

Case Example

Alan, 19 has been a psychiatric inpatient for 6 months; also in the family are Kathy, 17; Pete, 13; Mom and Dad

Minuchin to Kathy: Do you have a boyfriend?

Kathy: yes

Minuchin to Alan: Alan, do you have a girlfriend?

Alan: No

Minuchin to Alan: Alan, is her boyfriend your friend?

Alan: Yes

Minuchin to Alan: How old is he?

Kathy: 19

Alan (answering simultaneously): 19

Minuchin to Kathy: You are helpful Kathy. I asked Alan how old ~~he was~~ ^{your boyfriend is} and you, while he was thinking, you said 19.

Minuchin to Alan: She didn't wait for you to ~~ask her~~^{answer}
Alan. She volunteered. Is that something she frequently
does?

Alan: Yes

Minuchin: So, she takes your memory.

Alan: I guess so.

Minuchin to ~~Alan~~^{Alan}: Who else in your family acts like
Kathy? I saw your mother with Pete, just outside.

Minuchin to Pete: Pete^{you} wanted to go to the bathroom,
and your mother almost went to the bathroom with you,
as if you couldn't find the men's room by himself. Did
you notice that, Pete? Did you notice your mother went
half of the way with you?

**(at this point, Alan drops his microphone, and father
rushes to pick it up for him)**

Minuchin to Alan: I want to show you, Alan.

(Minuchin gets up, stands in front of father and son, takes the microphone cord, and reproduces the father's act.)

Minuchin to Alan: Your father took the microphone and picked it up for you. Why does he do that?

Alan: I don't know. Trying to correct something, I guess.

Minuchin to Alan: Do you have two arms?

Alan: yes

(Minuchin takes the microphone and places on the floor where the father had picked it up)

Minuchin to Alan: at 19, I assume you can do that by yourself?

Alan: yes

Minuchin to Alan: Why did your father do that? Isn't it strange that he should do that, as if you don't have hands?

Alan: well, he does that a lot.

Minuchin to Alan: How old do you think he thinks you are? Three? Seven? 12?

Alan: 12

Minuchin to Alan: So he makes you younger than Pete. Can you help ~~him~~ ^{your father} so he lets you grow up— So that he lets you use your two hands?

Alan: I don't think so. I don't know.

Minuchin to Alan: Well if you don't help your father to change, you will not be able to use your hands. You will always have 10 useless fingers—you will always have two left hands— you'll always be incompetent because your father is doing things for you. Your father is paralyzing you. Talk to him about that, because I think that's very dangerous what your father just did now.

Mother: It is helpful what my husband does. It is out of love that he helps.

Minuchin to mother: Your husband is killing your son with kindness. Why do you let your husband do that? I am sure you know it is wrong what your husband does. What stops you from confronting your husband?

Alan to Minuchin: My father does things for me out of love--what my mother said.

Minuchin to Alan: Your father needs help, and I don't think that anybody can help him in that better than you. Your mother knows that too but lacks the strength to challenge your father. I don't know why that is, but you have to tell your father you are old enough to take care of yourself

Alan: I don't know what to say. I need your help

Minuchin to Alan: I cannot help with what you are asking. I am a stranger to this family, and I don't know this family that well. If you need some help, you can ask someone in the family for help.

~~**Father to Alan:** Do you want ~~me~~ to help you?~~

~~**Minuchin to father:** Why did you select for him? You just did exactly the same thing.~~

~~**Minuchin to Alan:** You see, Allen, your father is so absolutely hooked into be helpful he cannot help himself.~~

Father to Alan: Do you want Kathy to help you?

Minuchin to father: Why did you do that? Why did you select for Alan? You just did the exact same thing? Do you not believe that you 19-year-old son can think for himself? He will never get out of this hospital if you keep taking his mind. You are keeping him infantile and unable to care for himself.

Minuchin to Alan: Your father is so hooked into being helpful, he does not realize that he is keeping you a baby. He cannot help himself. Now I want you to decide if you want Kathy to help you, if you want someone else in the family to help you, or if you don't need help at all.

Alan to Kathy: Would you give me a hand?

Kathy: Tell daddy you want to make decisions by yourself.

Alan to Kathy: Yeah, I would like to be more independent, but I guess it's a habit of letting people do things for me, and I've gotten into it.

