Brief Therapy for Parents of a College Student Not Attending School: Interactive Perspectives of Narrative and Structure

Choichiro Saito\(^1\), Naohisa Tahara\(^2\), and Mieko Mori\(^3\)

\(^1\) Tokyo Metropolitan University Graduate School
\(^2\) Tokyo Seitoku University Graduate School
\(^3\) Healthcare Corporation Seiwa-Kai Asai Hospital

ABSTRACT: The present case study reports the process of consultation to parents of a student who were not attending college. In addition, it examines the significance of sessions that address the possibility for the treatment system to create a vicious cycle in working on school non-attendance by dealing with parents’ narrative and the relational structure for coping which are in interactive relationship. The present case demonstrated the importance of supporting parental problem solving behavior by assessing the communication problem.

KEY WORDS: narrative and structure, brief therapy, not attending school, college students

Problem
A number of college students, in addition to elementary and junior high school students, are not attending schools or attending only poorly. Developmentally, this is a period when one deals with such themes as establishment of self-identity and career choice (Seki & Sakata, 1983), it is conceivable that values concerning college are part of the background of non-attending students. On the other hand, secondary communication problems that non-attendance poses to the student and his or her family can remain similar even when the student is in college.

Case Summary
(Adapted without departing from the essence)
Clients: father ("Fa") and mother ("Mo").
Chief Complaint: non-attendance of the son who is a college student ("IP").
Referral: Parents were referred by a university counselor to counseling agency of the writers.
Counseling Structure: Approximately once a month, 50 minutes each. Two consultants ("Co") conducted the sessions.
Fa: business employee; Mo: business employee; older sister: business employee; IP: college student; younger sister: high school student.

Process at College Leading to Referral

After starting college, guidance was provided by a faculty member due to repeated poor attendance in the first year. Guidance was provided in the second year due to difficulty in attaining the junior status based on the credits earned by the first term. Despite friends’ encouragement, attendance was not sustained. Junior status was barely granted for consideration of those around him, but since the university could no longer reach IP, it contacted his parents in June. IP did not express the reason for poor attendance, leaving the university unable to provide intervention. To the university counselor, IP talked about communication problems in the family, stating that his parents were never home, they did not eat meals together or prepare meals for him, he had little conversation with them, and that he wanted to leave home as soon as possible.

Counseling Progress

(#1 July, Year X)

It was reported that IP had entered his university with reluctance, and the past non-attendance was discussed. Recently, he had a life in nocturnal lifestyle, spending much time in playing games.

<What have you tried so far to deal with it?>

Mo reported communication difficulty between the parents and IP, for example, an instance in which he declined her invitation to go for a ride to chat on the way. Fa reported that while he had questioned in strong language what IP had intended to do, he had also given him a letter in a soft tone that life was not only about school, but that IP should not cause the members of his seminar trouble.

#2 September, Year X

It had turned out that IP was not attending classes although he would answer, “I’ll go,” and “OK, OK,” to Fa when he was asked what he was going to do with college. Fa reported that IP did not have a sense of emergency. Even when the parents asked him out, IP would not come.

It appeared to Co that there was a vicious cycle in communication that could be described as “IP’s problem becomes serious → parents approach him → IP avoids.” Hence, Co commended the parents for the ideas that they had tried to talk to him and gave the Surprise Assignment (Hasegawa & Wakashima, 2002) intended to Do Different (Hasegawa, 1987) by asking that <Fa and Mo do something to surprise IP. It does not matter what.>

#3-4 October, Year X

Conversation based on the Go Slow Paradox (Hasegawa & Wakashima, 2002) was exchanged, including Co saying, <I don’t think that there have been any notable change to IP in this short period, but is there anything that has changed since the last session?> In regard to the Surprise Assignment, it was reported that the parents had made a surprise visit at IP’s part-time work. Co commended them for that and suggested them to continue to
work on the Surprise Assignment whenever possible.

#5 November, Year X

Continuation of the part-time work and continued conversations between the parents and IP during the rides to and from the work were reported. Fa said about his attitudes with optimism, “I can refrain from telling him what to do. I am now able to watch IP calmly. The important thing is to mentally support and watch. We are growing together with our son.”

Co stated a prediction, “As is often the case with adolescents, it might be difficult to maintain a good condition through events such as receiving not so great grades on tests and failing to pass onto the next grade year. How would you deal with these?” Co suggested to prepare hypothetical conversational tools in case of termination of the part time job.

