

Parental Double Bind and Its Impact on Children's Decision-Making Competence: A Perspective According to Paul Watzlawick

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Abstract

This study explores the impact of parental double bind on children's decision-making competence from Paul Watzlawick's systemic communication perspective. Double bind occurs when children receive contradictory messages on verbal and relational levels, creating cognitive, emotional, and behavioral confusion. The intervention adopted a clinical systemic approach, combining the Melbourne Decision-Making Questionnaire (MDMQ) and the Family Environment Scale (FES) to assess decision-making patterns and family communication. The case of Adam, an 8-year-old with low self-confidence and excessive dependency, illustrates the effects of alternating parental authority and inconsistent messages. Therapy focused on reframing parental communication, distinguishing content from meta-content, and gradually training the child in independent decision-making. Over seven sessions, improvements were observed in cognitive clarity, emotional regulation, parental consistency, and the child's confidence in choice, reflected in higher MDMQ scores and more autonomous behavior. Watzlawick's approach

highlights that change occurs through modifying systemic interaction patterns rather than directly correcting the child's behavior.

Keywords: Double Bind; Decision-Making Competence; Communication Theory; Child; Family System; Brief Strategic Therapy.

Introduction.

Human communication constitutes a fundamental pillar upon which the psychological and social balance of the family is built, as it forms the structural framework through which relationships among its members take shape. Any communicative interaction within the family system—whether verbal or nonverbal—goes beyond the mere transmission of informational content to become a reinforcing indicator of the prevailing relational pattern within the family and of the positioning of its members within that system.

Parental inconsistency represents one of the most profound manifestations of communicative disturbance within the family. It is expressed

through the double bind, whereby the messages addressed to children by their parents are contradictory—between what is verbally stated and what is implicitly conveyed, between an explicit encouragement of autonomy and a covert stance that reinforces dependence.

According to Paul Watzlawick's communication theory (1967), it is impossible for human beings not to communicate; even silence constitutes a communicative act imbued with meaning. However, when messages intersect across two incongruent levels—the verbal and the relational—a phenomenon emerges that he termed the double bind. This pragmatic contradiction leaves profound effects on children across multiple dimensions, particularly at the cognitive and perceptual levels.

This latent overlap between discourse and practice not only disrupts children's behavior, but also generates disturbances in their cognitive and emotional structures, placing the child within a symbolic world lacking clarity, where discerning the true meaning of parental messages becomes particularly difficult.

Since communicative consistency is a fundamental prerequisite for the development of executive functions related to decision-making—such as planning, evaluating alternatives, and assuming responsibility for consequences—chronic exposure to pragmatic contradiction may hinder the formation of psychological autonomy. Consequently, either children may gravitate toward excessive dependency in their decisions or toward impulsivity and rebellion as an unconscious attempt to break the communicative deadlock (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

The risks arising from this critical contradiction extend further, contributing to the formation of an affect-laden cognitive style that distorts the decision-making process. Environments characterized by such levels of cognitive inconsistency often foster an anxious relationship between choice and chronic disappointment.

Rather than being perceived as a conscious, self-determined act, decision-making is psychologically reconstructed as a defensive response to contradictory expectations that cannot be simultaneously satisfied.

Within this framework, the analysis of the double bind cannot be dissociated from its therapeutic dimension, particularly in light of Paul Watzlawick's clinical approach, which emphasizes the reframing of meaning and the modification of interaction patterns rather than focusing on individual psychological content. Watzlawick posits that the problem does not reside in the child as an individual agent, but in the communicative logic governing the family system. Any effective therapeutic intervention therefore requires breaking the contradictory interactional loop by inducing a second-order change in the very rules of communication (Watzlawick, Weakland, & Fisch, 1974).

Based on the foregoing, the research problem is articulated through the following questions:

- How does parental double-bind communication within the family system affect the consolidation of children's decision-making competence?
- Can Brief Strategic Therapy, as conceptualized by Paul Watzlawick and grounded in modifying communication patterns and reframing contradictions, be relied upon to enhance children's decision-making competence?

