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Turning irritation into teaching: professional responses to disputes amongst adolescents in Dutch family homes

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we have focused on irritation as a discourse marker for professional foster parents to intervene in adolescents' disputes. We were interested in how irritation leads to responses from people who are not the object of irritation themselves, but who intervene in the dispute, thus entering and changing the social situation. Four types of responses could be distinguished: 1) responding to the content of the dispute, 2) responding to the process of the dispute, 3) responding to the emotion of the adolescent or 4) ignoring the dispute. Although most cases in our sample seem to exhibit a main strategy that fits this categorisation, in 10 cases different strategies are combined. We showed that in these combined responses professional foster parents do not intervene merely for disciplinary reasons, although they do so when things threaten to get out of hand. They also use these occasions as teachable moments.

KEYWORDS

Irritation; adolescents; professional fostercare; applied conversation analysis

Introduction

In this study we focus on disputes amongst adolescents in the presence of professional foster parents. We are especially interested in parental responses to disputes during dinner time in family homes.

In these family homes, professionally trained foster parents receive around four out-of-home-placed children in their family (Wunderink, 2019). The pedagogical climate in these family homes is hybrid, the professional foster parents combining family life with professional interventions (van Nijnatten & Noordegraaf, 2016).

The family homes that are included in this study constitute part of a project aimed at preventing the placement of adolescents in such homes from ending up in breakdown (Sallnäs, Vinnerljung, & Kyhle Westermarck, 2004). A major reason for breakdown is escalating problem behaviour of youngsters. This problem behavior can be either fueled or mitigated within (foster-)sibling relationships (see, for instance, Kothari et al., 2017; Wojciak, McWey, & Waid, 2018).

It is therefore relevant to find out more about the ways in which disputes amongst adolescents in family homes are dealt with by professional foster parents. For our analysis, we use an interactional perspective to show how disputes build up around actions that elicit opposition and may evoke parental responses.

Irritation in conversations

Disputes are a sequentially organized, interactional process. We approach disputes as action-opposition sequences. This means that ‘any move, claim, stance or position that one person takes explicitly or implicitly, verbally or nonverbally, can become part of an argument if it is opposed’ (Maynard, 1985, p. 23. See also Church, 2016 on how conflicts are regularly organized). One way of demonstrating an opposite understanding of someone’s action is to show irritation. According to Ruusuvuori, irritation is an emotion, which is ‘a state of mind that has mental, bodily or behavioral indicators’, and has an object (2013, p. 331). We are interested in how indicators of irritation are treated amongst adolescents and how disputes flare up to the point of parental (non-) intervention.

Parental responses to conflict

In pedagogical literature on parental responses to conflicts between children, four strategies can be found. McHale, Updegraff, Tucker, and Crouter (2000) distinguish three different parental response techniques: 1) intervention (command to stop, punish), 2) coaching (give advice, explain feelings) and 3) non-involvement (ignore, tell siblings to work out problem). Kramer, Perozynsk, and Chung (1999) breaks down coaching into a) collaborative problem solving (to reach a resolution that satisfies all) and b) exploration of emotion.

A previous study on interaction between professional foster parents and adolescents in family homes, based on direct (video-) observation, showed that professional foster parents hardly ever intervene in adolescents’ verbally ironic disputes and even gear their reactions towards preparing them for future disputes with other peers (van Nijnatten, Matarese, & Noordegraaf, 2017). This finding follows Kramer et al. (1999) who found that passive parental non-intervention (parents leave it to the children but don’t say so) is most common. Contrary to this, we expect professional foster parents to be less distant when the tone of the dispute is less ironic and more hostile.

Method

In our study we used applied conversation analysis as a method. More specifically, we focused on institutionally applied conversation analysis to examine the institutional activity of professional foster care, in order to reveal ‘how the (foster care) world and its problems work’ (Antaki, 2011, p. 8). We used (video) recordings from interactions in the natural setting of a family home, which provided the opportunity to analyse participants’ verbal and embodied practices within a conversational context. Findings in the analysis are illustrated by transcriptions of conversations from the videos.

