Systemic family therapy for severe functional disorders in youths.

A qualitative study in a psychiatric setting

Word Count (main document including abstract and references): 5812

Running head: Family therapy for functional disorders in youths

Key words: Systemic family therapy, functional disorders, children and adolescents, youths, family

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The overall study was conducted according to the guidelines of the Danish Ethical Committee and approved by the Danish Data Protection Agency (Record no. 17/28315).

Funding: Helsefonden; Psykiatriens forskningsfond, Region Syddanmark

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Abstract
This study aimed to explore participant experiences of systemic family therapy for youths with functional disorders. After completing family therapy, 8 youths and 13 parents participated in qualitative interviews. The analysis was based on Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis and identified two main themes. The first theme was: Challenges of creating meaning and understanding of child-symptoms in family therapy, with symptom understanding and explanation found to be important, though sometimes challenging themes in therapy. The second theme was: Clinical encounters in family therapy promote dialogue, which included the finding that the family therapy setting with joint sessions for family members facilitated within family communication.

Practitioner points
- Addressing family dynamics during therapy can be experienced as an invasion of the family domain
Symptom explanations should avoid any suggestion of blame and remove feelings of guilt, be relatable and meaningful and point towards solutions for the family

Systemic family therapy can support empowering processes for families of youths with functional disorders

Introduction

Functional disorders (FD), characterized by disabling and bothersome physical symptoms without clear organic pathology, are common in children and adolescents (Rask et al., 2009, Berntsson et al., 2001, Rask et al., 2019). FD cause significant impairment and reduced quality of life in childhood, including school absence, withdrawal from peer relations and disturbed family functioning (Garralda et al., 2015, Rask et al., 2009, Rangel et al., 2000, Jordan et al., 2007, Moulin et al., 2015, Rask, 2012).

Currently there are no clinical guidelines on which treatment to offer this patient group (Eminson, 2007, Fonagy and Cottrell, 2014). However, psychological treatments have shown promising results (Bonvanie et al., 2017, Abbott et al., 2017, Eccleston et al., 2014).

Targeting the whole family in treatment is often emphasised as important (Hulgaard et al., 2017) due to the potential family influences on the precipitation and perpetuation of FD in children and adolescents (Schulte and Petermann, 2011, van Tilburg et al., 2015, van Gils et al., 2014, Hulgaard, 2020).

Family-based approaches in child mental health can comprise a variety of treatments, from systemic psychotherapy, where both children and parents are treated together, to parent training programs where parents act as supporters for child treatment (Carr, 2014, Diamond and Josephson, 2005, Hulgaard et al., 2017). Research focusing on how youths and their parents experience systemic family therapy (SFT) is almost entirely missing in the literature (Sheridan et al., 2010, Faulkner et al., 2002). A qualitative study found that parents who sought SFT for a variety of different problems, e.g. adolescent depression or adolescent substance abuse, emphasised the importance of the SFT therapeutic climate and structure to allow constructive change within the family and improvement of the adolescent’s symptoms to happen (Sheridan et al., 2010).

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to explore the participant perception of SFT based treatment for youths with FD (Hinton and Kirk, 2016). The study is part of a larger research project exploring the experiences of youths with severe FD and their parents in the context of transition from a paediatric department to child and adolescent mental health.
health services (CAMHS) (figure 1). Two previous papers conducted in the same setting, before the commencement of SFT, have focused on the families' illness perceptions (Hulgaard et al., 2019b), and on parenting experiences, including their attitudes to referral from a somatic to a psychiatric setting (Hulgaard et al., 2019a). Results from these studies suggested barriers and scepticism towards SFT among family members. In the present study we will extend these findings by exploring some of these participants’ experiences after termination of SFT. The concept of patient empowerment is used as a theoretical perspective, in order to broaden our understandings of how SFT may support potential change within families (Feste and Anderson, 1995, Gaughan et al., 2014). Empowerment is defined as an enhanced sense of self efficacy that occurs as a result of an empowering process which aims to engage the participant in defining meaningful health related goals and in achieving these (Anderson and Funnell, 2010, Tengland, 2007, Schulz and Nakamoto, 2013).

Methods

Design

A qualitative study design was chosen as we wanted to explore participant experiences with SFT for FD in youths (Smith and Osborn, 2007, Thorogood, 2009, Malterud, 2001). The research team consisted of a medical doctor and trainee in child and adolescent psychiatry (first author, DRH), two senior medical doctors and specialists in child and adolescent psychiatry (CUR, GD) and one medical anthropologist (MBR). Only GD worked in the clinical setting under study.