1. Operational Conceptual Definitions

1.1 Double Bind / Parental Double-Bind Communication

A parental communication pattern in which children are exposed to contradictory messages

conveyed on two or more levels (verbal/nonverbal, explicit/implicit), such that responding to one message necessarily entails violating the other, placing the child in a communicative dilemma.

1.2 Decision-Making Competence

The child's ability to make an autonomous decision through the analysis of available alternatives and the evaluation of their potential consequences.

1.3 Family System

A dynamic system of parental communicative interactions within which contradictions emerge, manifested in double-bind communication, and which in turn influences children's decision-making competence.

1.4 Brief Family Therapy

A therapeutic approach that focuses on modifying dysfunctional and contradictory patterns of interaction and communication between parents, with the aim of enhancing children's decision-making competence.

Conceptual Framework

2. The Concept of the Double Bind According to Paul Watzlawick

Paul Watzlawick (1967) is regarded as one of the most prominent theorists of human communication in the twentieth century. Together with Janet Beavin and Don Jackson, he contributed to the development of a new systemic conception of human interaction, drawing on the work of Gregory Bateson on the concept of the double bind. However, they expanded this notion to encompass the pragmatic dimension of human communication within interactional systems, arguing that the meaning of a message is derived not solely from its verbal content, but also from the nature of the relationship linking the participants in the communicative system.

Watzlawick maintains that communication cannot be understood in isolation from the systemic context in which it is produced, as every message simultaneously involves two inseparable levels:

- The content level, which conveys explicit information;
- The relationship level, which defines the nature of the bond and the organizing power between sender and receiver.

When a contradiction arises between these two levels, without allowing the possibility of clarifying the inconsistency or escaping the communicative situation, a double-bind condition emerges. This situation places the receiver in a cognitive and emotional dilemma, rendering them unable to determine an appropriate response without committing an error (Watzlawick et al., 1967).

For instance, when a parent tells a child in a firm or threatening tone, "Do whatever you want," the verbal message at the content level suggests freedom of choice, while the tone and relational context convey an implicit and opposing message of prohibition or threat. In such a case, the child is confronted with two contradictory injunctions: complying with the content level entails violating the relationship level, whereas respecting the relationship requires ignoring the content. With repeated exposure to this pattern, the child experiences a persistent cognitive paradox that gradually leads to perceptual confusion, undermines self-confidence, and weakens the capacity for independent and coherent decision-making.

Watzlawick (1976) emphasizes that the double bind is not confined to pathological cases or dysfunctional families, but also appears in ordinary everyday interactions. However, its harmful effects intensify when it becomes a recurrent and dominant communicative pattern within the family system, where it operates as a systemic mechanism that maintains an apparent equilibrium in family relationships, despite the

underlying tensions and latent conflicts it conceals (Watzlawick, 1976).

According to Watzlawick, contradiction may take several forms, including:

1. A contradiction between speech and action;
2. A contradiction between the primary message and the meta-communicative message;
3. A contradiction between the relational and authority levels in parental relationships, such as when a father demands autonomy from his child while punishing the child for exercising it.

In all these cases, the child is exposed to a form of cognitive double bind that renders the decision-making process fraught with fear of error or rejection.

3. Systemic Mechanisms Generating the Double Bind within the Family

The double bind may be considered one of the most complex interactional patterns within the family system, as it represents a manifestation of structural communicative dysfunction that infiltrates everyday relationships between parents and children. From the perspective of Paul Watzlawick (1967), this contradiction is not understood as an incidental event or a transient communicative error, but rather as a dynamic structure that is systemically reproduced, whereby ambiguity in messages becomes an unconscious means of maintaining a fragile family equilibrium.

This communicative pattern constitutes one of the most significant determinants of children's cognitive, emotional, and behavioral confusion, as it confronts them with dual meanings that render action and decision-making processes fraught with threat and ambiguity.

