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## 5

# Initial Interview with a Family

Volker Thomas

## Summary

The chapter describes the initial assessment and evaluation of the Smith family, who sought family therapy because the parents were unable to manage their 9 year old son's behavior effectively. The case illustration is structured according to the assessment guidelines provided in the previous chapters.

## 1. Phone Contact

Ms. Smith called asking for her husband and their 9 year old son Ben to come in for family therapy because they were at their “wits end” trying to manage Ben. Ms. Smith reported that Ben had recently hit her when she tried to discipline him for hurting their family cat. On the phone Ms. Smith sounded hopeless, helpless, and desperate. Although Ben was an excellent student and the parents had not received any complaints from school about his behavior, Ms. Smith had phoned the school and had a long conversation with Ben's school counselor. The counselor had not noticed any defiant or oppositional behavior at school, but at Ms. Smith's request referred the family to our family therapy clinic.

Ben's early development was within normal range with no unusual behavior. Ms. Smith stayed home from her job as an elementary teacher to fully concentrate on raising her only son, while Mr. Smith advanced quickly in his career as a systems analyst for a large company. The family had a good income, moved 4 times before Ben started kindergarten. By then he could read and comprehend math on a 3rd grade level. Ms. Smith and Ben had developed an extremely close relationship in which she partially compensated for missing her husband, who was rarely home due to increasing work responsibilities. When Ben entered kindergarten, Ms. Smith looked for part-time employment as a 4th grade teacher, but could not find a job. She became increasingly depressed, while Ben enjoyed the company of other children and excelled in the very individualized full-day kindergarten program.

It was not until Ben entered 2nd grade that Ms. Smith found employment at the same elementary school. The next two years were rather uneventful, until Ms. Smith lost her