Kathy to Alan: And I guess it's going to be very hard for daddy to stop. It will be hard for all of us, but especially daddy because he tends to be very protective.

Alan to Kathy: Yeah!

Minuchin to Kathy: Kathy, do you find yourself frequently in the job of being the helper in the family?

Kathy to Minuchin: Yes

Minuchin to Kathy: Who else in the family asks you for help?

Kathy: My mother, it is mostly my mother. She asks for my help **all the time.**

(Minuchin further explores Kathy's parentified role in the family by asking her to talk with her mother about how she feels overburdened because her mother gives her so much responsibility in making adult decisions for the family. Minuchin wonders what has gone wrong in the marital relationship that the father is so focused on Alan to the point of infantilizing him and the mother has triangled Kathy into the marital relationship by relying upon her for advice rather than consulting with her husband. Minuchin shifts to exploring the marital relationship.

Minuchin to father: Where were you? Why didn't your wife ask you for help?

Father to Minuchin: I wasn't around too much, working 2 jobs.

Minuchin to mother: Oh, that's why are you saying that you were alone and that you use Kathy-- because your husband was not around?

Mother to Minuchin: My husband has worked two jobs for a longtime. I feel he has time for the family **only** if it's something he's interested in; and if it's something he's not interested in, he doesn't want to hear it.

(Minuchin directs parents to talk to each other about how to change so that Alan is not infantilized by the father and can thereby be discharged from the hospital; so that Kathy is no longer triangled into parental conflict by the mother; and so that Pete can go to the bathroom by himself.)

Mother to father: How do you think we can go about correcting this mess?

Father to mother: Well, I think I should start being home at nights for one thing. I'll leave the other job—

(Kathy is shaking her head in the affirmative)

Minuchin to Kathy: Can you stop shaking your head, Kathy? It's not your function to decide for your mother.

Father to mother: Much as I feel I have to change an awful lot, I think you have to change too.

Mother to father: In what way?

Father to mother: Oh, general mannerisms, your attitude towards me personally. I feel deeply hurt by you many times.

Mother to father: How?

Father to mother: I feel you don't feel I am a full man—a full husband. I feel you look down on me many, many times.

Mother to father: How do I act that it makes you feel like I look down on you? I don't understand.

Father to mother: You're not respectful to me. You roll your eyes when I'm talking. You look away when

I'm talking. You say that you hear me, but you don't act like you do.

Mother to father: I don't mean to disrespect you. And I guess I have feelings that you don't understand me either, and I feel you do not respect me.

Father to mother: I think that we've been hurling accusations at each other for a long long time...

Minuchin to Kathy: You have not been helpful Kathy.

Kathy to Minuchin: What do you mean?

Minuchin to Kathy: Whenever mom chooses to talk to you instead of talking with your dad-- that is not helpful. In fact, it is destructive to you and Alan. Will you resign from that job? Will you tell your mother it is wrong for her to use you as an ally against your father? Will you resign from this job or you will you be stuck with it for life?

Kathy to Minuchin: I don't know. I don't think that my mother is going to stop—

Minuchin to Kathy: Using you?

Kathy to Minuchin: yes, you're right.

Minuchin to Kathy: It's a job that you like for life. Do you want that job for life? Do you always want to be your mothers' partner or do you want to keep your boyfriend? You can't have both that way.

Kathy to Minuchin: Yes, you're right. I will be stuck as long as I am "married" to my mother. I won't really be a partner for my boyfriend.

Minuchin to Kathy: Your mother uses you when she feels she does not know how to talk with your father.

Minuchin to parents: So, Mom, you triangle Kathy into your marital conflicts when ask for her counsel and help; you have put Kathy in the untenable position of being aligned with you against her

father. And Dad, you escape into Alan when you feel disrespected by your wife. When Alan lets you do things for him that he is capable of doing for himself, he makes you feel respected and valued.

Minuchin to Alan: Alan, you are sacrificing yourself for your father by allowing you to infantilize him. You make him feel valued because your mother forgot how to do that.

Minuchin to parents: You two must deal with each other directly so that your son can get out of the hospital and your daughter can grow up to have a life with her boyfriend or with whomever else she chooses to do so.