Our data stem from a bigger data set of video recordings in six family homes. Cameras ran every day from 4 PM to 7 PM over a period of three weeks. Each day, a tripod was placed at the same place in the dining room; the researchers were, therefore, not present during recordings. For this study we analysed 27 hours of dinner table talk from three family homes in which several adolescents are living together and where mealtime disputes happen. The conversations were transcribed in detail

according to Jefferson (2004) conventions, then translated into English. Informed consent was obtained for scientific use of the data. Names and other identifying details have been changed to preserve individuals' privacy. Informed consent for scientific use of the recordings was given.

We selected 25 cases in which adolescents show indications of irritation and where professional foster parents respond. Four responses can be distinguished that differ somewhat from the earlier mentioned classification of McHale et al. (2000), supplemented by Kramer et al. (1999). We defined intervention not only as a directive but as all kinds of responses that aim to help solve the problem. We identified four possible categories of response strategy: responding to the content of the dispute (N = 1), responding to process of the dispute (N = 14), responding to the emotions (N = 1) and not responding (N = 9).

Although all 25 cases in our sample seem to have a main strategy that matches this categorisation, in 10 cases different strategies are combined. These cases appear to have in common that the irritation amongst the adolescents is turned into a teachable moment (see: Slembrouck & Hall, 2017).

In our Results section we focus on cases in which a dual strategy is applied, by: 1) clarifying each strategy; 2) analysing more complex dual responses; 3) exploring how irritation is transformed into teaching and what kind of lessons emerge.

Results

Our first case is an example in which both the professional foster father (in the excerpts: Foster Father) and the professional foster mother (Foster Mother) respond to a dispute between five youngsters (Joost 19 years old, Maarten 12 years old, Jurre 15 years old, Kas 15 years old, Ruth 14 years old) during dinner time. An extract from the dispute is presented below and then analysed in detail.

Excerpt 1. Combining responses to both the process and content of the dispute.

1	Joost (19)	Maarten also just 'accepted' sweets too (.).for nothing (looks at Jurre))
2	Maarten (12)	((laughs))
3	Jurre (15)	That's just <u>SO</u> selfish, no = (shakes his head))
4	Foster Father	((takes a seat at the back))
5	Maarten (12)	=Hey, <u>you're the one who's selfish</u> (nods his head towards Jurre))
6	Jurre (15)	It makes me laugh but it's <u>real:ly</u> bad [you know]
7	Maarten (12)	You're] just as bad. (nods his head towards Jurre, stares hard))
8	Jurre (15)	It's really, really [bad]
9	Kas (15)	[What's] bad?
10	Joost (19)	So Hanny did <u>e::everything</u> , and you just go and put them in your drawer.
11	Maarten (12)	((laughs))
12	Jurre (15)	Sure, go ahead [and laugh about it] but it's <u>not</u> funny. Yeah, you're <u>laughing</u> but it's really bad (nods his head towards Maarten))
13	Maarten (12)	[JUST STOP YOU] (smiles)) ((In a high-pitched voice))

(Continued)

(Continued).

14	Foster Mother	Oʃh oʃh, oʃh oʃh, oʃh oʃh, mind your lʃlanguage, mind your lʃlanguage.
15	Foster Father	Didn't I make it clear, you share them out, so you don't just put them in your dra:wer ?
16	Maarten (12)	((shakes his head, high-pitched voice) (Inaudible)
17	Foster Father	(Inaudible)
18	Maarten (12)	(Inaudible)
19	Kas (15)	What did he put in his drawer? What did he put in his <u>drawer</u> , then?
20	Ruth (14)	A bag of sweets.

