then would return to school voluntarily.

Mr. Wright, who concluded that Mike's refusal to attend school was rebellious in nature, then withdrew even more from the family. According to his wife, he was angry and sullen when he was home and often drank too many beers. He began working longer and longer hours while Mike and his mother spent more and more time together watching soap operas and playing cards. Neither Mrs. Wright nor her son had made friends in their new neighborhood, and neither could drive. Mrs. Wright and Mike continued to return to their hometown, without Mr. Wright, every weekend.

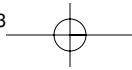
Diagnosis

Mrs. Wright, dependent and lonely, was overinvolved with Mike. She depended upon him for her daily entertainment and company. Mike's symptom served to keep her busy and helped her to avoid confronting her personal loneliness and the distance in her marriage. Mrs. Wright was aligned with the sibling subsystem in a coalition against the father.

Mr. Wright, the functioning parent, was undermined by this alliance. He became ineffective and withdrew from interaction with both his wife and Mike. In addition, Mrs. Wright's family-of-origin was involved in undermining Mr. Wright by continuing to provide transportation and money to her and Mike.

Intervention

The therapist asked Mrs. Wright's permission to contact her husband at work and request that he attend a meeting concerning his son. Contrary to his wife's characterization of him, Mr. Wright was eager to attend the meeting. He talked to the therapist at length about his frustration regarding his son and said he would be willing to do whatever he could to solve the problem. The therapist then scheduled a meeting at the high school to include the child study team, the homebound teacher, the parents, the probation officer, and Mike.



During the first part of the meeting, Mike was asked to wait outside. The therapist requested this purposefully to indicate to Mike that he was not part of the executive subsystem, and that the adults would make the decision as to how to proceed with his problem. In addition, excluding Mike from this part of the meeting broke up the alliance between Mike and his mother.

The meeting began with a venting of feelings of frustration on the part of the parents, teachers, and probation officer. The therapist then asked questions about Mike's intelligence and physical and emotional development. As the meeting progressed, it became clear to everyone that Mike was capable of attending high school. The homebound instructor, however, suggested that Mike was not motivated and that, even with the one-to-one attention, he was not keeping up with his school assignments.

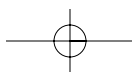
The therapist began to reframe Mike's problem as a developmental lag, using evidence that had been offered by those present to convince the parents that Mike needed nurturing, support, and structure to begin to grow up and face the challenges of being a high-school student. The explanation centered on Mike's need, like that of younger children, for structure and assistance in becoming motivated to complete homework, chores, and other skills of growing up.

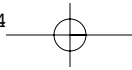
With this reframe in mind, the therapist advised that Mike had not been receiving enough structure and reinforcement. The parents were asked if they would be willing to work together to provide for these needs, to which they readily agreed. In step one of the intervention, the mother was assigned as Mike's homebound instructor. She was to structure a mock classroom for teaching Mike about attending school and growing up. For 6 hours a day, she would instruct Mike in his various subjects. The probation officer agreed that if the mother were homeschooling her son, the threats and charges against her regarding the truancy would likely stop.

Mike's teachers agreed to provide weekly lesson plans for her to follow, and the homebound tutor agreed to come to her home once a week to help her plan assignments and clarify any information about which she was unclear. In addition, the teachers offered to be available by phone for any questions about assignments. The purpose of this intervention was to intensify the dependency of Mike and his mother so they eventually would become unhappy with this arrangement.

Step two was to elicit the father's help. He agreed to be in charge of waking Mike up each morning and helping him get showered, dressed, and fed in preparation for his day at "school." Because the father had to be at his store by 7:00 each morning, Mike's school day was scheduled to begin at 7:30 and end at 2:30, with an hour break for lunch. This intervention was designed to decrease the distance between Mike and his father and to give Mrs. Wright the message that she was supported by her husband.

Step three was to define Mike's visit to his hometown each weekend as "confusing" to a child with his "delayed developmental level." If he was to be helped to adapt to his new home and to the structure of school, he needed the stability that living in one place would provide. In this regard, the mother agreed that they would visit their hometown only every other weekend, and then only for a day. Because of his "delays," Mike needed to sleep in the same house consistently. Mr. Wright agreed to take Sundays off and spend time with his wife and Mike. He also agreed to begin exploring options for a local church with his family.





This three-part intervention served many purposes. By identifying Mike as “delayed,” the team created a situation in which the only way Mike could convince the adults otherwise was to return to school. As long as he was “delayed,” he was “incapable” of spending every weekend in his hometown. Thus, he essentially was put on the same grounding schedule that his father had threatened but ostensibly for very different reasons. It was hypothesized that if Mrs. Wright and Mike were no longer able to get their social needs met on weekends in their hometown, they might begin to search for connections with other people in Atlanta. Finally, Mr. Wright agreed to become more involved with and supportive of his wife so her loneliness would decrease and her need for Mike as her support system would diminish.

As the final step in the intervention, Mike was asked to join the meeting. His position as the “baby of his family” was emphasized, and he was told the reframe that his refusal to go to school indicated his “delay in growing up.” His parents then advised him of the plan that had been devised and pledged their mutual support of his efforts to “catch up” in development. Clearly, Mike was less than happy about these proceedings.

Outcome

After 2 weeks of homeschooling, Mike returned to high school. His mother offered to attend the first day with him, but he declined, saying that would be “babyish.” His teachers introduced him as a new student who had moved to Atlanta recently so Mike didn’t have to face the stigma of being absent for so long. In addition, Mike received supportive services from his school counselor to help him cope with joining this new social arena. With coaxing, he tried out for baseball in the spring and made the team.

Mike and his parents continued in periodic family therapy. With help, Mr. and Mrs. Wright were able to set up a reinforcement schedule for Mike in which he could earn visits to his hometown or trips to movies, sporting events, and other events in Atlanta. Any absence from school, unless accompanied by high fever or vomiting, would result in no privileges for the weekend. At first, Mike almost exclusively chose visits “back home” as his reinforcement. As time went by and he began to develop friends on his baseball team and at school, his request for visits became less frequent.

Through therapy, Mrs. Wright was helped to look at her own loneliness and isolation. She obtained a bus schedule and, with support, began shopping and sightseeing in Atlanta by herself. She asked one of her sisters to begin teaching her how to drive and elicited a promise from her husband that, as soon as she got her license, he would buy her a car. She began helping her husband in the store part-time. Eventually she was able to use her skills at crafts to help him make buying and display decisions for the store. Mr. Wright continued to take Sundays off and spend these days with his wife, even when Mike no longer needed the support.

This case study represents successful collaboration between school professionals, an outpatient psychotherapist, a probation officer, and both parents. Without this collaboration, the interventions would not have been possible.

