Chapter 11 Case Study

Support Group: Part 1

Parent Support Group Transcript

DR. BERG: My name is Stuart Berg. I am a clinical psychologist working here at University Hospital. I want to welcome each of you to this first Support Group meeting. I know some of you, and I will look forward to meeting and working with all of you in the weeks to come. The goal of this support group is to help you to help your children and yourselves. You are all here because you have a child in treatment and because you indicated an interest in mutual support. Although these meetings will be unstructured, they do have a goal—to help you cope with having a child who has a psychological disorder. Some of the issues we discuss will be practical: how to access government assistance programs, how to find a babysitter, how to get your child to the dentist. Because some parents whose children develop psychological disorders feel guilty and ashamed, as if they were the cause of their child's problems, we will also try to educate ourselves about what causes psychological disorders in children and what we can do about them.

Because this is our first meeting, I thought it might be a good idea to go around and have each of you introduce yourself to the others. Let's begin on my left.

JOHN CHENEY: My name is John Cheney. I am a doctor, a radiologist, in this hospital. My son, Eddie, has autism. He is eight. I have no other children. I just couldn't handle any more.

INGRID CHENEY: I am Ingrid Cheney, John's wife. I do not work. My life is looking after Eddie.

PASQUALE ARMANTI: My name is Pasquale Armanti. I am a builder here in town. In fact, my company built this hospital. My wife, Francesca, couldn't have children. We adopted Paolo when he was a baby. My life hasn't been the same since. He has been in trouble since he could walk and nothing—

FRANCESCA ARMANTI (*interrupting her husband*): You are always picking on him. You never wanted Paolo. You always rejected him. Even when he was little, you spanked him—

PASQUALE ARMANTI (*interrupting his wife*): Lighten up! Listen to yourself. Who are you kidding? Paolo is out of control. He needs discipline.

DR. BERG: Perhaps we should get back to this later. Let's move on.

KAREN BEASLEY: I'm Karen. Karen Beasley. I'm 19 years old. I'm here on my own because my boyfriend Eric left us a few months ago. It's just me and Michelle now. Michelle is 4, and she won't talk. She won't hug me or let me hug her. She just stays in her room. Sometimes she watches TV; other times she just cries. Sometimes she hurts herself by banging her head against the wall. But even when she is hurting herself, she won't let me comfort her. I don't have a job. I never finished high school. Lately I've become fat. I'm dieting, but it doesn't help. I've been running, and even that doesn't work. That's me—a fat girl with no money, no boyfriend, and a kid who won't talk.

CELIA BEROFSKY (*to Karen*): How did you get into this mess? A baby at 15, abandoned at 19. And what makes you think you are fat? You're nothing but skin and bones.

KAREN BEASLEY: I am? But I feel fat.

DR. BERG (*addressing Celia*): Perhaps you can introduce yourself?

CELIA BEROFSKY: I am Celia Berofsky, and this is my husband, Michael.

MICHAEL BEROFSKY: Hi.

CELIA BEROFSKY: My son Gordon won't go to school. When we force him to go, he won't talk to anyone. I know this is just a phase that he will grow out of. Michael thinks so, too. Our psychologist suggested that we come to this group, but I don't think we will be members long.

DR. BERG: Thanks, everyone, that was good. Perhaps one of you could start off the discussion by telling us about your experiences and the problems you are encountering. Everyone should feel free to ask questions. Now, who wants to start?

PASQUALE ARMANTI: I'll start. I am used to talking about Paolo. According to the psychologists at school and Dr. Gale, our private psychologist, Paolo has attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder. But this is not his only diagnosis. For a long time, they told me he had an oppositional defiant disorder, and he also supposedly has a conduct disorder. Once they suspected Tourette's disorder. I wonder if anyone knows what is wrong with Paolo. Maybe he's just a difficult kid.

Support Group: Part 2

School Report on Paolo Armanti; Midvale Comprehensive School Yearly Report

Student: Paolo Armanti

Grade: Two

Paolo's academic performance is below average. Although he has learned to count and do simple addition and subtraction, he has not grasped the concept of fractions, and he is poor at other operations (division or multiplication). His reading is below grade level, particularly his comprehension. His schoolwork is marked by carelessness. He makes frequent errors and is easily distracted by things going on around him. Whenever he can, Paolo tries to get out of work. Intelligence testing conducted in preschool, and repeated this year, found Paolo's IQ to be above average. It seems that his academic performance is the result not of poor intellectual capacity but, more likely, of a psychological disturbance.

