

# 101 More Interventions in Family Therapy

Thorana S. Nelson, PhD & Terry S. Trepper, PhD (Editors)  
New York: Haworth Press  
1998

---

Chapter

—80—

## Carols in the Trenches

By

Gary C. Dumbrill

### *INTRODUCTION*

Working with mandated clients can become like trench warfare, particularly in child protection work. It begins with social workers and parents taking opposing positions over an issue. Saber rattling occurs as each side uses argument and perhaps even coercion to try to make the other side change their position. Rather than change, each side digs in and becomes increasingly rigid. Trench warfare has begun.

Unfortunately, while parents and protection workers battle, children are often caught in the middle. In such warfare, children may be removed from home to ensure their safety while simple collaboration between workers and parents might enable children to live at home safely. It is crucial, therefore, to develop ways of breaking out of entrenchment. The intervention of “carols in the trenches” does just that: it provides a way social workers can break entrenchment and develop collaborative relationships with parents.

### *DESCRIPTION OF INTERVENTION*

During the First World War, German and British troops were spending Christmas in the trenches. The English troops began singing carols and were surprised to find that the German troops started singing carols back. After a time of exchanging carols, one brave soldier stood and sang in full view of the enemy. Soon the English and German armies were singing together in the wasteland between the trenches. From that day on, the soldiers stopped fighting and spent their time playing soccer together.

Unfortunately, the generals did not like this turn of events. The generals made it a capital offence to play soccer or sing carols with the enemy. The

frontline troops were replaced with new troops who had not gotten to know the enemy and war resumed.

If singing carols can briefly halt one of the most brutal wars in history, it has the potential to end deadlocks occurring between social workers and mandated clients. Using principals taken from what occurred in those muddy trenches in casework easily overcomes entrenchment.

Three sequential events occurred in the trenches. The first was the initiation of nonhostile communication between both sides. Singing carols allowed this nonhostile interaction to occur. Through this interaction, each side began recognizing the humanity of the other.

The second event was a gesture of faith from one side to the other. This occurred when a soldier stood and sang in view of the enemy. The soldier was probably urged to do this by his newfound belief in the enemy's humanity. The soldier's act led to the enemy to make a similar gesture and soon both armies were singing together in the land between the trenches.

The final event was both armies recognizing that they had things in common. This recognition developed as the soldiers got to know each other and realized that both armies were in similar cold trenches away from their families at Christmas.

The above three events had an almost inevitable result. After each side recognized the humanity of the other and the fact that were both in the same predicament, both sides worked together to make life more comfortable. The armies gave up fighting, refused to return to their damp trenches, and played soccer together.

#### *CASE EXAMPLE*

The three elements above can be successfully applied to entrenched cases. Consider the case of the B family. The B children, aged three years old and one year old, were apprehended by child protection services after being physically abused by both Mr. and Mrs. B. At the time of the abuse, the parents had been going through a period of extreme stress.

Within weeks of the apprehension, Mr. and Mrs. B seemed to be overcoming their problems and dealing with their stresses in a more effective manner. However, they refused to cooperate with any assessment of their functioning and would not discuss the abuse of the children or how they intended to prevent similar abuse occurring again. Mr. and Mrs. B soon became entrenched and stated that there was only one way they were willing to show the authorities their problems were under control; the children should be returned and the authorities could then observe that the children were well cared for.

Unfortunately, as the children's injuries had been serious, it would have been irresponsible to return the children without firm evidence that Mr. and Mrs. B had overcome the problems that led to the abuse. With no option for negotiation, the protection worker became equally entrenched and said that returning the children would not even be discussed until a full assessment was completed showing that Mr. and Mrs. B no longer presented a risk to the children.

As the protection worker and parents argued to try and break their impasse, their respective positions became increasingly entrenched. Meetings between the social worker and parents became a time for posturing where no constructive work was undertaken. Each side became convinced their position would be vindicated by a judge after a full trial.

The trial could not be scheduled for six months. As the children were very young and needed to be bonded with their parents, it was crucial that a speedier resolution be found without compromising the children's safety. That resolution was found through the intervention of "carols in the trenches."

