



## Virginia Association of Marriage and Family Counselors

Issue #2

Newsletter

Winter, 2003

### President's Message

VAMFC got off to a great start this year with the best attended Membership Meeting that we have had in years. The Membership Meeting is held during the VCA Conference each year, and is an opportunity for the VAMFC membership at large to have direct interaction and input with the Board members. My thanks to the members who made the effort to attend and participate in the recent meeting. As a Board, we can effectively attend to the needs of our membership if we have their input into the process. This year, we had a greater opportunity for member input than ever before—it is greatly appreciated.

Once again, VAMFC shared a display table with VACES at the 2002 VCA Conference. This year, VCA participants visiting our display were able to browse the web site along with viewing our display board brochure and newsletter. We had seven individuals requested further information about VAMFC; which was sent to them following the conference. My thanks to all of you who helped with both the display and the meeting.

Perhaps the single most important work that was done was the planning of the spring workshop for February, 2003 in Williamsburg. Due to constraints of the budget deficit we regrettably had to cancel our fall workshop, so we are pleased that our spring event will be a reality. VAMFC will be co-sponsoring the workshop with the New Horizons Family Counseling Center at the College of William & Mary. We are especially excited to have been able to secure the services of Dr. Michael Nichols as our workshop presenter. Dr. Nichols is an internationally recognized practitioner, author, and teacher in family therapy who has co-authored and practiced with other renowned colleagues that include Salvadore Minuchin and Murray Bowen. He will be presenting on the use of enactments in couples therapy. Several of his recent books will be available for sale at the workshop. Further details of

the workshop are featured elsewhere in this newsletter. We hope to see you there!

Regrettably, our President-Elect, Victoria Foster, had to resign her position to assume the President-Elect position for SACES. I am very pleased to announce, however, that our current Secretary, Judy Stone, has agreed to step into the President-Elect position for the remainder of Victoria's one-year term. I am likewise grateful to Donna Kaiser, an LMFT and third-year doctoral student from Williamsburg, for agreeing to fulfill the remainder of Judy's two-year term as Secretary. The Board welcomes these two new members, who according to the by-laws have been appointed to fill the unexpired terms of the two elected members. Thanks to their commitment and flexibility, the Board's business can proceed on schedule without "skipping a beat." I anticipate (and hope!) that Judy and Donna will allow their names to be placed on the spring election ballot for full terms in these positions.

On a final note, I encourage all members to check the VAMFC web site periodically, as it contains information and announcements that are updated much more frequently than can be achieved in the Newsletter. It's time to update our suggested reading list for family counselors. If you have encountered new publications in family counseling you feel would be of benefit to others, please send me their reference information, and we'll post it to the reading list. Let us know if there are other items that you would like to see included on the web page <http://www.vamfc.org>

I look forward to seeing many of you at our workshop in February. Until then, have a safe and prosperous new year.

Rip McAdams

**A Challenging Time for Families: An  
Opportunity for Family Counselors  
Dennis A. Frank II and Christine Sacco-Bene**

We are at the brink of a new year that stands to be a particularly challenging one for many families throughout Virginia. Struggling state and national economies have resulted broadly in the loss of promising careers, the drastic reduction of family incomes, and dashed hopes for retirement security among aging family members. At the same time, the growing prospect of war has separated family members, disrupted normal living routines, and made the potential loss of loved ones a reality. For some families, the changes necessitated by the current national situation will be nothing short of traumatic; and for those lacking the resources to successfully adapt and cope with the changes, the impact may be devastating.

Anyone knowledgeable in Structural Family Therapy need not reflect long on familial hierarchy, boundary, and alignment to see how the current economical and political environment might predispose family dysfunction. Family leadership (hierarchical) structures understandably are at greater risk of compromise if adult family leaders are forced to spend longer hours away from home due to extended military deployments or the need to compensate for lower paying jobs. Equally understandable is the notion that boundaries among family members are likely become confused when children or extended family members are required to assume substantial portions of nuclear family leadership during the necessary absences of parental leaders. Conflict and coalitions (functional and dysfunctional) among remaining family members are to be expected when individual members lacking unifying and coordinating leadership are left to their own devices to compete for a share of needed family influence and resources. To a trained family therapist, the types of family problems just described are not only understandable; they are normal and even predictable.