Building a case against Maarten

In the first exchange in this excerpt we see two examples of action-opposition sequences that are typical for disputes (Church, 2016; Maynard, 1985). Jurre initiates the action to attack Maarten (in line 3, saying 'that's just so selfish' and in line 6 saying 'it's really bad'); Maarten opposes this (saying 'you're the one who is selfish' in line 5 and 'you're just as bad' in line 7). Here we already see how the conversation becomes marked with irritation that can tell foster parents that 'something is going on'. Markers in conversation can be defined as 'those words or expressions that rise above their referential meanings to take on complex interactional duties' (Waring, 2005, p. 416) or, more simply, as 'little words that matter' (Bolden, 2006, p. 661). Besides words and expressions, adolescents often support their disputes with 'distinctive pitch, raised pitch on negatives, and other embodied performances' (Goodwin & Kyratzis, 2007). In this case we see little markers of irritation like the word 'so' and the headshake in line 3 and the headshake and staring in lines 5 and 7. Interestingly, in this case, Jurre is prompted to take action by Joost who is pre-sequencing this dispute by describing what Maarten has done wrong, thereafter leaving the dispute to Maarten and Jurre.

In line 6, Jurre repeats his indignation at Maarten's behaviour. Jurre's repetition of his negative evaluation in turn 8 again expresses his irritation, as similarly described by Arcidiacono and Pontecorvo (2009) who showed how literal, precisely expressed and emphasized repetitions of negative evaluations are markers of irritation. In turn 11, Maarten's laughing reaction fuels Jurre's irritation who in the next turn repeats that this is an improper facial reaction (Peräkylä & Ruusuvuori, 2013).

When Maarten turns angry

Maarten's high-pitched voice and his directness (in line 13), showing an increase of irritation towards anger, leads to an intervention by the professional foster mother. Her reaction is directed at the tone of the dispute rather than the content. The Ohohohohohoh-utterance in turn 14 is a soft corrective intervention aimed at the dispute's process, indicating that it can go on but with a different tone. By that she is showing confidence that the boys can settle the conflict themselves in a more decent way. The professional foster father's response goes without affiliative actions that might have mitigated affront to social solidarity (Lindström & Sorjonen, 2013). The foster father's response in line 15 is frontal and extra harsh because it is expressed in the other boys' presence and reinforces their accusations. The extension of the 'a' in drawer in

turn 15 displays his bewilderment at Maarten's behavior (as if this was the last thing that he would have expected) (Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 2006). Maarten's reaction, in a high pitched tone while shaking his head (although the content of what he says is inaudible), shows that he disagrees. Both the foster father's reaction of surprise and Maarten's reaction of indignation contribute to maintaining the moral order (of sharing your treats) (Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 2006). After this, the conversation becomes more calm.

Calming and reprimanding

This dispute exhibits a classical course of bidding, extreme case formulations, and the use of high-pitched voice, which results in an intervention by foster mother who tries to calm down the discussion. The paternal intervention may be considered as a process evaluation, aimed at preventing the dispute from ending in a major row. In contrast to the foster mother, the foster father addresses his comments directly to Maarten with respect to the content of his peers' accusations. Although the foster mother's intervention is aimed at the communicative process, remaining pedagogically distant, thus showing her confidence in the adolescents' ability to solve the problems themselves, father's pedagogical intervention is dominant in this conversation. He reacts to the content of the dispute and takes sides in the argument amongst the adolescents and so uses the dispute to discipline one of the youngsters.

Teaching by modelling

Surprisingly, mother's intervention seems to be more effective than father's, because the tone of the dispute becomes less aggressive, whereas father's reprimand is not followed up by an excuse from Maarten or other demonstration of acknowledgment of his wrongdoing in the eyes of the others. Having said that, the foster father, naming wrong as wrong, teaches the youngsters that their outrage is justified, but at the same time demonstrates how to express such feelings in a calm way. He is thus modelling how to conduct conflicts in a 'grown-up' way, allowing the boys to be mad, but (with the help of the foster mother) to not let it get out of control.

