

FAMILY INTERVIEW

Narrator

Karen and Sam are newlyweds. Karen has two adolescent children, Angie and Casey, from a previous marriage. Sam also has a child, Tommy, who is younger than the girls. All five live together in small, overcrowded apartment. Instead of The Brady Bunch, Karen and Sam's family is not quite ready for prime time.

Sam is worried about his son Tommy. Karen's children regularly pick on their smaller step-brother and Karen lets things get out of hand. She tells Sam that the kids just need to learn how to *get along*. Sam feels frustrated that he can't get through to Karen's children. They don't respect him and he can't discipline them.

Karen's mother accuses Sam of being mean to the girls. The girls have learned to manipulate the situation by creating a scene. They run and cry to their mom, who finally restores order.

Karen intentionally waits for everything to explode before she steps in. In this way, she asserts herself as the dominant figure in the household—and then resents having to be in charge. She's angry with her husband for regularly coming home late. She feels that when he does get home he avoids the ongoing family squabbles by heading straight to the computer. She's playing the hostile-martyr role.

Karen sees herself as the victim in the family. She thinks that she's being the perfect mother and wife. She assumes all of the responsibility for fixing all of her family's situations. She thinks Sam is being insensitive and neglectful of her. Sam, in turn, resents her behavior. Her destructive behaviors are designed to make her look good, and him look bad. The result, however, is that she has become the target of her husband's resentment.

Casey and Tommy have been getting into trouble at school. They've been getting into fights with other students and acting out in the classroom. This has caught the attention of the middle school counselor. Tommy has admitted to the counselor that he has had thoughts of hurting himself and others. Tommy feels ganged-up on at home and feels that his family blames him for everything.

Family counseling session

Human Services Professional (HSP)

Welcome. I am Dennis. So you must be the Tates.

Karen

Um, yeah. I am Karen and this is my husband Sam. And our children Casey and Angie; and that is my stepson, Tommy.

HSP

Well, I just want you to know I work a lot with families. This is a confidential and private setting. So you are able to speak freely.

Karen

Well, I have to be honest. I have very mixed feelings about this whole deal. I think that we are just like any other family, and we have our issues – but I don't think we need professional help. It is not like we neglect the kids, or anything.

HSP

I appreciate your honesty and your openness. I just want you to know that I can appreciate that families today are under a lot

of stress with money issues and cultural shifts going on. It is not like I was in our generation (looks at dad) and I want you to know I understand that.

Sam

You can say that again. When I was growing up, loyalty was really important. I remember my dad worked for the same company for 30 years. Back then companies were loyal to employees and employees were loyal back. Those were the good old days.

HSP

From what I understand, Tommy here was referred to me by Ms. Kilgore, at the CyLinks Middle School. So Tommy, tell me, what is going on in school that is bothering you?

Tommy

Well, I am tired of getting picked on. It is a new school so I do not know a lot of people yet. Everyone calls me names, and they think I am stupid. It is tough because even when I try to make friends it just does not work. I never get picked for teams in gym—and it just seems like nobody likes me.

HSP

Well, what about at home? What worries you at home?

Tommy

The place we live in, our apartment, it's pretty small. My sisters, have themselves to talk to and they do not include me. Then they hog the computer so I never get a turn— and then when I want a turn they always call me names or do mean stuff.

HSP

Tommy, what do you do that bothers your sisters?

Tommy

Nothing. They do everything. They...

HSP

Wait a minute, wait a minute (to Karen and daughters) Go on (to Tommy).

Tommy

OK. It just seems like no one likes me at home except for my dad, and he is at work most of time. My stepmom is busy cleaning or doing other things—and it just seems like no one has time for me. I wish things would go back to normal—just me and my dad.

HSP

Well, adjusting to, new family, new school, new rules—this can be stressful for anybody.

Karen

Now wait a minute. I am doing my best that I can for everybody here. I mean, I get the kids up, I am making sure you are dressed (look at girls), I volunteer. Then I am helping grandma—I take care of grandma, I am cooking, doing dishes and I am helping you with homework every day. You know, give me a break! I am the one who is alone here. And when he comes

home, I mean, Sam does not help out much. (Looks at Sam, whispers) Well you do not.