Unfortunately, trained family counselors do not always guide general perceptions of families. For those without such training, parents struggling earnestly, albeit ineffectively, to cope with real hardships can easily be misperceived as irresponsible and neglectful of their parental responsibilities. Children reacting anxiously and angrily as symptom-bearers for their family's unchecked difficulties may be unjustly labeled and

treated as troublemakers at school and elsewhere. Overburdened and overwhelmed parents' difficulties in finding additional time off from work to deal with children's symptomatic problems provides further "ammunition" for their portrayal as uncaring and unfit. Because of these perceptions, struggling families sometimes experience undeserved disdain and rebuke rather than compassion within their communities. Such responses serve only to further isolate the families from the support they need, thus exacerbating their problems and inviting even more criticism.

In the challenging months ahead for this nation, many more families are likely to find themselves in crisis and in need of support and assistance that they have not needed in the past. As family counselors we will undoubtedly find ourselves among those that these families reach out to for help. Foremost, we must be prepared to use our training and understanding to help families distinguish the normal struggles they are experiencing (amidst very real and formidable national crises) rather than feed into beliefs of family pathology and personal failure; and we must advocate for others in the community to do the same. Though specific problems and needs will differ broadly among the client families that come to us in the coming months, these authors suspect that most if not all will share primary needs for understanding, encouragement, and hope. Their success at fulfilling these critical needs may be pivotal in their continued survival. Family counselors are among the professionals to empower families to persevere through these troubled times. Our role may never have been more important than it will be in the days to come. Let's hope we are up to the task.

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**Call for Newsletter Articles**

If you are working on a project that that you want others to know about, giving a presentation and have a written proposal that highlights the presentation, or have a thought piece you'd like to share, we invite you to send a copy to us for the next issue of the VAMFC newsletter. Anyone interested in having their article printed in the next news letter, should contact Denny Frank at [dxfran@wm.edu](mailto:dxfran@wm.edu) or Chris Sacco-Bene at [cxsacc@wm.edu](mailto:cxsacc@wm.edu). We look forward to hearing from you!

**Feature Article**  
**Family Structure and Youth Aggression –**  
**Dysfunctional Boundaries**  
**Part 2 of a 3 Part Series by**  
**Rip McAdams & Victoria Foster**  
**The College of William & Mary**

The roots of most violent behavior develop during childhood, the time when family members and family processes are characteristically the most prevalent influences in an individual's life. Consequently, understanding the impact of family relationships on the development of a violent individual may be a necessary prerequisite to developing effective methods for violence prevention and intervention. The influence of family relationships on violent behavior may explain why efforts to describe and predict violence on the basis of individual personality or character traits alone have proven largely unsuccessful.

From a structural perspective, a dysfunctional family is one in which problems in one or more elements of its structure have impaired its resources for coping with and adapting to contextual stressors. With its resources overloaded, the dysfunctional family is no longer able to adequately deal with the stress or nurture the growth of its individual members or the family unit as a whole. The loss of family support and guidance is particularly detrimental to children who are dependent upon them for their survival and healthy development. In fact, the aforementioned cognitive characteristics common to aggressive children appear to have origins in one or more of the basic elements of a dysfunctional family structure. In Part 1 of this article, we discussed specific ways that problems in a family's hierarchical structure may contribute to aggressive attitudes and behaviors in developing children. The contribution of problematic family boundaries will be the focus of Part 2 below.

The functionality of family boundaries is determined more by their degree of permeability than by their specific composition (Goldenberg & Golden berg, 2000). As noted previously, clear boundaries within a family help maintain separateness between individuals and subsystems and at the same time emphasize belongingness to the overall family system. However, when family boundaries are either excessively rigid (disengaged) or diffuse (enmeshed), there is detriment to both the family system and its individual members --

particularly the developing children (Minuchin, 1982).

*Disengagement.* Excessively rigid or inflexible boundaries between subsystems can lead to emotional distance or "disengagement" between parents and children. Nurturance, involvement, and easy exchange of affection and support between parents and children are typically missing in such cases. Over thirty years ago Bandura (1966) provided a long list of studies supporting his contention that affectional deprivation and rejection play a critical role in the development of aggressive disorders in children. He contended that if parents fail to volunteer support and emotional involvement with their children, the children have no recourse but to force their involvement through disruptive (including violent) behavior that demands immediate and intense parental intervention (Chiles, 1986). The violent behavior itself may be understood as a species of attachment behavior, with its ultimate goal being physical contact, often a very extreme kind (Mawson 1980). Whereas children in families with functional boundaries need do little to receive adult support and enthusiasm, those in families with rigid boundaries may come to learn that the adult involvement afforded them in response to their violent behavior is better than no adult involvement at all.