In the next excerpt we discuss a case in which a professional foster father first ignores a dispute and later starts to respond to the process of the conflict, thereby touching upon supposed underlying emotions of one of the adolescents.

Excerpt 2a. When a response goes from ignoring, to directing the process and then touches on underlying emotions to the conflict.

Kas's (15 years old) soccer team has a new trainer and that is why he doesn't want to go to training. Previously, the foster father told Kas that a new trainer is no reason for absence. Just before the next fragment there was an argument about bed times. The fragment starts when the adolescents are doing the dishes.

1	Kas (15)	I'm not going to trai↓ning.
2	Daan (21)	KAS, you really <u>have</u> to stop, you're so <u>annoying</u> !
3	Kas (15)	<u>You're</u> annoying =
4	Daan (21)	= just have to stop now
5	Kas (15)	Coffee:: you look so grumpy, bàà::h, bà↑à::h
6	Daan (21)	<u>Getting</u> on my nerves. He's ↑always acting so spoiled.
7	Kas (15)	Okay.
8	Daan (21)	Just act nor↓mal, man =
9	Kas (15)	= Kay =
10	Daan (21)	= Easy for you [to talk] =
11	Kas (15)	= [Are you an↑noyed?][Are you an↑noyed?]
12	Daan (21)	[No, you just have to] act normal.
13	Kas (15)	((does the washing up, barely looks at the others)) bèè::h (1.0) bè↑è::h
14	Daan (21)	Have some <u>respect</u> for Jan (foster father) and Hanny (foster mother).
15	Kas (15)	bèè::h (2.0)
16	Daan (21)	No, not bèè↓h
17	Kas (15)	bèè::h (1.5)
18	Jurre (15)	((looks at Kas)) Same again, Kas [thinks he's funny.]
19	Daan (21)	[If you] go on like that, Kas
20	Kas (15)	OK
21	Daan (21)	Until you've <u>really</u> pissed me off =
22	Kas (15)	= Who, you? =
23	Daan (21)	= Yes.
24	Kas (15)	Okay.
25	Foster Father	[Daan, stop.] =
26	Jurre (15)	[And you will have to deal with] [<u>me</u> too.] ((looks at Kas))
27	Daan (21)	= [<u>No</u> , I'm not going to↓stop.]
28	Foster Father	Stop =
29	Daan (21)	= He's getting on my <u>nerves</u>
30	Foster Father	<u>Calm down</u> (1.0), enough
31	Kas (15)	Okay. (3.0)
32	Foster Father	We're just going to finish the job (2.0)
33	Kas (15)	Kein Verstandung
34	Daan (21)	Is <u>that</u> what you <u>think</u> ? I ab ↑ solutely don't feel like doing any m ↓ ore. ((looks at foster father))
35	Foster Father	What don't you feel like doing =
36	Daan (21)	= This job here
37	Foster Father	What exactly?
38	Daan (21)	All that stupid talk, <u>damn</u> it
39	Kas (15)	((laughs))
40	Daan (21)	Yes, him. I have com ↓ pletely had it (3.0) ((looks at Kas))
41	Kas (15)	Okay. (1.0) ((looks briefly at Daan))
42	Daan (21)	We are <u>really</u> not going to like you any better, you know, the way you behave.
43	Kas (15)	Congratulations. (1.0)
44	Daan (21)	No, <u>really</u> . (2.0)
45	Foster Father	Kas is just going through a difficult time.
46	Daan (21)	Yes, well, I'm having my problems <u>too</u> . But I <u>don't</u> act like that .(1.0)
47	Kas (15)	What's your problem?(2.0)
48	Foster Father	Shall we stop now?
49	Kas (15)	Okay. (.) Kay.

