

## Family debriefing

This article is based on a presentation by Christian Quartier given on 15<sup>th</sup> October 2018 at the Global Connections Joint Member Care and TCK Forum in Derby, UK. Our thanks go to Christian for permission to use his material.

### What is family debriefing?

It is a process which provides debriefing for the entire family as a unit. Although some work may be done with individuals or part of the family, the main focus is on the whole family interacting together.

Families are part of God's design, and in a well-functioning family everyone has a place of safety and belonging. The children – including TCKs – are free to explore from this place of security, emotional and physical proximity, where they are fully known. Separation is painful, but it is a positive pain, because it indicates the love and security that are there when the family is together.

A book called *Secrets of strong families* [Stinnett, N., Defrain, J., published by Little Brown & co., 1986] lists several important features of resilient families. These are commitment, appreciation, communication, time together, viewing a crisis as an opportunity, and spiritual oneness. When one of these features is absent, there is disconnection. For TCKs there is the added stress factor of constant change, with people coming and going into and out of their lives all the time. This disconnection is shown in reactions such as fear, panic and anxiety, a sense of danger or threat, insecurity, rejection, abandonment and shame. It often leads to the children feeling safer outside the family, perhaps in a group on the street.

Those who spend their time working with families will learn to quickly pick up what kind of family they are dealing with. They will notice features such as high stress levels, feelings of insignificance in the children if the ministry routinely comes first, a sense of injustice or of feeling unloved, or the need to prove oneself and one's identity.

## **Joys and challenges of family debriefing**

Each family member has an individual angle or perspective on the story of the family. Sharing these together helps to create oneness and to get a full picture of how the family works and what makes it unique. It also helps the family members to support one another and move forward with a better mutual understanding. There are many joys in family life and much to be positive about. It is rewarding if during debriefing it can be seen that family members are beginning to understand each other better.

Family debriefing also has its challenges, some of which arise from the 'family system'. The culture, modes of communications and relating together vary with each family, and the dynamics between the family members need to be observed and understood by the debriefer. Often, individuals take on unhelpful roles: for example, one may speak on behalf of others and make it difficult for them to get a word in. There could be a longstanding habit of letting one member do the speaking and this may arise from a cultural value (e.g. respect for parents) or from force of personality. The debriefer needs to have the courage to challenge this and ask a dominant speaker to stop so that others can contribute. This may have to be repeated several times before the dominant person gets the message.

Debriefers will need to assess how forceful they need to be in a given situation. If the debriefer notices that one of the children never gets a chance to contribute to the discussion, a useful question might be 'How does child X get the chance to talk in your family?'

Another role is that of the 'corrector' who is in the habit of interrupting others to correct whatever they are saying. Again, this is an ingrained habit that needs to be challenged. Some simply choose to withdraw from the whole process, and it may be wise to consider some one-to-one time here. Others parrot or repeat the opinions expressed by another member of the family, and skill is needed to get at their own genuine opinions.

## **Limitations and guidelines**

Before the debriefing starts, it is crucial to talk with the parents to explain the process and clarify expectations. It may be necessary to explain that you are

offering debriefing for the family unit, not a series of separate debriefs. This does not mean that there is no flexibility to spend time with individuals if it is seen to be beneficial, but the primary focus is to be the whole family. It is important to set out ground rules such as mutual respect for each individual and listening to others without interruption.

It is essential for debriefers to know their boundaries and to be clear as to when they need to connect with others who have more expertise.

Where there has been a significant trauma or crisis, it may be necessary to connect with the parents first, before involving the whole family. There may be serious conflict between the parents or between the parents and one of the children. Sometimes people are in a very emotional state, and may be negative, critical, depressed or disrespectful.

Debriefers and other agency staff should not assume that all MKs are Christians. Although they are being brought up in a Christian context, they may not have responded to the Gospel personally. They may have questions and issues to work through before they can come to a position of faith.

It is possible that one or more family members have no desire to take part in the debriefing. This needs to be respected, but if the family is not complete, the debriefing will be less effective.

Confidentiality is an important factor and it is good to explain how this will work. Many situations are not straightforward, and sensitivity is required. An example can be given from a case study that Christian presented. In this example, a teenage boy asked for an individual interview with Christian. (For safeguarding purposes he agreed to the presence of another member of staff in the room, but this person remained silent). The boy shared certain things which he did not wish to reveal to his parents. He agreed to give them a limited amount of feedback from the discussion via Christian. This resulted in improved communication, with the boy opening up to his parents and the parents responding with better understanding.

