

Everything is NOT a Counseling Session

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I have observed that when someone learns the concepts and practice of Choice Theory® and Reality Therapy there is a tendency to turn every situation or problem into a counseling session. This stems from a sincere belief in Choice Theory™ and wanting to use the “pure” form of these concepts.

Careful consideration should be given to your intentions before embarking on “teaching Choice Theory™” or “using Reality Therapy” with family, friends and colleagues. I will demonstrate my point with a few examples from my parenting experience.

When my oldest son was two years old, he and I were the only ones at home one day. I wanted to go to the grocery store to pick up some items we needed for dinner. I had just been certified in Reality Therapy (R.T.) and was enthusiastic about applying the concepts and practices. In my quest to be the perfect “Reality Therapist” (we could use that term in 1981) I had a conversation with Matt that went something like this:

Me: “Matt, let’s go to the grocery store.”

Matt: “No”

Me: “Do you want to help daddy buy the things we need?”

Matt: “No.”

Not to be thwarted by a 2 year old, I continued. I did not realize I was attempting to use R.T. on Matt to manipulate him into thinking that going to the store was his choice. Of course, I took him to the store anyway.

What good did it do to ask Matt what he wants? I clearly did not like his answers and ignored his wants in the end. In this case, I should be acting as his father, not his counselor.

The relevant questions I should have asked myself were:

1. Am I going to the store? Yes
2. Do I believe in leaving a 2 year-old at home alone? No
3. Does Matt really have a choice in going to the store? No

Choice doesn't mean we "get everything our way". We teach "we always have a choice". But, that shouldn't be translated into "we always have a good choice". Matt's choice was how he would behave, based on whether I stayed home with him or whether I took him to the store.

In parenting, not everything is negotiable. We believed that parents must set certain boundaries. We had very few rules in our house, but we did enforce the ones we created to the best of our ability. The two that stand out the most to me were:

- * No R-rated movies until you are 17
- * We want to know where you are and your curfew is midnight.

We had no control over what they did at friends' houses. I am not naïve enough to think they never watched R rated movies. However, I also know of times when they told their friends or their friends' parents that they weren't allowed to watch them.

When I was in High School, I wasn't allowed to go places I wanted to go, so I lied to my parents. Our boys were rarely told "no", as long as we knew where they were. With the freedom to go where they wanted, with very few exceptions, there wasn't a need to lie to us. The curfew issue was occasionally waived as they became juniors and seniors in High School and based on events like prom, etc.

These were not "counseling issues". They were parental permission issues. Our children are/were not our clients. The rules that we imposed were our decisions based on our values.

We did use the R.T. process when certain problems arose, but again, we didn't use the process as "counseling". We were biased about the outcome. We used it as best we could to problem-solve and therefore they were mostly conversations/conferences about the problem.

Parenting is a unique role that may include some of the elements of teaching, managing, counseling and friending (Glasser). However, a parent must be very clear on what role they are in at the time they choose how to deal with a child. Parents are emotionally attached to their children in ways that a teacher or counselor will ever reach. If a child is asking for help and the parent is not emotionally involved in the outcome, a "purer" "counseling" (reality therapy) use can be effective. In most cases, it is best for the parent to recognize their emotions or biases and just talk with their children. The relationship will be stronger for listening and giving opinions than from subtly "leading" the child into what the parent wants for their child.