Paolo's behavior is causing everyone at school considerable concern. He is constantly "on the go" and he almost never sits still. On the rare occasions that he does remain in his seat, he fidgets endlessly. At meals, games, or even when using the sink, Paolo never waits his turn; he always pushes ahead of the other children.

Over the course of the entire year, Paolo's behavior has been consistently negative. He often refuses to follow instructions. When his teacher insists, Paolo frequently loses his temper. He also picks fights with other children. He takes their food and their possessions and seems to be constantly angry. On one occasion, Paolo took another child's baseball bat. When the child tried to take it back, Paolo hit him in the knee with the bat. The child required four stitches. On another occasion, he grabbed a girl's new pen out of her hand. When she demanded its return, he threw in on the floor and crushed it under his heel. When confronted with these behaviors, Paolo always denies wrongdoing, blaming the other children for "not sharing." Because of his behavior, Paolo has no friends in his class, or in the rest of the school. The school psychologist feels that Paolo may have an oppositional defiant disorder. Because children with this disorder may develop more serious long-term psychological disorders, the psychologist recommends that Paolo's parents seek professional assistance.

Support Group: Part 3

Transcript From Meeting of the University Hospital Parent Support Group: Francesca, Celia, and Karen Discuss Their Children and Themselves

FRANCESCA ARMANTI: The doctors say Paolo may not have Tourette's disorder. He doesn't make sounds or shout. Anyway, you need to have symptoms for a year before you can make the diagnosis, and we didn't want to wait a year before doing something. The doctors decided to try a "drug holiday." During the summer vacation, Paolo was gradually tapered off Ritalin (a stimulant) to see whether this made any difference. The experiment was a success. Paolo's tics stopped when his Ritalin was removed. The neurologist decided to put Paolo on the drugs they use for depression. He said these drugs also help kids like Paolo.

KAREN BEASLEY: I wish the doctors would give me some of that Ritalin. I could use something to kill my appetite. I want to eat, but I know I should lose weight. At least I exercise.

CELIA BEROFSKY: I told you before, you're already too skinny. You should be worrying about your daughter. That's the reason you're here, isn't it? Your daughter won't talk to you, and my son won't talk to his teachers. They make a good pair.

KAREN BEASLEY: I guess so. You know, I thought she would be better when Eric left. He used to beat her up. Once, he even broke her arm. But, you know, I need to look good. Eric said I was too fat. Maybe that's why he left. I diet and exercise like crazy, but I need to do more. I get so hungry I can't help eating. Like, I might eat a whole quart of ice cream or five chocolate bars—sweets mainly. Then, I feel so bad, I just stick my fingers down my throat and throw it all back up.

Support Group: Part 4

Transcript From Meeting of the University Hospital Parent Support Group: Celia and Michael Describe Gordon's Problems

MICHAEL BEROFSKY: Gordon is a sensitive boy who likes to be near his mom. He has always hated being left with a babysitter. He would cry and cry. When he started third grade, he began having trouble getting out of bed in the morning. He would follow Celia as she made the beds and prepared meals. He would even stand outside the bathroom until she came out. Sometimes he would come to our bed in the middle of the night to see whether his mother was still breathing. He says he has nightmares about his mother dying in her sleep. I tried to get Celia not to baby the kid, but she just overprotected him to the point that he is now unable to stand on his own two feet.

CELIA BEROFSKY: Oh sure, blame it all on me. Like you were not there. You know how pathetic he was. He could barely let go of my hand when I took him to school. He is still the same. He is devastated every time he has to leave me. Besides, he is sickly. He has all these illnesses—headaches, tummy aches. The doctors seem to be unable to find out what is wrong. When I force him to go to school, he won't talk to anyone. He studies at home with me, and his work is excellent.

FRANCESCA ARMANTI: What treatment has Gordon received?

CELIA BEROFSKY: He has been to psychologists and psychiatrists. They say he has separation anxiety and that his not talking at school is selective mutism. He has had play therapy, behavior therapy, and a course of antidepressants. They all help a little, but sometimes I think this is just the way he is.