These mechanisms can be outlined as follows:

3.1 Integration of Content and Meta-Content as an Interactional Field

According to Watzlawick (1967), as previously discussed, every message encompasses a content level and a relationship level. Contradiction emerges when messages conveyed at these two levels repeatedly conflict, transforming what may initially be an isolated incident into a structured communicative pattern within the system (Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967).

3.2 Repetition and Circularity

Communication within the family is understood as a sequence of reciprocal interactional loops, in which each behavior or message elicits a response that, in turn, becomes a stimulus for a new message. When pragmatic contradiction is repeatedly embedded within these loops, it becomes consolidated in the systemic structure through feedback mechanisms.

3.3 The Function of Contradiction as a System-Maintenance Mechanism

Despite its pathological appearance, pragmatic contradiction serves an implicit function within the family system, operating as an unconscious defensive mechanism aimed at avoiding direct confrontation or overt conflict. It allows the family to regulate internal equilibrium without threatening established power positions or role distributions. In families characterized by emotional restraint or silence, contradiction may be employed as a means of boundary regulation that appears flexible on the surface but, in essence, reinforces submission and dependency. In this sense, contradiction becomes a systemic solution rather than an individual problem, enabling the system to persist without disintegration, albeit at a high psychological cost to children—manifested in confusion regarding authority, fear of error, and an impaired capacity for autonomous decision-making.

3.4 Interference among Structural Levels (Hierarchical, Authoritative, and Emotional)

The roots of the double bind are also evident in the structural overlap among relational levels within the family. When the authority structure conflicts with the emotional structure, contradiction emerges in its most impactful form for the child.

For example, a mother may publicly assert that she grants her children freedom of expression, while in practice constraining them through rigid instructions that leave little room for choice. In such situations, the child experiences a split between discourse and reality—between verbal empowerment and actual restriction—resulting in a persistent internal conflict between the desire for autonomy and the fear of losing emotional acceptance. This structural contradiction fosters distorted representations of authority, love, and freedom, and undermines cognitive functions related to planning, initiative, and outcome evaluation, all of which are essential processes for the development of decision-making competence.

4. Interpretive Pathways of the Effects of Pragmatic Contradiction on Children's Decision-Making Processes

Researchers have conceptualized the effects of pragmatic contradiction across three interrelated domains: cognitive, emotional/evaluative, and behavioral.

4.1 The Cognitive Pathway

The cognitive domain is among the most affected by parental double-bind communication, as recurrent communicative ambiguity is reflected in children's perceptual structures, information-processing patterns, and decision-making competence. Continuous exposure to dual-source messages generates what may be termed informational confusion, which hinders the construction of stable cognitive representational models of social situations. As a result, the child experiences difficulty in predicting the outcomes of their actions or accurately interpreting others' intentions. Over time, this confusion weakens the child's capacity to analyze alternatives and anticipate consequences, thereby increasing a

tendency toward decision avoidance rather than decision-making (Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967; Bateson, 1972).

Furthermore, a process that may be described as fragmentation of cognitive representations emerges—namely, the loss of integration among perceptual and emotional experiences that collectively shape representations of the self and others. Children who receive contradictory parental signals concerning love, authority, and acceptance develop incoherent mental representations of human relationships, making it difficult for them to employ coherent contextual reasoning in social understanding (Minuchin, 1974; Watzlawick, 1983; Keeney, 1983).

Consequently, cohesive cognitive structures that enable rational decision-making based on clear internal criteria fail to consolidate. The child becomes increasingly reliant on external emotional cues as a substitute for internal cognitive regulation. Instead of grounding choices in stable personal values or internal standards, the child seeks affective indicators from the environment—such as tone of voice, facial expressions, or others' reactions—to determine whether a decision is acceptable or rejected. This reliance reflects the fragility of the self-regulatory cognitive system and diminishes decision-making competence by rendering the decision process slow, hesitant, and often contingent on fluctuating relational contexts (Watzlawick, Weakland, & Fisch, 1974; Siegel, 2012).

