Triangles and The Family Dynamic

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Family dynamics have a major impact on how an individual interacts with the world around them. In families, alliances can form as part of the natural family dynamics. Sometimes triangles, three person relationships, are formed during conflict. In a family system, understanding triangles is essential to breakdown conflicts between within a family. These conflicts are called triads, which a coalition formed between two people at the expense of the third. Because each individual in a family is constantly influencing one another, there has to be a study of the hierarchies and other complexities of the family (Cox & Paley, 1997). The hierarchy shows how the triangles can form on different levels. When conflict arises and triangles infiltrate the family system, understanding the families established hierarchy can help resolve the problem.

Triangle problems occur from a confusion of levels of communication and confusion between levels of the relationship system (Hoffman, 1981). Problems within triangles usually begin when one person gets conflicting messages from at least two different people. The one person can neither make a comment nor leave the situation (Hoffman, 1981). Unfortunately, the child is usually the one caught in the middle of the conflict. Regardless of which family member is caught, in the conflict the family member could be punished for choosing a side and/or punished for not choosing a side. Youth development leaders have a responsibility to the children they interact with every day. In order to understand any child fully, there has to be an understanding of the influences that relationships have on behaviors and social relations (Cox & Paley, 1997).

There are a number of different ways triangles cause problems within families. One example of a triad is a “perverse triangle”. The perverse triangle or cross-generational coalition is a triad containing two people at different levels of hierarchy against a third and the coalition is hidden from the third member. This could be a parent and child against a parent, a grandparent
and child against a parent. In the case of parent-child-parent, the coalition undermines the authority of the left out parent and gives more power to the other (Hoffman, 1981). For example, a mother and son have formed a bond against the father for various reasons. The son will side with his mother or choose to listen to her instruction instead of the father’s. This causes a shift in family dynamics. The father, now pushed out of authority, will have to struggle to solve the problems, or decide to stay out of the issues. Thus, the balance of power is interrupted. Conflicts like this can extend to other parts of the family system and be detrimental to the child’s development (Cox & Paley, 1997).

Within my family, there are few triads to speak of. We have always been very close and my parents tried to keep their marital strife away from my siblings and me. I would say the most noticeable triad would be between my siblings and me, though. I have an older brother and a young sister. When we were young, my brother and I were both close to my sister, but we were not close to each other. My sister was put into the position of ambivalence. Ambivalence, according to Caplow, is an emotional strain that comes from interaction with a person who is both an opponent and a coalition partner. Haley defines ambivalence as a state of mind of an individual that is faced with choices that are equal and has mixed feelings about (Hoffman, 1981). On the one hand, with me as her play partner, we could do all the “girly” games which my brother did not wish to play. On the other hand, playing with my brother allowed her to play with the older kids in the neighborhood. The mixed feelings were that she knew someone was going to be left out of play.

In the inner city, unfortunately many families are single parent homes. Many parents rely on other family members to help out when the need arises (Hoffman, 1981). For example, a child can get caught in the middle of family arguments. On the one hand, the child could pick a side
(parent or grandparent) and risk alienation from the other side (parent). If they remain close to both sides, both can react negatively toward the child. In instances like this, the child gets caught up in an avoidance-avoidance conflict. If the child goes to either side, they receive negative consequences. The child tries to stay neutral, but when forced to take a side, it can cause great distress (Hoffman, 1981). When three generations are involved in the triangle, it is called a cross-generational coalition. Many of the families I work with have formed these coalitions for the protection of the children. Parents struggling with addictions or commitment issues leave their children with their own parents. The child knows their parent is unstable, therefore allies themselves with their grandparent.

As a youth development leader, there are ways to help resolve these situations. The first thing to do is to speak about the problem. All parties involved must be able to give an explanation. Many times, it is because of fear of ridicule or punishment that prevents a person from speaking up in the first place. When a child is given conflicting messages from their parents, it can cause stress for the child. Giving them an opportunity to speak about the stress will help alleviate the problem. Talking can also help work out any underlying problems which have cause the parents to give opposite messages to their child. If youth development leaders notice these triangles forming, it is in the best interest of the child to prevent the conflict from solidifying. If that does happen, it could cause damage to the child’s family relationships, development and overall mental wellbeing. Moreover, once solidified, not much can be done to return the relationships to normal. However, if reached in time, the youth development leader can teach the family strategies to prevent such conflict in the future, like speaking out concerns, or forming healthy alliances that are beneficial to the situation. Triangles appear in society more often as divorce rates continue to be high, and families consisting of many different authoritative
people. Youth development leaders need to learn to recognize triangle situations and defuse them as best as they can for the child’s benefit.
References


United States of America: Basic Book Inc.