

SYSTEMATIC TRAINING STEP IN

SUMMARY

In the past couple of years, Dinkmeyer and McKay's (1976) Systematic Training for Effective Parenting (STEP) has become very popular in Australia. It is currently being used in public schools, Department of Children Services and other social agencies. As the use of STEP increases, it seems appropriate for STEP users to share their ideas in

order to promote a better understanding of the programme. In this paper, the author

(i) describes his early experiences with parent education;
(ii) identifies the theoretical origins of step, and
(iii) describes some guidelines for a STEP leader.

INTRODUCTION

My wife, Jane, and I first used parent education in Brisbane, Australia in 1974*. Our initial use of parent education was to provide training to Family Day Care (FDC) parents. Up until that time, FDC was seen as an unstable environment for children. This was because FDC parents tended to quit after staying with the job for a couple of months.

It was though that if FDC parents were provided the skills to understand and work with children, they would stay with the job. In this program all FDC parents were required to attend a 10 week (2 hours a week) parent education course. The programme was based on the Adlerian oriented book "Happy Children"*** by Dreikurs and Soltz (1972). The 20 FDC parents ranged in age from 22 to 70 and represented a cross section of socio-economic status levels. Apparently the parent education course had some effect on the FDC programme. At the end of the first year 18 of the initial 20 FDC parents were still in the programme. Today, many FDC schemes use parent education as a means of providing training to FDC parents. It is seen as a practical way to help FDC parents better understand and work with the children in the care.

In 1976, Dinkmeyer and McKay's Systematic Training for Effective Parenting (STEP) became available. The programme seemed to bring

together the best parts of Gordon's (1970) Parent Effectiveness Training (PET) and our Adlerian/Dreikursian programme based on "Happy Children."

Between 1976 and 1980, my wife and I conducted numerous leader training workshops for people interested in offering STEP programmes to the public. The participants represented various disciplines of the helping profession (e.g., counsellors, social workers, pre-school teachers, medicos, and psychologist). The majority of these people were from the state of Queensland. Soon the word got around that STEP was a meaningful and comprehensive programme. By 1979, STEP was being offered in major cities throughout Australia.

I believe that there were several reasons for STEP's popularity. The concepts are easy to understand. The programme also provides practical guidance to help parents handle common child rearing problems. The main attraction of the programme might be that it is consistent with the child rearing philosophy that many parents already have. For example, since the Australian people value sportsmanship and fair play, they find it easy to accept the STEP concept of

* 1. We had earlier experiences with parent education programme in Oregon, U.S.A.

** 2. The hard cover edition of "Happy Children is "Children the Challenge". (1964).



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mutual respect. Australians also take pride in being a rational-logical people. Therefore, the STEP principles of natural and logical consequences become attractive.

THEORETICAL ORIGINS OF STEP

STEP is essentially a combination of two parent education programmes — Gordon's (1970) Parent Effectiveness Training (PET) and the Adlerian/Dreikursian programme based on "Happy Children." The theoretical origins of PET can be traced to Carl Roger's (1961) Client Centered approach to Counselling. PET is essentially a programme that trains parents to use counselling skills with their children. Parents use PET skills such as active listening (i.e., paraphrasing and reflection of feeling) to communicate that they understand their child. As the child feels understood, the relationship between the parent and child is enhanced. This sets the stage for problem solving within the counselling process.

Another valuable concept that PET brings to the STEP programme is problem ownership. Problem ownership suggests that a problem is either owned by the child (e.g., the child is having trouble with a friend); the parent (e.g., the children are making a lot of noise in the house); or jointly owned by both the parent and child (e.g., the child does things to the parent to get revenge). The concept of problem ownership helps:

- (i) parents avoid taking responsibility away from their children and
- (ii) provide parents with a means of determining what to do when there is a child rearing problem.

The second major theoretical contributor to the STEP programme was Alfred Adler. Adler was a colleague of Freud who later broke away and started his own psychological school of thought which became known as Individual Psychology. It is a humanistic educationally oriented point of view

(see Adler, 1970). Adler was a pioneer in child guidance and started what may have been the first child guidance clinics in Europe.