4.2 The Emotional Pathway of Double-Bind Effects on Decision-Making

The emotional domain is particularly vulnerable to parental contradiction, as ambiguity in affective messages undermines the child's capacity for emotional regulation and the stability of emotional identity. When children receive contradictory emotional messages, the links between feelings and expression become disrupted, giving rise to emotional confusion, wherein security becomes intertwined with fear and love with guilt, thereby

destabilizing the internal affective structure (Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967; Haley, 1976).

Within a contradictory family system, the child exists in a state of persistent emotional vigilance, attempting to decode conflicting parental intentions. Over time, this condition crystallizes into a stable emotional trait, characterized by a constant effort to avoid error or loss of acceptance, alongside the suppression of spontaneous emotional expression in order to preserve an apparent family equilibrium (Minuchin, 1974; Hoffman, 1981).

At the level of decision-making competence, this distortion of emotional structure produces a conflict between affective motivation and rational criteria. Children raised in double-bind environments tend to make emotionally driven decisions motivated by fear of rejection or loss of love, rather than decisions grounded in objective evaluation of situations. Decision-making thus ceases to function as an expression of the self and becomes instead a strategy for safeguarding the parental relationship.

This pattern constitutes one of the mechanisms underlying what is known as invisible loyalty, whereby decisions are governed by an emotional system subordinated to parental authority rather than by autonomous internal standards (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973; Watzlawick, 1983). Such emotional ambivalence also increases vulnerability to anxiety and impairs the ability to identify emotions appropriate to specific situations, thereby weakening emotional coherence and the capacity for balanced decision-making.

4.3 The Behavioral Pathway of Pragmatic Effects on Decision-Making

The consequences of pragmatic contradiction become particularly evident in children's observable behavior, as cognitive and emotional confusion are translated into contradictory behavioral patterns. Children who learn that any

decision may be interpreted in mutually opposing ways often adopt avoidance behaviors as a defensive strategy to evade punishment or blame. They hesitate to initiate action, postpone choices, and seek external validation prior to acting (Watzlawick, Weakland, & Fisch, 1974).

Conversely, some children develop an opposing pattern characterized by excessive compliance, wherein they attempt to satisfy parental expectations by adopting positions they perceive as safe or socially acceptable, even when these positions conflict with their own personal desires (Minuchin, 1974; Haley, 1976).

Over time, such dynamics consolidate what may be termed chronic behavioral confusion, defined as an inability to develop autonomous strategies for coping with novel situations. Decision-making thus becomes contingent upon awaiting parental—or symbolic—responses, further undermining the development of independent agency (Keeney, 1983; Hoffman, 1981).

5. Amplifying and Moderating Factors of the Systemic Effects of the Double Bind

The effects of parental double-bind communication on children do not operate in a linear or homogeneous manner. Rather, they are shaped by a set of mediating and moderating factors that regulate both the intensity and the direction of these effects. These factors include developmental, personality-related, social, and cultural dimensions.

5.1 Developmental Stage: Developmental Specificities and Their Impact on Interpretation

Developmental stage is among the most significant factors explaining how children receive and interpret double-bind communication. During early childhood, the impact is primarily

manifested in the domain of basic security, as communicative ambiguity hinders the development of trust in both the self and others. Children who receive contradictory messages regarding acceptance and rejection experience difficulty in forming stable representations of parental figures, which subsequently undermines emotional and cognitive regulation (Siegel, 2012).

However, during adolescence, contradiction tends to elicit more complex responses, as adolescents oscillate between indecision and rebellion depending on the strength of alternative relational bonds, particularly with peers. The presence of a positive social support network provides a compensatory framework for the reorganization of meaning and mitigates the impact of contradictory messages on decision-related behavior (Minuchin, 1974).