Daan expresses his irritation toward Kas

When Kas says he is not going to training, Daan starts a dispute action by saying that Kas is 'so annoying' (in line 2). Kas retaliates immediately with an opposition in the same words (line 3). Then Daan tries to stop the conflict by saying that Kas just 'has to stop now' (line 4). Kas's response is an example of fueling someone's irritation. Instead of stopping he starts another dispute action by saying 'coffee, you look so grumpy' in a teasing way and by making bleating sounds with exaggerated intonation contours (Arcidiacono & Pontecorvo, 2009). Then, Daan seeks an audience and addresses the others rather than Kas (by using 'he' in line 6), using an extreme case formulation (always) to underscore his point of view. What is relevant is that Daan's voice rises (6), showing emotion, and drops in turn, demonstrating control. This gives extra weight to his command. After this we see some turns in which Daan builds a case against Kas and where Kas continues to non-respond and ridicule Daan. You could say that they both take dispute actions. The argument is escalating.

Stepping into the conflict

It is striking that when the professional foster father orders Daan to stop the argument (25) Daan bluntly refuses to obey him, after which the foster father repeats his brief command twice (28, 30). The foster father orders the boys to finish the dishes. His use of 'we' is noteworthy. By that he includes himself in the 'job' while in fact the two boys are doing the dishes. By doing so, the foster father expands the tight psychological space between the two troublemakers. Kas reacts in (mock) German, suggesting that they don't understand each other. The use of incrowd language (German) is an attempt to mitigate the sharp edges of the conflict. Daan starts again to vent his gall about Kas, but now addresses the foster father, who tries to find out what exactly is bothering Daan. Daan expresses his frustration about the whole situation, hinting at doing the dishes with Kas and the dispute. Kas's reactions (repetition of 'okay') are demonstrations of playing the underdog. The boys continue their argument, Daan maintaining his aggressive approach. Again the use of 'we' by Daan in line 42 is interesting. This time it isolates Kas by presenting the rest of the family as a unity ('we') in front of Kas on his own.

Trying to invoke empathy

After a few fruitless attempts by the foster father to stop Daan from attacking Kas, the foster father now tries to convince Daan by alluding to Kas's troublesome position in turn 45. The use of 'just' is downplaying his hard times as something quite common (among out-of-home placed adolescents). It shows the complexity of foster father's mediating position of convincing Daan while saving Kas's face. Daan does not give in and responds that he too has his problems.

Kas's reactions in this excerpt may also be considered as power play, showing he is unmoved by Daan's emotional attacks, and deviously agreeing with all of Daan's and foster father's requests. Several of his responses support this perspective, such as the use of buzz words (like 'Ma', 'Ok', 'Kay' 'Kein Verstandung') that may be used frequently by the adolescents in this family home. It confirms Kas's membership of the group and shows that Daan's accusations do put his membership at risk. Secondly his repeated

demonstration of not being moved, by uttering nonsense words, is an effort to disarm these attacks and remain immune.

How to prevent irritation from evolving into anger

What is the parental role in this conflict? At the start of the dispute, the foster father remains aloof, while he did notice the dispute, (he is redirecting the camera towards the kitchen where the boys are doing the dishes). Only in turn 25, does the foster father intervene and order Daan to stop. The foster father reacts to the process of the dispute. Twice, he asks the boys to stop arguing, both times after an utterance of Kas. The first time Kas responds 'Okay', as if to say 'I heard you but don't make such a big fuss'. On the second occasion, Kas appears to drop the cynicism (47) and seems to adopt a more open conversational attitude. Then the foster father asks them (in 48) to end the dispute, addressing all rather than Daan alone.

In this excerpt it seems to work well that the foster father only comments on the process, using his authority in a calm but at the same time directive way. He starts trying to teach Daan about the reason why people sometimes behave the way they do (referring to Kas going through a difficult time). This does not seem to resonate with Daan, who is still too angry. In the end, the dishes have been done while the conflict did not get out of hand. The question remains, however, what makes Daan so annoyed in the first place.

We now present the next excerpt in which the foster father returns to the conflict with Daan. Kas has already gone to training and the foster father makes another attempt to teach Daan a lesson.

Excerpt 2b. Digging deeper into the process of a conflict.