*Enmeshment.* In families with excessively permeable or "diffuse" boundaries between subsystems, there is often no clear generational hierarchy, and children and adults may exchange roles easily. Without set role definitions, roles become enmeshed whereby children may act like parents, and parental control may become ineffective (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 2000). Parents with ineffective control are less likely to discipline children's deviant behavior or to follow through with disciplinary measures when they are taken. Their threats to discipline without follow-through actually serve to increase the amount and/or severity of behavior that needs disciplining by devaluing the "disciplinary currency" in the family (Patterson, 1982). James (1995) proposed that the levels of physical violence by children and parents alike inflate as the currency of parental discipline becomes devalued through threats of discipline that are not carried out. This devaluation facilitates escalation in the severity of children's antisocial behavior by redefining at a higher level the severity of behavior that goes unpunished. It, likewise, necessitates a corresponding escalation in the

severity of the disciplinary response that is needed to appropriately address the increasingly serious behavior. When behavioral escalation becomes a primary means for relational problem solving in a family, violence is a predictable and probable by-product (Olweus 1979).

In families with clear hierarchical boundaries, children have consistent input into family decisions but are only responsible for decision-making that is appropriate to their age and ability. Because clear hierarchical boundaries afford children regular, reciprocal interaction with adult caregivers, they neither have to fight (literally or figuratively) for direction and involvement from disengaged caregivers nor test (through escalating behavior) the confusing limits of authority in enmeshed caregiver-to-child relationships.

The health and strength of a family is also related to the clarity of boundaries between the family unit and its environment. Families that function effectively maintain a balance between boundary openness and closedness, accepting influence from the outside world so that appropriate change and adaptation are accomplished while resisting influence that would threaten family integrity and survival (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 1996). Families that fail to maintain such a balance are prone to disorganization either because, as excessively closed systems, they fail to recognize the need for adaptive change or, as excessively open systems; their members lose a sense of common purpose and direction. In either case, the resulting stress placed on the family structure increases the risk that the individual needs of family members, including the critical developmental needs of children, will go unmet.

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### **Student Perspective**

**Hugh Jackson**

**Graduate Student Representative**

First of all, let me welcome everyone back to a brand new semester. I sincerely hope that each one of you had a very relaxing, well-deserved break from the rigors of your academic work and clinical duties. It was nice to have a break, but I kind of missed school over the break to be honest with you.

The VCA Conference held in the fall here in Williamsburg was a fantastic event. There were a lot of really interesting workshops and proposals for attendees to take advantage of; and the vendors

always seem to have just the right book for the particular clinical challenge I am facing at that time. Speaking of VCA, I just received the newsletter with the announcement for next year's conference. As usual, there was a call for proposals and presentations. I encourage you to consider presenting at one of these conferences regarding your experiences, tricks of the trade, or research in the realm family counseling. It is a really good experience, it gives exposure to the importance of family counseling, and it looks great on a résumé to have presented on topic that is important to you and the field as well.

Please consider applying for the scholarships offered through the Virginia Association of Marriage and Family Therapy. These financial scholarships certainly come in handy. Many other associations, foundations, and organizations offer scholarships and grants that are available to you. Spend some time checking around for these scholarships...the payoff may be worth your time!!

With the increasing demands on us as students and clinicians, let us not forget to take care of ourselves in the process. We must stay healthy so that we may do our jobs well and serve our clients to the best of our abilities.

### **UPCOMING EVENTS:**

- **February 14, 2003 – Dr. Michael P. Nichols – VAMFC Workshop – *Working Effectively with Enactments in Couples Therapy* – College of William and Mary.**
- **March 21, 2003 – Virginia Counseling Graduate Student Conference – College of William and Mary.**
- **April 21 – 25 – ACA National Convention – Anaheim, CA.**

Have a great semester!!!!!!

Hugh Jackson

ahjack@wm.edu

### **Call for New Leadership**

In the spring, VAMFC will be looking for new Board members to replace those whose terms are coming to an end. Positions that we will be looking for include President Elect, Secretary, and Treasurer. Several Committee chair positions may also be needed. The vitality of VAMFC is

maintained solely by the influx of new leadership coupled with the knowledge and experience of the “veteran” leaders. The “price” of Board membership is attendance at four half-day meetings per year. The benefits far exceed the costs and include collaboration and fellowship with a wonderful group of professionals committed to family counseling as well as the opportunity to “speak” on behalf of family counselors at the state level. As a two term President of VAMFC I invite and encourage other members to step up to the plate and volunteer for Board and Committee positions in VAMFC when they are announced. Only through your willingness to step in as others retire can VAMFC maintain the vitality needed to effectively represent marriage and family counselors at the state level. Anyone interested in becoming a Board or Committee member should contact Rip McAdams at [crmcad@wm.edu](mailto:crmcad@wm.edu). We look forward to hearing from you!