5.2 Child Temperament and Personality Traits

Differences in temperament play a crucial role in determining the degree to which children are affected by parental double-bind communication. Nancy Eisenberg et al. (2004) emphasize that children with higher levels of self-regulation—such as emotional control and cognitive delay of gratification—demonstrate greater flexibility in coping with double messages. These children are better able to dissociate relational ambiguity from the cognitive evaluation of situations.

In contrast, children with a high predisposition to anxiety exhibit faster and more profound responses to pragmatic contradiction, developing a defensive cognitive–emotional pattern characterized by exaggerated threat anticipation. This dynamic significantly undermines decision-making autonomy (Watzlawick, 1983; Siegel, 2012).

5.3 Alternative Support Systems

The availability of support networks outside the family system constitutes one of the most important protective moderators against the effects of contradiction. Positive relationships with teachers or the presence of supportive reference

figures within the school environment contribute to the reconstruction of self-efficacy and the restoration of meaning coherence. Likewise, supportive siblings or secure friendships act as mediating factors that modify the psychological impact of contradiction by providing more stable communicative alternatives, allowing children to experiment with decision-making in a less threatening environment (Gianfranco Cecchin & Luigi Boscolo, 1982).

Practical Aspect

Method:

The clinical method was adopted as the most suitable approach for exploring contradictory parental communication manifested in the double bind and its impact on children's decision-making ability, as it allows intervention to correct the course of communication within the family system.

Instruments:

To achieve the objectives of the study, the following instruments were utilized:

- Clinical Interview Grid;
- Melbourne Decision Making Questionnaire (MDMQ): Used to identify cognitive decision-making styles, including vigilance, procrastination, hypervigilance, and reliance on others;
- Family Environment Scale (FES):

Developed by R. Moos & E. Moos (1981), it is used to measure three main dimensions:

- Family Relationships (cohesion – emotional expression – conflict)
- Organization and Control
- Independence and Support

High scores on control combined with low emotional expression serve as warning indicators

of a double-bind communication system within the family.

Case Study:

1. Case Presentation

The case concerns Adam, an 8-year-and-4-month-old boy, currently enrolled in the fourth grade of primary school.

Reason for Referral: Low self-confidence, marked indecisiveness in making simple decisions, and excessive dependence on his parents.

Referring Source: The primary school teacher requested that Adam's parents seek a psychological consultation after observing his slowness in initiating tasks in class and difficulty performing individual tasks without direct guidance.

The family, consisting of the father (47 years old, merchant), the mother (42 years old, French language teacher), and their only child Adam, attended the clinic seeking psychological intervention for indecisiveness and excessive shyness, as reported by the parents.

2. Initial Observation and Child's Behavior

During the first interview, Adam appeared hesitant in responding to even simple questions, frequently looking toward his parents before answering. For example, when asked, "What do you want to be in the future?" he replied in a soft voice: "I don't know... my mother wants me to be a doctor, and my father wants me to be rich."

Throughout the sessions, it became evident that the child derived certainty from his parents' facial cues, attempting to interpret the tone of their voices more than the content of their words. This behavior indicates a reliance on external cognitive guidance.

3. Analysis of the Family Context and Manifestations of Pragmatic Contradiction

Through multiple interviews and observation of family interactions, it became evident that the

family operates within multiple layers of double-bind communication, and that this contradiction is not incidental but a recurring pattern. Researchers identified several situations in which contradiction was prominent, as follows:

- During a session while the therapist was speaking with Adam:

The father interrupted, saying: "Speak confidently, my son, don't be afraid."

At the same time, the mother placed her hand on his shoulder and said: "Leave him, don't embarrass him."

In this situation, the two messages conveyed contradictory meanings simultaneously: "Speak with courage" versus "Stay silent to avoid mistakes", in addition to interrupting the child and intervening in a conversation that was not directed at them.

- When discussing Adam's low self-confidence:

The mother said: "My son is very sensitive; we need to understand him," looking at the father for confirmation: "Right?"

The father replied: "He is not sensitive, he is spoiled; he needs strictness to become a man in the future."