1	Foster Father	Such annoying complaining just then, eh (1.0)
2	Daan (21)	What
3	Foster Father	Ve::ry negative=
4	Daan (21)	=Yes, well, it's Kas's fault =
5	Foster Father	=You're letting yourself be completely dragged into that negativity, keep-, when I tell you to keep your mouth shut, then you just need to keep your m↓outh shut.
6	Daan (21)	And just put up [with everything]
7	Foster Father	[No], no, because, we will make sure, we will keep an eye. (1.0) You just make things worse by always carrying on.
8	Daan (21)	I make things↑worse.
9	Foster Father	That's what <u>you</u> do.
10	Daan (21)	[So I have to] just suck up everything he says
11	Foster Father	[You], you find it hard to take criticism.
12	Daan (21)	No. I just find it annoying (.) the way he behaves
13	Foster Father	Yes, you don't have to- you don't need to manage that=
14	Daan (21)	=I'm not saying that, it just irritates me.
15	Foster Father	Well, just say so and then shut up about it.
16	Daan (21)	I've just said so.
17	Foster Father	But you keep going on about it. (3.0)
18	Daan (21)	That's just the way it is

(Continued)

(Continued).

19	Foster Father	You just have to say it once – I find your behavior annoying – and that’s that.
20	Daan (21)	It won’t make any difference to him.
21	Foster Father	No, but saying it ten times will not make a difference either
22	Daan (21)	Maybe it will. Maybe it will get through to him then. (2.0)
23	Foster Father	It just gets more annoying.

Aftertalk

In this case, the professional foster father finds a teachable issue with regard to Daan, but the presence of peers makes it an inappropriate teachable moment. Therefore, after the discussion has stopped and the boys are ready with the dishes, the foster father takes Daan aside to reflect on the dispute. The foster father explains that Daan’s discussion style is unproductive, when he becomes so emotional. So the parental instruction is given in a common reflective talk. The content of the paternal lesson is aimed at the process of discussing (controlling your emotions) rather than at Kas’s pampered behaviour or what has triggered Daan so much in this behaviour. Although the foster father did try earlier to explain that Kas is going through a difficult time, he does not ask why Daan got so upset. This actually, might have given some sort of opening to Daan to become more receptive for reflection. Having said that, discussing underlying emotions is what we see least in our sample.

From our 25 cases, only one touches on and shows emotions that are related to the expressed irritation. In our next excerpt we discuss a case in which the professional foster parents do touch on the emotions that are related to a dispute amongst the boys.

Excerpt 3. Responding to process, content and emotions.

Donald (12) and Karel (14) are annoying each other at the dining table. The professional foster father is in the kitchen and can’t keep an eye on the boys.

1	Karel (14)	((Karel looks at Donald, stands up, picks up a serving spoon and gestures with the spoon twice towards Donald’s head. Then he replaces the spoon and walks to the kitchen)).
2	Donald	What <i>are</i> ↑ you doing? (2.0)
3	Foster Father	Hey Donald, seriously, this is your last warning = No! <u>That’s</u> not how to behave. OK? (2.0) now you’re cross because you can’t deal with it
4	Donald (12)	((Starts to cry))
5	Foster Father	Fine, but I <u>don’t</u> like it when you always react to everyone like that, as soon as my back is turned. Well, i ↑ s that clear? I ↑ s that clear? = G ↓ ood.
6	Donald (12)	But he was threatening to hit me with a spoon – like this t((imitates Karel’s gesture))
7	Foster Father	Yes [but]
8	Donald (12)	[He was] <u>right</u> across the table like s ↑ o ((imitates Karel again))
9	Foster Father	Karel, I’m going to check, and if that’s the case, then uhh you have a problem. Unless you want to admit now what you did
10	Karel (14)	Yes but I wasn’t threatening to hit him, he does things like that to m↑e too
11	Foster Father	So you’re sort of admitting it
12	Karel (14)	He does things to like that to m↑e too

(Continued)

(Continued).