HSP

(Look toward Casey and Angie) You guys are teen-agers, right? Could you possibly get up in the morning by yourselves?

Casey

I suppose we could do it ourselves but she likes to do it. It is just easier for me—well, for us—if she does it. My stepdad is always nagging us about helping out mom more but I am busy with friends, and school and MySpace and my softball team. I am hitting .450.

Angie

When I get home I just want to *chillax* before getting to my homework. I am really worried about college and I have a ton of hard classes. I have Algebra and Chemistry, and five other.

HSP

Um, *Chillax*?

Angie

Chill and Relax.

HSP

OK, I got it. Sam, What are your thoughts?

Sam

I am just trying to do right by my family, like my dad did for me. You know I did not have a great relationship with my dad, so I am really trying to be here for Tommy. (pause) and for Karen, and Casey and Angie too. And let us not forget I work 60 hours a week. Everybody criticizes me but they forget that I am the man of the house. Am I supposed to work and come home dead-tired and do all this work too? It seems like all I am doing lately is putting out fires between the kids. It just seems to me that Karen is so much better at talking to, listening to and relating to the kids. With me, it is different. The girls: they just do not even like or respect me.

HSP

Well, I agree that families working together can be a challenge but it is important for everybody. All families have their stressors, you know, things that cause stress, uncertainty and conflicts in relationships. Let us take a moment to look at this session not as a "Who's to blame," but more as a problem-solving session. Things are different now than they were for our parents or our grandparents. So what we are going to do is we are going to take a look at an ecomap and it is a tool that we can use to examine some of the stressors, conflicts, different things like that within relationships. How does that sound as a plan for the day?

Meeting at office

Narrator

I am the office coordinator of family services at a local agency. I am meeting with Dennis, a case worker, for his weekly update on cases and written case reports. Near the end of the case reports, Dennis presents the case scenario and ecomap of the Tate family and talks about the self-serving bias. He appears critical of the family members in their tendency to take credit for their successes and deny any responsibility.

Ken

Great job on this week's report.

Dennis

Thanks (moves to pack up papers and reports)

Ken

Just one more item. Everyone knows that we are all swamped with the overgrowing caseloads, but the one item that our agency requirements is a monthly written reports with goals and your assessment on their performance. And as you know, these reports are due the second day of the month. It is now the 10th and I still do not have your reports. This is the second month in a row.

Dennis

I know. Sorry, things have been crazy. I have been given so many court hearings and family interviews, and I know it is no excuse, you know, and on top of that I am going to school at night. I am working on my master's in Human Services, just like you are; you know I am over at Capella. They have the doctorate and graduate programs! And you know, everybody here is saying I am doing such a great job.

Ken

Dennis, I know that you are busy and I am glad that you are investing in your future with the graduate school, but our work is not done until it is completely documented. Timely documentation is key.

Dennis

Well I hate to complain, but it just seems like the computers are down half the time. It seems like the copy machine is down for repairs all the time. Then you tell us do not to work extra hours unless we get your approval, so I am not going to get the work done in the time that I have.

Ken

Dennis, you remember over the summer we had a great presentation on the self-serving bias in human services?

Dennis

Yeah, yeah, the family's tendency to take credit for the successes and deny responsibility for the failures. This family, the Tates that I was working with, they were doing that a lot of that.

Ken

I know, and you did a great job with that. I would just like to say that the self-serving bias can also occur in our work and communications as human service professionals.

Dennis

OK. What are you getting at?

Ken

Well remember, when I was asking you about getting your documentation in on time. You shared with me that you were busy with court cases, court hearings and school, and yet appeared to blame the system and copy machines for your part.

Dennis

OK, (smiling) I get what you are saying. I can be part of the problem or part of the solution. I need to take responsibility for my stuff and practice what I preach.

Ken

It is not just you. It is all of us, even me. Collecting and evaluating information accurately and objectively is critical for all of us. Unintentionally, without reflection, we can all open ourselves up to bias, even the self-serving bias, in our search for the facts.

Dennis

I get it. Thanks for pointing it out Ken. I appreciate it. I will have the reports on your desk the day after tomorrow.

Ken

Sounds like a plan! Dennis, I am pleased that you are balancing your time trying to develop yourself with the graduate study. Balancing the demands of school, family and work—well that can be quite a challenge!



CREDITS

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