Researchers noted that the reference framework was divided between emotional understanding and behavioral correction, creating a duality in the child's emotional identity.

- In another interview, the mother stated: "I always encourage him to make choices, but when he makes a mistake, I must correct him," reflecting a dual corrective logic that undermines the value of decision-making.

- During another session, the therapist asked Adam to describe his feelings when his parents disagreed:

- The father spoke on his behalf: "He doesn't care; we discuss calmly."

- The mother interrupted: “No, he suffers a lot, but he doesn’t show it.”

Researchers recorded that the child’s voice was silenced twice in this situation: once by speaking for him and once by interpreting his emotions without asking him, which reinforced his communicative helplessness.

From the analysis of the interviews with the parents and based on their reported behaviors toward the child, researchers observed that:

The father exhibits a traditional authoritarian style, inclined toward firmness and direct control.

The mother outwardly adopts a modern style encouraging independence.

However, in daily practice, the parents alternate in sending contradictory messages, which were evident in situations such as:

During an activity provided by the therapist, the father instructed the child to rely on himself and avoid complaining, while the mother intervened to encourage and assist him in every detail, claiming he felt shy in front of the researcher.

4. Systemic Clinical Analysis

The alternating contradictory pattern employed by the parents led to cognitive confusion regarding authority and reliance, generating a conflict within the child between the desire for independence and fear of punishment or rejection.

In this context, the child experiences the double-bind message: every choice involves violating another command, leaving the only possible solution as inaction or waiting for the stronger cue.

Through circular analysis and exploration of response patterns, it became evident that pragmatic contradiction within the family system produces a superficial equilibrium based on ambiguity. The parents believe they complement each other in parenting, while in reality; they reinforce confusion and dependency in the child,

who loses trust in his own ability to make judgments.

Decision-making thus becomes emotionally risky: if he chooses according to one parent, he loses the approval of the other. Consequently, he adopts what Watzlawick (1983) calls communicative neutrality—refraining from making decisions as a defensive mechanism against conflict.

Two assessment tools were applied:

The first is Melbourne Decision Making Questionnaire (MDMQ): to identify Adam’s decision-making style and his level of self-confidence in evaluating situations.

The second is Family Environment Scale (FES): to understand the communicative and emotional structure within Adam’s family and to identify sources of pragmatic contradiction affecting his psychological development and decision-making.

In the psychological–cognitive assessment, Adam scored high on the avoidance dimension and low on decision-making confidence in the Melbourne Decision Making Questionnaire (MDMQ), with clear hesitation in open-ended responses.

This reflects the impact of pragmatic contradiction on the cognitive–emotional pathway of decision-making, as described in the theoretical models reviewed earlier.

5. Initial Diagnostic Summary

Clinical Diagnosis: Low self-confidence and impaired decision-making skills within a context of contradictory family communication. This is due to the persistent conflict between the content and meta-content levels of parental communication, structural differences in authority and caregiving styles between the father and mother, as well as a lack of role clarity and overlapping emotional boundaries.

6. Therapeutic Intervention

Watzlawick’s therapeutic approach is based on the premise that the problem does not reside within

the individual, but within the communication patterns regulating the family system. The goal is to break the cycle of pragmatic contradiction within the family system and rebuild a more coherent communicative balance between the content and meta-content of parental messages.

The double-bind is not a psychological symptom per se, but a communicative dysfunction that causes cognitive and perceptual confusion in the child, leaving him unable to determine the intended meaning of parental messages.

The researchers established five therapeutic objectives, aligned with Watzlawick's approach, and translated them into operational goals for each session:

1. Identify communicative contradictions, particularly double-bind patterns, within family interactions.
2. Deconstruct double messages that confuse the child's perception.
3. Reorganize meaning within the family system through corrective communicative interventions.
4. Stimulate systemic rebalancing indirectly.
5. Enhance the child's self-confidence through clearer parental messages and encouragement of independent initiative.