-
- 13 Foster Father Ok, but you *are* admitting it though (1.0)
- 14 Karel (14) Yes but=
- 15 Foster Father =Perhaps, no, but perhaps you just need to stop doing that, Donald can't deal with it. So just don't do it. And of course I agree that it's not right for Donald to do it either.
- 16 Karel (14) ((Karel walks away))
- 17 Foster Mother Just listen, you can learn from this, Karel.
- 18 Karel (14) No, it will just make it worse ((starts to cry))
- 19 Foster Father [No]
- 20 Foster Mother [N↑o], you're not listening, it will
- 21 Karel (14) [Karel walks back] He is so sneaky that, that he uh^h ... that I don't do what he just did
- 22 Foster Father Exactly, but I'm only saying=
- 23 Karel (14) =He plays dirty, you know
- 24 Foster Father [He plays dirty]
- 25 Donald (12) [Wh↑at's the matter?] [I only...]
- 26 Foster Father [Donald, Donald!] Shut up. Now I'm talking. Sit up straight or else go up ↓ stairs.
- 27 Donald (12) ((crying))
- 28 Foster Father It's about the two of you together. There's a problem between the two of you. And your reaction is not the way to solve it. Like what you're doing now. You come to me and tell me what Donald is doing and that it's annoying and it's bothering you. You don't take a spoon and uh^h make some strange gesture at Donald. That won't work
- 29 Karel (14) Yeah
- 30 Foster Father D↑onald has a problem
- 31 Karel (14) You, you got angry just now, because I [inaudible] was acting up ((inaudible))
- 32 Foster Father I'm not, I'm not even angry with either of you. I'm speaking to both of you about your behaviour. I can see that you are both in conflict all the time.
- 33 Karel (14) Yeah uh^h but that's because he's always provoking me
- 34 Foster Father Well, OK then. At any rate, I can see that there is conflict. I want the two of you to be able to talk about that (1.0) right now. Because, evidently, it wasn't enough to say that it had to stop (1.0) right?
- 35 Karel (14) Yeah
- 36 Foster Father That's not so bad. I'm not angry with [anyone in particular, but I]
- 37 Karel (14) [Because Donald kept going on]
- 38 Foster Father Yes, but is that (1.0) it is, it's weird
- 39 Donald (12) [imitates the gesture] like that
- 40 Foster Father Yes, that's weird. That's right, [Karel has]
- 41 Donald (12) [Yes, but] [he does it too]
- 42 Foster Father [Donald], shut up, it *is* weird, I fully agree. (1.0) But you sometimes act weird towards Donald. You both do it to each other. That doesn't work. (1.0) Leave each other alone. (2.0) If we could agree on that. That you both leave each other in peace. Then it will be much more pleasant and much more peaceful around here. (1.0) Only Donald has a problem, he finds it hard to behave towards you in a normal way (1.0)
- 43 Donald (12) ((Crying)) No I don't.
-

Provoking and processing irritation

Behind the professional foster father's back Karel feigns an attack with a spoon and the foster father only notices Donald's verbal reaction to that. The rise of Donald's voice (2) is also an irritation marker, expressing his bewilderment about Karel's action. Probably it is an effort to attract attention from the foster father and to get Karel into trouble. Yet the annoyance of the foster father is at first directed at Donald, criticizing his outrage. The parental strategy here is to correct the one that is irritated, rather than to find out what the source of the irritation was. This is a strategy that is focused on the process and is also really context-specific as the father is finishing dinner.

Exploring the content

The intervention to stop the irritation with a correction is not enough to calm Donald down. He starts to cry (4). The professional foster father gives Donald permission to cry by saying 'fine' in turn 5, following immediately with a 'but', coming back to his point that Donald's outburst was not ok. Here it becomes clear that such outbursts are regular. The professional foster father formulates it as a behavioural pattern ('you always react to everyone like that').

