Case Study

The Macintosh Family

Family Background: Linda Macintosh, age 33, is the mother of four children: Kyle, age 12, Susan, age 8, Janine, age 5 and Michael, age 2. Her oldest son, Thomas, was killed 2 years ago in their old neighborhood by a stray bullet. Linda still grieves for her son and states that she cries frequently. Linda was married to and later divorced the father, Jack Macintosh, of Thomas, Kyle and Susan. Linda and Jack married young because of Linda's (teen) pregnancy with Thomas and her family's concern that they could not afford another mouth to feed. Linda and Jack worked hard to make a go of it, however, financial worries and youth took their toll. Jack was unable to keep a job or make a living wage to support his family given his age and education. According to Linda, he couldn't hold his head up anymore and thought that the kids would be better off on welfare like their families before them. He left the family right after Susan's birth. Jack works hard now as a long distance truck driver. He jokes that he has left a string of broken hearts and heads across the nation referring to his many affairs and fights. When he is passing through Syracuse, he visits with the family focusing on Linda, Kyle and Susan. He does not pay child support although he often brings extravagant gifts for Linda and his children when he visits. Linda continues to find Jack attractive and is afraid of pushing him away if she pressures him for money or other things. Miguel Santos is Linda's live-in partner who is of Cuban decent. They met when Linda was in dire need of money after the birth of her last child. They do not make their relationship overt for fear of welfare cutting them off. Linda feels that her relationship with Miguel survives because they are good friends and don't "interfere" with each other's lives. Janine and Michael are not his children. Linda takes care of the children and Miguel works. With welfare payments, food stamps and Miguel's income, they are able to afford a car (unreliable, older car). Miguel's parents will babysit the 3 youngest children and take them to church on Sundays.

Presenting Problem: Linda recently told the school social worker that Kyle has been sneaking out late at night. At school he is unmotivated, although he has significant potential, and in danger of failing. He is openly defiant, often dismissing his Mother and Miguel's advice as ignorant and irrelevant to his life. He should not have to be accountable to them, in his opinion. Kyle has no hobbies or interests. He frequently argues with his siblings. The other 3 siblings are close. Linda is unable to control Kyle, especially after his father, Jack, visits. Kyle thinks that Linda still loves Jack and resents Miguel, however, Kyle sometimes performs chores at the bar Miguel works at to earn money. When they work together, Kyle has been known to confide in Miguel. Kyle splits his earnings between himself and his three brothers and sisters. He calls it their allowance. Linda also worries that Kyle may become part of the gang that seems to be moving into the neighborhood near theirs. Last year, he experimented with belonging to a variety of peer groups at school, including "goth" and punk, never really settling with a group of friends. Linda is looking for help with Kyle. She would like to see him participate in a peer group of some sort so that he can make friendships and work through his problems.

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Discussion Questions

What are this family's underlying structural issues? What are the challenges for this family in terms of developmental tasks?

- Mother as central figure, having children.
- Father's or adult males are distance, in and out.
- Poor knowledge of child development. Sees normal behavior of trying on "personalities" on the part of pre-teens as worrisome. Also, at this age, they begin to focus on the advise of peers more than parents. Mother sees this as oppositional. Developmental task – successfully transition Kyle in to adolescence and adulthood.
- Kyle needs goals and interests to connect him to the future. He needs a positive peer group. Needs to be taught goal-setting.

What are the subsystems in this family? Are there clear and healthy boundaries between subsystems especially couple subsystems? Does one subsystem intrude on another (e.g. unhealthy coalitions and/or alliances)?

- Subsystems
  - Linda and Jack
  - Linda and Miguel
  - Linda and Kyle
  - Linda and other 3 children
  - Three Children
  - Jack, Linda, Kyle and Susan
- Boundaries between Linda and Jack remain blurred.
- Boundaries between Linda and Miguel are distant, rigid
- Power lies with Kyle

What are the dynamics of the adult relationships? Would this family benefit from couple relationship education?

- Mother has not really relinquished her relationship with Jack.
- Linda's relationship with Miguel seems more symbiotic than interdependent. They each fulfill a need for the other but not emotionally close.

How are these adult dynamics impacting the children?

- Linda still grieves for her oldest son and perhaps projects her fears onto Kyle. She could benefit from a support group to work out her issues in this area.
- Kyle sees the male role model as distancing from the family.
- What is the role of a father?

What socio-economic class strengths are helping this couple? Hindering them? What resources, if any, can they access based on their race and social class?

- To Jack, welfare was a resource and alternative for his family. Sacrificed his involvement to connect Linda and the kids to the system.
- Linda's relationship with Miguel seems to be very much grounded in how to work around the system.
- Accessibility to negative influences such as gangs.
- School as a resource – reality in inner city schools is that there are far more problems than social workers to help.

What role models does Kyle have?

- Male role models within his family are not fully engaged. They do model hard work.
- Needs to establish a long-term relationship with another male adult who is appropriate.
- Referral to a peer support group may be appropriate.

What are the survival strategies for this family that are, in the long run, destructive?

What are the resources this family can use to build an effective base for Kyle?

What are some of the attachment issues in this family?

- Kyle's loss of his father Jack..

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