

THE CASE OF GERRARD

Gerrard was placed in an inpatient substance abuse treatment center after repeated attempts at outpatient treatment had failed. He was 15 years old at the time he entered the center. One portion of the treatment plan called for ongoing family therapy that was to be initiated during Gerrard's eight-week stay in the facility and to be continued on an indefinite basis upon his release. Family therapy was rejected by the parents because "they were not the ones with the problem." A doctoral intern approached the parents and suggested consultation as an alternative to family therapy, indicating that the entire focus of the process would be to enhance their ability to parent Gerrard. The parents agreed to participate, although the level of their commitment seemed relatively low.

Gerrard's father was a professor at a major university and his mother was a housewife. They had three children, of which Gerrard was the youngest. According to parental reports, the other children were "quite normal" in that they had done well in high school, gone on to college, and were either advancing in their careers or in graduate school. Gerrard, who is five years younger than his youngest sibling, was quite ill as a child and on one occasion, both parents expected him to die. At the time of consultation, Gerrard was experiencing no major health problems.

Both parents admitted that Gerrard had been treated differently from his older siblings in that expectations regarding academic achievement, out-of-school activities, and even in-the-home participation had been reduced. Both agreed that these lower expectations were partially because of Gerrard's health problems, but the father volunteered that Gerrard's mother enjoyed her continuing role as mother and suggested pleasantly that Gerrard had been pampered by his mother.

When it became apparent in the middle of the elementary school years that Gerrard's health problems were virtually over, his father attempted to pressure him to do better in school and to generally meet his standard of performance. His mother, while not fully in agreement with the father's tactics, agreed

with the general idea that Gerrard should be expected to function at a higher level.

Gerrard rebelled at the demands of his parents, but was usually somewhat passive in his rebellion. He declared that he was different from his siblings; he started dressing dramatically differently in clothes that he purchased with his allowance at the PTA Thrift Shop. Most important to the parents, his grades continued to be in the C–D range with an occasional F even though test results indicated that he was capable of superior performance.

Once in junior high, Gerrard's academic performance fell even lower and while he "flirted" continuously with failure, he never actually failed a subject. He also fell in with the wrong crowd and was caught with a marijuana cigarette by one of his teachers. His behavior became more erratic and, once when his parents went to pick him up from a friend's house, he fell into the car, obviously inebriated. It became clear that he was using alcohol extensively near the end of junior high school and his relationship with his parents, and particularly his father, had deteriorated to the point where they interacted only on a superficial level. He failed two subjects during his sophomore year, was picked up by the police for possession of marijuana (less than an ounce), and what conversation went on at home was strained at best.

The parents agreed that they needed to:

1. Help Gerrard set some of his own goals instead of trying to impose their own goals on him.
2. Generally rebuild their relationship with him by communicating their concerned love instead of their expectations.
3. Accept his lifestyle (hair, clothes).
4. Help Gerrard develop self-confidence in areas of interest (e.g., music) by providing support in the form of lessons and purchasing instruments.
5. Model only the most responsible use of alcohol.

When Gerrard was told of his parents' plans to be more supportive of his interests and to stop the bickering over his clothes, hair, and so on, his response was one of extreme skepticism. In a subsequent visit to the hospital, his father, who was typically

quite conservative, arrived wearing one earring, a vest with a Grateful Dead sticker on it, and with his hair spiked with mousse. While Gerrard was still skeptical, the ice was broken to some degree.

Throughout the remainder of Gerrard's stay in the hospital, the parents worked on helping Gerrard set some goals for himself and laying out plans for helping him achieve those goals. Gerrard was systematically reinforced for goal-setting behavior and any verbalization that related to increasing his standards of performance. Throughout these visits, the parents continuously expressed confidence in Gerrard's ability to take control of his life and in his ability to function in a wide variety of situations, including school (no great emphasis on this area).

After release from the treatment center, Gerrard returned to his high school, where he continued to struggle academically, although he passed all subjects.

The open hostility that was present in the home prior to Gerrard's admission into the treatment center was greatly reduced, except when Gerrard's parents expressed reservations about his friends who are alcohol abusers, too. According to Gerrard's own statements, tension and conflict developed. Gerrard experienced two relapses during the three months of follow-up. Each time, his parents expressed disappointment and offered their continuing help in Gerrard's efforts to stop abusing drugs.

At the final session, the parents reported that their relationship with Gerrard had improved dramatically, that his grades had improved to a small degree, and that he "was dressing better." They attributed this to the fact that his father occasionally appeared at the dinner table in an earring and an Iron Maiden T-shirt.

Consultant's note: The unusual behavior engaged in by the father was not the result of a direct recommendation by the consultant. However, the father was encouraged to find ways to break the communication barriers between himself and his child. Had his behavior been viewed as a "putdown" by the child, this approach would have exacerbated the situation.

STUDENT LEARNING ACTIVITY 10.2

Analyze the case of Gerrard by answering the following questions:

1. What is the most likely explanation for Gerrard's behavior?
2. If you had known that the father was going to moussé his hair and wear an earring to the hospital, would you have advised it?
3. How do you explain the relationship of the health problem to the presenting problem?
4. What are alternatives to the interventions that appear to have been used in this case?