It should be borne in mind that the parents' perception of how the children are coping is only one facet of the picture, and there may be a mismatch between the parents' perspective and that of one or more of the children. This is best

illustrated by an example where a resource called the Blob Bridge was used to elicit responses. [See <https://www.blobtree.com/products/blob-bridge> ].

This can be used for families in transition or processing traumatic events, to help them express their feelings as to where they perceive themselves to be emotionally at a given time. It is suitable for all age groups, including young children. As well as revealing each individual person's emotional journey, in family debriefing it also conveys the whole picture to all of the family members at the same time. A common feature of families in transition is that the parents can be in denial regarding their children's progress. An example was given of a 6-year old girl who chose a blob image indicating that she was really struggling with the changes that the family was going through. She had not said anything to her parents so they assumed that she was fine. Her choice drew an angry reaction from the father. Parents often desperately want their children to be coping well, and may express displaced anger when they realise that this is not the case.

### **The role of the facilitator**

It is important for the facilitator to be aware that the goal is to empower the family to find their own solutions together. The facilitator is not the problem and it is important to bear this in mind when emotions are high and accusations are flying. Equally, the facilitator is not the solution either. Active listening and careful observation are crucial. As in the example referred to above, it is vital to acknowledge and respond to emotions.

The facilitator needs to be familiar with different techniques for group discussion, processing and decision-making. Families all have different dynamics and some methods will work better than others. When using creative activities such as drawing or painting, it is worth remembering that not everyone likes to do these things and some people prefer just to think things through. They might like to go for a walk, fix something or make something.

### **Supporting families through transition**

A family debriefing retreat may be based around the five stages of transition as referred to in books such as Pollock and van Reken; *Third culture kids* [3<sup>rd</sup> Ed 2017]. This model can be used with an individual family or with groups of

families on a retreat together. Where it is a group retreat, it is recommended that each family meets as a unit once a day, to review and discuss some questions. Other activities may take place in larger groups.

Some transitions are natural, such as a child growing up. Others are imposed by outward circumstances, such as evacuation or deportation, or by parental decisions where children do not have a choice.

The story of Jesus meeting the disciples on the road to Emmaus in Luke 24: 13 - 33 can give us some insights into relating to people in transition. Jesus got alongside the disciples, listened and asked questions. We need to ask what happened, and listen carefully to the answers.

It can be helpful to ask each member of the family to make a timeline of their lives. In a group retreat, this could be done in age groups across families, followed up by time together as individual families. Each family member can be given the opportunity to share highs and lows from their timeline, while the others listen. They can then be asked to share their reactions to the stories shared by the others.

Pictures of facial expressions can be used to elicit responses about emotions. This can work particularly well with children, especially as words are not needed.

Transition can be worked through using an activity involving balloons and ropes or strings. Each person blows up a balloon which represents him or her, and they identify which aspects of their life have given them a sense of rootedness and belonging. For each aspect they attach a rope to the balloon, with a label on it. Examples might be family members, best friends at school, church, sports club etc. If they are in the process of leaving a familiar situation, they then reflect on which of the ropes will stay with the balloon as they leave, and which ones they will have to leave behind. They can choose to cut the ropes or just to let them go. When they are about to enter into a new situation, they should think about the ropes they will need to replace those that have been cut, and how they can do this. They may need to take certain steps or ask others for help. They then attach new ropes to their balloons.

It is good to express hopes and expectations – what is each person looking for in the future? Also alongside that, it is important to explore concerns and fears, for oneself, one's husband or wife and the children.

Ultimately the journey of Christian debriefing leads us to the Cross. We work through the issues and weather strong emotions and honest although difficult times of sharing along the way. These sometimes stormy and painful episodes are the groundwork, enabling families to bring things out into the open and learn to support one another. In the end we need to spend time looking to Jesus and His redemptive work on the Cross. It is He who releases healing, peace, hope, freedom, forgiveness and reconciliation. It can be immensely rewarding and satisfying to be involved in helping a family to reach this point together.

Gill Bryant with thanks to Christian Quartier