6.2 Therapeutic Sessions

First Session:

Operational Goal: Rebuilding the therapeutic alliance and establishing a treatment contract

Duration: 45 minutes

The first session focused on creating a climate of trust and clarifying the objectives of therapy.

From the outset, the therapist observed attempts by the parents to direct the child during the conversation: the father occasionally answered on Adam's behalf, while the mother completed his

sentences, confirming a pattern of mutual communicative control.

During this session, it was agreed that each party would be given independent space for expression without interruption, a foundational technique for systemic neutralization. The fixed interaction patterns were identified:

Who sends the message? Who responds? When does the other intervene?

Points of contradiction were also explored, such as: "Be free to choose what you want," followed by "...but don't choose that." This was aimed at raising awareness of the dysfunction without assigning blame, as blame tends to trigger defensive patterns in the system.

The family agreed to a seven-week program, including the current session, consisting of both joint sessions and sub-sessions for the parents and the child.

An agreement was reached with the family on a program of seven weekly sessions, including the current session, which includes joint sessions and breakout sessions for the parents and child.

Second Session:

Operational Goal: Analyzing double messages

Duration: 45 minutes

Using the circular interactional analysis technique, the therapist observed how the child received double messages in simple situations similar to those identified in the first session.

The therapist employed paradoxical interventions to dismantle the closed system without direct confrontation. Paradoxical techniques work by destabilizing the pattern from within through unexpectedly redirecting the message.

Instead of accusing the parents of placing the child in a contradictory position, the therapist said to them: "Perhaps it would be better if you asked Adam to hesitate even more; he seems to have become skilled at it."

This paradoxical statement created an indirect awareness in the parents that Adam's hesitation was not an innate deficiency, but a response to their double communication.

In another instance, to draw the parents' attention to their continuous interruptions, the therapist jokingly remarked: "It seems you are competing for the title of the biggest interrupter..."

Other indirect methods of guiding the messages were also used, which the therapist noted to be more effective than direct confrontation.

Third Session:

Operational Goal: Deconstructing authority roles and redistributing them

Duration: 45 minutes

Observations revealed that one source of contradiction was the alternation of authority between the father and mother; when one intervened, the other would either withdraw or oppose in front of the child.

The therapist employed the technique of a clear and explicit family contract, agreeing that decisions related to daily routines (clothing, meals, and leisure) would be shared responsibilities, but presented with a unified stance in front of the child.

The interaction pattern was adjusted to become a single, unified message directed to one recipient, instead of conflicting messages, while modeling collective decision-making in front of the child as a learning example.

The therapist assigned the family symbolic tasks designed to modify the interactional structure without direct lecturing, encouraging the parents to shift from double communication to coherent, and single-signaling communication.

The first task involved instructing the parents to give Adam a number of simple tasks that he could choose and complete independently, without any

comments or corrections. Each task was to be completed one at a time before assigning another.

Fourth Session:

Operational Goal: Rebuilding meaning

Duration: 45 minutes

In this session, the parents' messages over the past week were reevaluated, identifying the difficulties encountered. The therapist then reframed the problem within a new systemic context, altering its significance without changing the facts.

Reframing shifts the perception from pathological behavior to adaptive behavior, helping to reduce pressure on the child and restore coherence to the messages.

The parents were trained to distinguish between content and meta-content in their communication, clarifying implicit messages to the child through clear and non-contradictory formulations, such as:

"You may choose whatever food you like, as long as it is healthy, and we trust your choice."

This simple adjustment in tone and linguistic structure helped reduce the child's cognitive confusion.

Fifth Session:

Operational Goal: Consolidating the new consistency and training the child in gradual decision-making.

Duration: 45 minutes

After observing gradual improvement in communication clarity, the therapist focused on consolidating the new pattern through:

- Enhancing awareness of implicit messages: how you say what you say.
- Establishing positive communication rituals, such as family meals where the child chooses certain details without debate.

- Training parents to monitor tone of voice and timing of interventions.