Support Group: Part 5

Transcript From Meeting of the University Hospital Parent Support Group: The Cheneys Talk About Eddie

INGRID CHENEY: My pregnancy and delivery were great. I felt well, and there were no problems. Eddie was a beautiful baby; people would look at him in his carriage and remark on how good-looking he was. He smiled a lot, but like I said, he never seemed to anticipate being picked up. When I would hold him, he would just hang there limp. Otherwise, he was perfectly normal.

JOHN CHENEY: Not quite perfectly. Remember when we thought he was deaf because he never seemed to turn to you when you called his name?

INGRID CHENEY: Of course I remember. He was hardly aware of sounds.

JOHN CHENEY: Anyway, by the time Eddie was two, we knew something was seriously wrong. He would never look in anyone's eyes. Even when you held his head, he turned his eyes away. He said nothing intelligible, and he didn't seem to understand much either. Eddie's favorite pastime was tapping this one special pencil on any surface he could find. Tap, tap, tap, until you thought you would go mad. If you tried to take away his pencil, he would go mad.

INGRID CHENEY: It was around then that he started these strange movements—flapping his arms like a bird, rocking, whirling in circles, twisting his fingers in front of his face, grimacing. Other kids were going to nursery school and playing. Eddie was spreading feces all over my sofa.

JOHN CHENEY: And he was so rigid. Everything had to be just as he wanted it. You couldn't move any furniture without Eddie going into a fit. He would scream, flap his arms, and hit himself in the head. Even his routine had to be exactly the same every day. First supper, then television, then a bath, then bed. Any change, and he would have a tantrum. Living with him was exasperating.

INGRID CHENEY: And sometimes dangerous. I can't tell you how many times he has kicked me and bit me. I have had to hide all the knives, scissors, and anything else that he might hurt himself with. Not that he is all that sensitive to pain. He has had the most horrible wounds without showing any sign that they hurt.

DR. BERG: What is he like now that he is nine?

JOHN CHENEY: He talks, but his speech consists mainly of imitations of what he has heard someone else say or something he heard on television. He likes music and can repeat whole songs after hearing them only once. He has learned to use some sign language—you know, the kind deaf people use. We have learned it, too. At least we can communicate a little that way.

DR. BERG: Does he go to school?

INGRID CHENEY: Yes, he is mainstreamed into a normal class for part of each day. He has special education the rest of the time, but he never plays directly with the other kids. And he is a handful at home. We rarely go out because we cannot leave him, and no one will babysit him. Vacations are only a dream.

DR. BERG: How has this affected you?

INGRID CHENEY: John works long hours and gets away from Eddie. For me, he is a constant companion. It has destroyed my life. I won't have any more kids because I can barely cope with Eddie. John and I fight about our lives, and we have discussed divorce. It's just too grim living like this. I feel like an old woman.

Support Group: Part 6

Transcript From Meeting of the University Hospital Parent Support Group: The Cheneys Discuss One Treatment Approach

INGRID CHENEY: We were so desperate to break through to Eddie, we were willing to try anything. On the advice of another couple whose child had autism, we bought a computer and employed a facilitator to help Eddie communicate with us. The facilitator would gently hold Eddie's hand over the keyboard, and Eddie would type out what he wanted to say. This other couple told us that their boy, who could not even speak, used this method to communicate his feelings and needs to them. He even told them that he loved them. At first, Eddie did well. With the facilitator guiding him, he told us how frightened he was of his illness and how much he liked cocoa, and all sorts of things. I was so happy. I remember that first day spending three hours with Eddie and the facilitator exploring so many topics. I couldn't wait for her to return. Eddie had so much to communicate.

JOHN CHENEY: It was a fraud. You know, like that famous horse that supposedly could think and do mathematics but was really getting signals from its master. The facilitator was guiding Eddie toward certain keys. They were her messages we were getting, not Eddie's.

INGRID CHENEY: John's right; I was fooled. I wanted so much to talk to Eddie, I tried the method on my own, without the facilitator. Eddie never typed out anything with me. At first, I thought I just didn't understand the technique; then I thought, Eddie won't talk to me. Finally, I realized that I had built my hopes on air—there is no secret way to communicate with Eddie.