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## **Please plan to attend this year’s VAMFC workshop - February 14**

A Skills Development Workshop  
Featuring Nationally Prominent  
Family Therapist, Educator, and  
Author:

Michael P. Nichols

### **OVERVIEW**

Although most therapists are familiar with in-session dialogues, or “enactments”, both beginners and advanced practitioners have trouble making them work. Beginners have difficulty taking charge enough to push family members past their reluctance to engage with each other, while more experienced therapists often overmanage enactments because they have trouble stepping back.

In this workshop, participants will learn when to use enactments and how to structure them, from initiation to facilitation and effective closing commentary. Videotapes will illustrate the specifics

of successful enactments—as well as times when enactments should not be used.

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### **ABOUT THE PRESENTER**

Michael P. Nichols received his B.A. from the University of Wisconsin, and his Ph.D. from the University of Rochester. For nearly three decades, he has studied, practiced, taught, conducted research, and published in the area of marriage and family therapy in the company of other noted leaders in the field including Murray Bowen and Salvatore Minuchin. Dr. Nichols is currently an Associate Professor of Psychology at The College of William and Mary where he remains actively engaged in family therapy instruction, supervision, and research. He is the author of numerous journal articles and the popular textbook: *Family Therapy: Concepts and Methods*. Among his other books are: *The Self in the System*; *No Place to Hide: Facing Shame*; *The Lost Art of Listening*; *Family Healing* (with Salvatore Minuchin); and *Inside Family Therapy*.

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### **THE SPONSORS**

The Virginia Association of Marriage & Family Counselors (VAMFC) is a division of the Virginia Counselors Association Family Counseling Center

The New Horizons Family Counseling Center is a teaching and research clinic in the School of Education at The College of William & Mary

**TO LEARN MORE ABOUT  
REGISTRATION and DIRECTIONS  
PLEASE REFER TO THE VAMFC  
WEB PAGE [www.vamfc.org](http://www.vamfc.org) OR  
CONTACT Rip McAdams at  
[crmcad@wm.edu](mailto:crmcad@wm.edu).**

We’ll see you there!

## Board Members & Committee Chairs

|  |   |  |  |
|--|---|--|--|
| <b>President:<br/>(voting)</b>                     | Rip McAdams<br>The College of William & Mary<br>School of Education<br>PO Box 8795<br>Williamsburg, VA 23187-8795<br>wk 757.221.2338<br>hm 757.220.8493<br>email crmcad@wm.edu                        | <b>Past-President:<br/>(Nomination and<br/>Election<br/>Committee)</b> | Karen Eriksen<br>Old Dominion University<br>Darden School of Education #110<br>Norfolk, VA 23529<br>Wk: (757)683-3460<br>Hm: (757)623-1109<br>Email: keriksen@odu.edu  |
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| <b>Secretary:<br/>(voting)</b>                     | Donna Kaiser<br>The College of William & Mary<br>School of Education<br>PO Box 8795<br>Williamsburg, VA 23187-8795<br>wk. 757.221.2363<br>hm 757.229.6184<br>dnkais@wm.edu                            | <b>Newsletter<br/>Editors:</b>   | Denny Frank<br>Chris Sacco-Bene<br>The College of William & Mary<br>School of Education<br>PO Box 8795<br>Williamsburg, VA 23187-8795<br>Wk 757.221.2363<br>Email (Chris) cxsacc@wm.edu<br>(Denny) dxfran@wm.edu |
| <b>Treasurer:<br/>(voting)</b>                     | Juliann Smith<br>2310 Carter Road S.W.<br>Roanoke, VA 24015<br>hm 540.343.7440<br>email jusmith7@vt.edu   | <b>Workshop:<br/>(Professional<br/>Development)</b>                    | Open   |
| <b>Board<br/>Member<br/>At Large:<br/>(voting)</b> | Wally Scott<br>Director, Center for Counseling &<br>Student Development<br>Radford University<br>P.O. Box 6902<br>Radford, VA 24142<br>Wk 540.831-5226<br>Hm 540.633-2285<br>Email wscott@radford.edu | <b>Membership<br/>Committee:</b>                                       | Jacque Gatewood<br>School of Psychology & Counseling<br>Regent University<br>1000 Regent University Drive<br>Virginia Beach, VA 23464-9800<br>Wk 757.226-4295<br>Email jacqgat@regent.edu                        |
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*Think Family!*

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ADDRESS CORRECTION REQUESTED