

When the therapist names what everyone's feeling without picking a side, the family can actually hear each other, and change becomes more possible



Multi-directed partiality is a way of doing family therapy that may sound impossible at first: the therapist is “on everyone’s side”, but not in a fake, neutral, bland way.

It means taking each person’s perspective seriously, one at a time, and showing it so clearly that the family can feel it, even if they still disagree.

Understanding each other’s feelings is an important step toward change.

Multi-directed partiality in action

Scenario:

- **Family:** Mum, dad, and teen son Ben who has just come out as gay.
- **Context:** School is rough right now, with comments, looks, and that constant edge of not knowing what’s coming next.
- **Mum** wants to step in fast and go full protective mode with the school.
- **Dad** worries that will make things worse and wants their kid to “keep your head down till it blows over”.
- **Ben** is torn between wanting help and not wanting more attention.

Therapist’s question



Mum

Mum, when you go into protective mode, what are you most trying to keep Ben safe from?



Dad

Dad, by keeping it low-key, what are you trying to prevent at school?



Ben

Ben, if help from your parents could happen in a way that *doesn't* put a spotlight on you, what would that look like?

Therapist is holding in mind:

Need: To know Ben is safe and supported at school.

Fear: If she doesn’t act strongly, Ben will be harmed or feel abandoned.

Hope: The school will take it seriously and things will change quickly.

Good intention: Protecting Ben and showing “I’ve got you, no matter what.”

Need: A plan that helps without making school life harder for Ben.

Fear: Escalating will make the bullying worse.

Hope: Things settle down and Ben can get through school with minimal drama.

Good intention: Reducing fallout and keeping Ben’s life as normal and safe as possible

Need: To feel safe and accepted, and to have control over who knows what.

Fear: More adult involvement will spotlight him and make everything blow up.

Hope: School becomes just school again, and home stays calm.

Good intention: Trying to survive each day and protect himself from more stress

What might happen next

In the session

1. The therapist summarises Mum, Dad, and Ben's positions as protective, each in their own way, not "right vs wrong".
2. Together they build a "team plan": with goal of safety and dignity, non-negotiables, and who does what.
3. Ben gets real, age-appropriate control over what is said to the school and how.

At home:

1. Parents stop debating and start doing: "What's the next step?"
2. Check-ins get shorter and more collaborative, so home feels supportive and like a recovery zone, not another stressor.
3. Ben is more likely to share details because help feels on his terms, not a spotlight.

8 examples of questions that can show multi-directed partiality in action

1. **To a parent:** "What feels most important for you to protect in this family, even if it comes out as strictness or nagging?"
2. **To a young person:** "What do you wish your parents understood about what you're trying to build for yourself right now?"
3. **To a sibling:** "When tension rises, what role do you feel pulled into, and what is hard about that?"
4. **To a caregiver who is often blamed:** "If we assume you are doing the best you can with the tools you have, what pressures might we be missing?"
5. **To the person who is often criticised:** "If we assume your reactions make sense given your experience, what would they be trying to communicate?"
6. **To the parent who feels outnumbered:** "When you feel everyone is against you, what are you most needing from the others in that moment?"
7. **To one partner:** "When you push for change/slow things down/hold back, what are you trying to protect in your partner or your relationship?"
8. **To the whole family:** "If each of you is acting out of care in your own way, what kind of care is each person trying to show, even if it doesn't have the impact they hoped?"

Further reading



Article: Ducommun-Nagy, C. (2025). The essence of contextual therapy, its place in the field of family therapy, and its role in the future. *Family Process*, 64(1), e13070.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/famp.13070> **Why:** Modern piece that highlights **multi-directed partiality** as a key strategy, so early-career clinicians can grasp what it is and what it's trying to achieve.

Book: Boszormenyi-Nagy, I. K. (2013). *Between give and take: A clinical guide to contextual therapy*. Routledge. **Why?** It's more "how to think and what to do in session" than theory

If you'd like to learn more, please contact us at the Bouverie Centre:

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