#6-8 December-March, Year X+1

It was reported that IP had told the parents that he had found what he wanted to do after graduating from college. Also reported were that IP had increased his hours at the part time work and that conversations between the parents and IP were going smoothly.

Fa planned and carried out a trip abroad with IP, performing the Surprise Assignment. Fa reported that he had learned during the trip that IP could be considerate toward others and renewed his view of IP. Co praised Fa for performing the assignment.

#9 April, Year X+1

It had turned out that obtaining the qualification that was needed to perform what IP wanted to do was not very realistic considering the balance with the required credits in college. Consequently, according to the parents, IP was again not going to the university. He had been staying up late and not waking up in the morning.

Fa’s narrative, such as “You are not motivated,” and “This has to stop,” suggested a structure in which the current state was conceptualized and attempted to resolve solely based on IP’s motivation. Thus, the need was discussed for the parents to communicate without implying to IP that he ought to generate motivation on his own. Co suggested, “Perhaps he is not able to go to sleep until early morning because of some physical conditions rather than a mere lack of motivation.” To address one of such conditions, Co provided psycho-education about the message function of a parental proposal to IP to utilize sleep medicine.

#10-11 May-June, Year X+1

Parents reported handing over-the-counter sleep medicine to IP. IP did not use it, but acknowledged that he had been playing games when he could not go to sleep.

He was going to his part-time work but not to college, and it appeared that the parents were in stalemate. Because Co could only imagine what IP had in mind from parents’ reports, Co wrote a letter to IP that it would not move forward without his cooperation and invited him to come to a session with his parents.

#12 July, Year X+1

*With IP attending

The first half of the session was conducted with IP only. IP directly stated his sentiments, such as that he did not have anything he wanted
to do although he wished he had, he did not enjoy college and he enjoyed his work more, he did not want to take a leave of absence from college, he could study if needed but did not feel like he could work hard, and that he wanted to withdraw from college and work more for the time being. He also stated that that was difficult to tell his parents.

IP’s thoughts and feelings were shared with the parents in the parents-child joint session.

In the parents-only session, Fa stated that IP had gained self-confidence from his part-time job and that it was ok to be not sure. Mo stated that she actually wanted him to go, but if he would not go, she would accept that.

*Only parents attending

It was reported that IP was not attending college, but he had added another part-time job, and had been talking about colleagues at work. Termination of the counseling was discussed after that session.

#13 September, Year X+1

There will be various problems with IP in the future. How would you feel about dealing with them based on the previous experience? >

The parents answered that it would be great if they could join him at his pace and that they would provide suggestions and assistance, but basically he would be on his own. Fa had become able to state that the communication had been gradually improving, the trip abroad had helped, and that they would be able to deal with problems to some extent. It was confirmed that counseling could be resumed as needed, and the case was terminated.

*Discussions

Structure of Problem Solving in the Family and Narrative

In the present case, the following structural change and related narrative development were observed (Table 1). In this case, the structure of parents-child relationship regarding problem-solving and parental narrative seemed to affect each other as above. Parental narrative about IP fluctuated between affirmation and negation, and suggested an interrelationship with the structure. Therefore, Co provided intervention at the structure, while paying attention to the narrative. It appeared necessary to facilitate sessions based on the background structure as well as the parental narrative.

Table 1. Structural Change and Narrative Development

| Parents intervene at the last moment—IP gives a stopgap response |
| I am now able to watch IP calmly, or If I am going to do if he couldn’t graduate in four years? |
| ↓ |
| Become able to maintain contact consistently |
| ↓ |
| Contact with Fa becomes strong |
| ↓ |
| Communication stalemate concerning college |
| ↓ |
| Speculate IP’s inner side and give meaning to his motivation |
| ↓ |
| Not motivated |
| ↓ |
| Apply previous problem solving |

Note: [ ] represents structure
[ ] represents narrative
concerning non-attendance at school.

Parent-Co Systems Perspective in Addressing School Non-Attendance
Because in dealing with the problem of school non-attendance, treatment system that presumes changes in IP sometimes creates a vicious cycle, the Go Slow Paradox was introduced between sessions. By sharing the assumption that changes to school attendance rarely occur, other kinds of changes, including those in parent-child relationship, were discussed in the sessions. In addition, relapse of the problem was expected, and what could be done prior to relapse was discussed.

The present case demonstrated the importance of supporting parental problem solving behavior by assessing the communication problem, including the counseling system, that is affected by IP’s school non-attendance.

References