In individual sessions, the therapist applied the limited gradual choice technique, where the child was asked to choose between two simple options without parental consultation.

Each choice was supported with positive feedback to reinforce decision-making confidence, which was subsequently measured using the MDMQ in the seventh session.

Sixth Session:

Operational Goal: Regulating emotional consistency

Duration: 45 minutes

The session began with a brief review of the previous week's experiences, during which Adam showed clear improvement in simple initiatives, yet remained hesitant when confronted with differences in his parents' tone of voice.

The therapist observed that emotional consistency between the parents had not yet been established: the father tended toward emotional firmness, while the mother adopted an overly nurturing tone that tended to negate implicit authority, leaving the child confused about a safe emotional reference.

It was noted that this type of emotional inconsistency contributes to the child's uncertainty in interpreting parental cues.

The therapist employed the guided intonation technique, asking the parents to rephrase the same statements with tone adjusted to align with the content. She also used the emotional mirroring technique, describing the parents' emotions at the moment they occurred without evaluation, in an effort to bring the parents' tones closer together and guide the system toward interactive emotional harmony without blame or criticism.

In the second half of the session, a symbolic exercise was implemented based on the principle: "one decision, one feeling." The therapist asked

the parents to jointly choose a single simple activity—going to the park—but to express it with a unified emotional tone in front of the child.

Seventh Session:

Operational Goal: Evaluation and system closure

Duration: 60 minutes

The initial assessment measures were re-administered, showing improvement in:

- MDMQ: A significant increase in confidence in the decision, from level five to level nine (out of 12).
- Family Environment Scale (FES): Improvement in organizational clarity and a decrease in internal conflict.

At the behavioral level, the teacher observed that the child had become more independent in completing tasks and relied less on continuous guidance.

At the end of the therapeutic program, a closing session was held to redefine freedom of choice within the family system, framing it as a shared value rather than a domain of conflict between the father and mother. The session also reviewed the intervention process and progress achieved, and informed the parents of potential relapse indicators if the therapeutic guidelines were not maintained.

Indicators of Improvement:

- Decrease in cognitive confusion in the child, who now looks directly at the speaker instead of waiting for cues from others.
- Elimination of the need for repeated permission in daily situations.
- Increase in parental communication consistency.
- Improvement in self-concept and higher scores in confidence and independent choice on the MDMQ.

Theoretical-Therapeutic Summary

According to Watzlawick, the double bind is not merely a set of conflicting words; it is a systemic pattern that profoundly affects the construction of meaning and the decision-making competence of children.

The therapeutic intervention was based on Watzlawick's premise that change does not occur by directly altering behavior, but rather through modifying the interactional logic of the family system by reorganizing communicative consistency and targeting the cessation of double and contradictory messages. Therapy does not center on the child alone; change is achieved by transforming the interactional logic produced by the system itself, rather than by directly correcting behavior.

The goal was to reorganize communicative consistency within the family system, not simply to make the child take more decisions. Once parental communication shifted from "Do as you wish, but cautiously" to "We trust your ability to choose what is appropriate for you", the entire system began to change.

As communication within the family became clearer and more coherent, the child naturally began to regain self-confidence and psychological autonomy, because meaning was no longer threatened by contradiction or negation. The child gradually freed himself from the communicative neutrality he had relied on as a defensive mechanism, forming a new self-image capable of initiative without fear of rejection or error.

Conclusion.

This study highlights the profound impact of parental double bind on children's decision-making competence, demonstrating that contradictory verbal and relational messages

generate significant cognitive, emotional, and behavioral disruption. The systemic clinical intervention, grounded in Paul Watzlawick's communication theory, illustrated that therapeutic strategies targeting the reorganization of interactional patterns, rather than direct correction of the child's behavior, effectively enhance autonomy, self-confidence, and decision-making capacity. The case of Adam underscores that even subtle inconsistencies in parental authority or emotional tone can perpetuate indecision and dependence, whereas structured interventions restore clarity, coherence, and balance within the family system.

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