Donald responds by telling about Karel's feigned attack behind the foster father's back, therewith 'inviting' the father to take a step away from the process and to explore the content of the conflict as well. Now, the foster father includes Karel in his correction (turn 9,11,13 & 15). It is noteworthy that the foster father uses the threat of checking the videotapes that are made for this study as the big stick (in turn 9). Karel walks away (in turn 16).

Marking the conflict as 'something you can learn from'

In turn 17 the professional foster mother steps in, meanwhile sitting at the table, inviting Karel to come back. She gives him permission to 'just listen' and explicitly turns the correction into a teachable moment saying that 'you can learn from this' (18). Karel is afraid that will make things worse and then starts to make some accusations towards Donald, that could have easily made it worse indeed (turn 21, 23). The foster father ignores the accusations and also stops Donald from intervening (in turn 26).

He then, reformulates the problem into a shared one, including Karel in the problem: 'It's about the two of you together. There's a problem between the two of you' (turn 28). And also articulates what kind of response is more appropriate when someone annoys you. The boys both don't take ownership for their part in the conflict.

Wrapping it up

In turn 42, the foster father tries to come to a conclusion, repeating his claim that it is a common problem of the boys which can be solved together by agreement. Then, he repeats his statement about Donald having a behavioral problem, which brings Donald back to tears again.

Turning irritation into teaching?

This last case makes it clear that is quite difficult to make a conflict stop, to find out about content and to go deeper into emotions as well. Both the boys are quite upset and not so open for reflection (yet). Although the boys do not arrive at insight into their behavior (now), they do express their emotions and stay involved in the conflict without an escalation. We do not know whether there has been an after-talk as in Excerpt 2b, but we do see in the recordings of the next day that the relationships have been restored.

This last case shows a different parental strategy of more and direct interference in the relationship between the adolescents. The adolescents' expression of emotion is often the immediate reason for intervening. The aim of the paternal intervention is disciplinary and directed at the communication process and takes teaching in its slipstream. Emotions are seen and recognized, but are not further examined. This case also makes quite clear that being annoyed and being open for reflection are difficult to combine.

Conclusion

Parental interventions often appear when emotions are running high in peer disputes. Being irritated is shown by more than the words that are used. Irritation markers that are found in our data are: using nonsense words, high pitched voices, repeating claims, making attacking gestures or shaking heads, by being direct and by using extreme case formulations. That irritation is more than just words, might explain why professional foster parents in most occasions do not respond to the content or the emotion of the dispute. Furthermore, it is interesting that professional foster parents use more than one strategy on a single occasion, sometimes divided between both parents, as in the first case in which the foster mother pointed to the tone of the dispute, while the foster father addressed the content of the argument.

We have seen that professional foster parents do not intervene in these discussions merely for disciplinary reasons, although they do when things threaten to get out of hand. They also use these occasions as teachable moments. The parental reactions are sometimes directed at the communication process, teaching the adolescents to control their emotions (foster mother in 1, foster father in 2 and 3) and sometimes at the content of the dispute (1 and 3).

In the third case, the boys' emotions are mentioned but not examined. This is a regular occurrence in our 25 cases. This lack of examination of why someone is irritated, or the absence of empathy with the irritation, might be a topic for further research in which professional foster parents are involved.

The practice of professional parenthood in family homes is closely related to what Parton and O'Byrne (2000) describe as 'constructive social work'. In their work they state that it is not only relevant what language means but also what it does. In this study, we see how language enables the adolescents to imagine someone else's position and to start acting differently (173/4). Moreover it helps us understand that professional foster parenthood is a ethically complex issue, not to be considered from a fixed set of behavioral norms, but to be regarded in more flexible terms. Parton and O'Byrne claim

that whether there is truth is less relevant and that ‘how accounts are made adequate for their respective purposes and practices’ should be taken into consideration (182). Finally the nature of professional foster care, being a hybrid practice, demonstrates how personal knowledge and professional expertise complement rather than displace each other.

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