The first objective was to connect with Mr. and Mrs. B on a nonhostile level. This was done by the worker no longer trying to convince them to cooperate with an assessment. Instead, the worker actively avoided arguing with Mr. and Mrs. B and found aspects of what the parents were saying or doing that could be praised. Initially they continued to posture with such comments as, "Don't ask us to undergo an assessment because we won't and after the trial the judge is going to tell you how we were right all along." The worker responded with comments such as, "I will not ask you to undergo an assessment anymore and I admire you taking a stand on what you believe is right."

It was not long before Mr. and Mrs. B began to respond to the worker on a nonhostile level and gave up much of their posturing. Although hostilities had ceased, both sides remained entrenched. The worker still needed an assessment and the parents were still unwilling to be assessed. At this point the worker applied the second element of "carols in the trenches" by making a gesture of good will towards the parents.

"I am really concerned and I don't know what to do," the worker confessed, "I really want to send the children home, I can see you have both made progress, but I am not sure how I can get them home."

"Just tell your boss to send the children home, your boss will listen to you" Mrs. B responded.

"I wish I could," the worker replied, "but my boss and the court expect me to give evidence that things are better, the Judge will laugh at me and

my boss will fire me if I try to send the children home unless I can say exactly why I believe things are better.”

In taking this position, the worker shared also her vulnerability. She revealed her genuine inability to effect change as a result of constraints placed on her by the courts, her supervisor, and the demands of her role as a child protection worker. The worker was out of the trench and standing in full view of the other side.

The worker continued to apply this strategy, remaining careful not to argue with the parents. When the parents continued to tell the worker to “just send the children home,” the worker would reiterate, “I wish I could, I just don’t know what to do, I feel so stuck without concrete evidence for the courts.” After several weeks of applying the intervention, the third element of “carols in the trenches” began to take effect. Mr. and Mrs. B began to realize that the worker was in a similar situation to their own. The worker wanted to see the children returned home yet, like them, did not have the power to achieve the objective in the present circumstances.

As the worker shared more of her frustration about being unable to return the children home without concrete evidence that they were safe, Mr. and Mrs. B began to consider how they might help the worker convince the court that their home was safe. It was then not long before Mr. and Mrs. B were collaborating with the social worker in successfully demonstrating that the children could be returned home safely.

### *CONCLUSION*

The B case is not unique. Scenarios may be different, but the deadlock that comes from entrenched positions maintains many child welfare cases in stalemate positions. As shown above, “carols in the trenches” does not compromise the safety of children and is a powerful way of breaking the entrenchment. Refusing to argue with clients and establishing nonhostile communication, making a gesture of good will and placing emphasis on what the clients and worker have in common (e.g. wanting to get the children home safely) is an effective way of making progress in many deadlocked situations.

The intervention however, does use methods that might be considered controversial. The first issue that might cause concern is a worker showing vulnerability by expressing to his/her clients a genuine inability to effect change. It is usual to discuss inability to bring change with a supervisor, but not a client. Yet why not discuss such concerns with a client? After all, the client has more ability to change the situation than a supervisor. Also, if the worker is in position where he/she cannot bring change, it impor-

tant to be honest with clients about this because the inability to bring change will effect the client more than anyone else in the situation.

The second concern that might be raised about the intervention is that a worker might express a desire to trust and return children to parents who have been abusive. Just because a social worker expresses a desire to return children, however, does not mean that the worker should allow this desire override a desire and duty to keep children safe. In the previous example, although the worker expressed a *real* desire to return the children to their home, she remained adamant that concrete evidence was needed to show that the children would be safe. Rather than being a problem, the attitude of this worker is what every parent of a child in short term care should expect; a worker who has a genuine desire to see children returned home, but at the same time a worker who will not compromise the safety of children.

Balancing keeping children safe and maintaining a desire to return the children home is not easy. Balancing these roles with mandated protection clients often leads to workers and clients taking polarized positions. When such polarization produces trench warfare, the intervention of "carols in the trenches" provides a way entrenchment can be broken and progress made.