Rudolph Dreikurs was a student and colleague of Adler. He was a prolific writer who provided dynamic and creative leadership to the Adlerian movement for over 30 years. Dreikurs started up parent education programmes and child and family counselling centers in many states of the U.S.A. and other countries throughout the world. Dreikurs authored several books (e.g., "The Challenge of Parenthood" (1958) and "Children the Challenge" (1964)) that influenced the majority of the principles found in STEP. The Adlerian/Dreikursian concepts contributed two important elements to the STEP programme. First, it provides parents with a system that can be used to understand the purpose of children's behavior from birth. Second, parents are exposed to democratic child management techniques (i.e., natural and logical consequences) that can be used to resolve common parent-child conflict situations.

GUIDELINES FOR BEING A STEP LEADER

WHO CAN BE ONE? In my written correspondence with Dr. Don Dinkmeyer, he suggested that there shouldn't be any formal educational requirement to be a STEP leader. He did recommend that any person that wanted to offer STEP to the public should attend a leader's training workshop. These workshops could provide the participants with the theoretical under-pinnings of STEP concepts and practical advice for presenting the STEP programme to parents. I believe that it is also advisable for prospective STEP leaders to have been a STEP participant. Dinkmeyer also suggested that university courses that relate to small group process

could also be helpful in developing effective STEP leadership skills.

Many prospective STEP leaders wonder if it is necessary to be a parent to teach parenting skills. A recent research project I was involved in (Schultz, Nystul, and Law, 1980 and Schultz and Nystul, 1980) suggest that this is not the case. Our study included a parent educator that had never had any children and looked 16 (she was actually 20). She got the same change in parental attitudes and behaviour as a parent educator that had several teenagers.

POSSIBLE ROADBLOCKS TO STEP EFFECTIVENESS

First of all, I believe that when STEP is offered to the general public, it should be presented as a form of education and not therapy. If a family has in-depth problems, STEP can be used in conjunction with family therapy and child counselling. STEP groups can tend to evolve into therapy groups if the STEP leader allows this to happen.

In the security and support of the STEP group, parents can disclose more of their family problems than they really wanted to. For example, a parent may appear emotionally overwhelmed in a role playing situation or discussion. If this occurs, the STEP leader should first respond to the emotional reaction and provide some support. Then, the STEP leader should try to ease the discussion to a less emotional level. After the STEP session has finished, the leader should also make an effort to sit down alone with the parent that had difficulty. During this time, the problem can be explored further to determine if counselling is required to help with the situation.

Another issue that can cause difficulties in STEP groups is the way the concepts are presented to the parents. Generally speaking, I believe

that STEP ideas should be exposed and not imposed on the parents. One of the main reasons that parents attend STEP groups is because they lack confidence in dealing with their children. Therefore a major goal of parent education should be to provide support for the parent. For example, a parent may feel that spanking is a useful form of keeping order in the family. In such situations it would not be helpful to tell the parent that spanking was wrong. This would only undermine the parents' approach and contribute to their lack of confidence.

A final guideline for parent educators relates to the importance of advanced parent education programmes. For most parents, STEP opens their eyes to new potentialities with their children. In a sense, it gets things started in a new direction for the parents. Eventually, some of the effects of the STEP program will begin to wear off. I believe that parents should be given an opportunity to attend an advanced course in parent education about 12-18 months after they have completed their STEP programme. This allows them a chance to re-introduce old ideas and explore new principles

associated with the STEP philosophy. Dinkmeyer and McKay's (1973) book "Raising a Responsible Child," Grey's (1974) "Discipline without Fear," Dreikurs and Soltz's (1964) "Children the Challenge" and Gordon's (1970)

"Parent Effectiveness Training" can be used to structure advanced courses in parent education.

Another interesting possibility that STEP users might want to consider is providing discussion groups for children. Don Dinkmeyer has developed two excellent self-concept and career awareness programmes — "Developing and Understanding of Self and Others (DUSO) I and II" (1970 and 1973). They can be used with children between the ages of 5 and 12. The DUSO programmes can help children understand themselves in relation to others in a philosophy similar to that found within the STEP programme.

CONCLUSION

The present paper has described my experiences with parent education in Australia. I have attempted to identify the theoretical origins of the STEP programme and offered some guidelines for its use.

I feel confident that the enthusiasm for parent education in Australia will continue. Parents love their children more than anything else. They are looking for ways to be better parents. Parent education can help parents discover the best approach for them and their children.

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