Participants and Procedures

In total 21 participants from 8 families (8 youths, 8 mothers and 5 fathers) who had all received at least 5 sessions of family therapy, were purposively sampled for variation concerning child gender, socioeconomic status and type and duration of symptoms. Families were referred to CAMHS by the paediatric department. Five of these families were recruited for participation prior to family therapy (figure 1). Figure 1 sets out the relationship of the current study to a larger project with the overall aim to explore the
experiences of children and adolescents with severe functional disorders and their parents in the health care system. As six families from the prior studies were excluded from participation in the current study (figure 1), the decision was made to include three additional families, to increase information power (Malterud et al., 2016). Healthcare professionals from either the paediatric department or CAMHS invited families to participate. Those who were interested received further oral and written project information by the first author and written consent was obtained before study inclusion. After termination of SFT, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with the youths and the parents, respectively. Separate interviews were chosen as we expected both youths and parents to be more inclined to share possible challenges or negative emotions regarding their shared participation in family therapy. The entire research team participated in the development and adjustment of the interview guide which was tested in a pilot interview. The first author conducted and subsequently transcribed the interviews verbatim, using a pre-developed transcription guide. Questions were open-ended and focused on symptom perception, treatment experience and sense of empowerment. Questions to youths were adjusted to fit their age and intellectual competencies (Kortesluoma et al., 2003). Interviews were performed 1 – 5 months after treatment ended, between June 2015 and January 2018. They lasted between 48 and 108 minutes for parents (mean 69 minutes) and between 27 and 45 minutes for youths (mean 34 minutes). The participants chose interview settings: Private home (6 families) or the first authors’ office (2 families).

Ethics:
The overall study was conducted according to the guidelines of the Danish Ethical Committee and approved by the Danish Data Protection Agency (Record no. 17/28315). All patient/personal identifiers have been removed or disguised so the patient/person(s) described are not identifiable and cannot be identified through the details of the story. Female aliases have been used for all participating youths to ensure anonymity.

Setting
The study was conducted in the CAMHS at the public Odense University Hospital, Denmark, which has a target population of 430,000 people. The department has a specialised team to offer assessment and treatment of youths with severe FD and a well-
established collaboration with the paediatric department. The team consists of medical doctors, psychologists and nurses, all trained in family-based psychotherapy.

Treatment
The family therapy provided is not manualized but draws on core principles of SFT (Retzlaff et al., 2013, Cottrell and Boston, 2002). The following description of the standard treatment programme is based on detailed information provided by the therapists involved. Therapy sessions are conducted with the child and parents, and sometimes siblings are present. The primary goal is to help the youth regain a normal everyday life including restoring peer relations, school attendance and leisure activities. Two therapists are assigned to each family and are present during both the initial assessment and the subsequent therapy sessions. Each session lasts 75 - 90 minutes and is scheduled every 2 – 5 weeks. The total number of sessions is adjusted to meet the needs of the individual family but will typically be 5 – 10 sessions.

Assessment and psychoeducation:
During the first two sessions a thorough history of the youth’s functional symptoms is taken. In collaboration with, and based on the experiences of the family, possible predisposing, precipitating and perpetuating biological, psychological and social stressors are identified (table 1). In parallel with the history taking there is focus on psychoeducation. Based on the biopsychosocial model for FD (Garralda et al., 2015), symptoms are explained as bodily reactions to various stressors.

Family therapy sessions:
The therapists aim to collaborate with the family in defining themes for therapy sessions by drawing on the families’ accounts. Themes can be, but are not necessarily, related to potential perpetuating factors in the family. Typical themes are presented in table 1.

Table 1 to be inserted about here

Analysis
The analysis was based on interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) principles. The analytic focus was on how youths and their parents experienced SFT (Smith and Osborn, 2007, Smith et al., 2009). Interviews were conducted, transcribed and analysed consecutively. Individual interviews were read in full several times and initial thoughts

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were noted. Subsequently, emergent themes were noted for each participant. Parents’ and youths’ accounts were analysed individually, not as group accounts. A cross-case analysis then identified convergences and divergences between accounts, and superordinate themes were identified. The software program NVIVO11 assisted analysis.

Researcher audit was used at several steps of the research process to increase validity. The co-author (GD) audited interview technique and analysis. In particular, possible preconceptions by the psychiatrists in the research team about advantages of family therapy were countered by reflective discussion among all four authors. In the final steps of the analysis, themes, subthemes and coding tree were audited by all four co-authors. Further to this, initial drafts of the paper were commented on by the entire project group.

**Results**

Details about participants are presented in table 2. Only female aliases are used for all youths to ensure anonymity.

While the current study cannot evaluate the effect of SFT, it is noteworthy that 7 of the 8 families by their own accounts described symptom improvement during the course of SFT, however not necessarily attributing the improvement to the SFT treatment.

As described in the following, two main themes with subthemes were identified, pertaining to the participant experience of the content of therapy sessions and of the SFT setting, respectively.

Table 2 to be inserted about here

**Theme 1: Challenges of creating meaning and understanding of child symptoms in family therapy**

The following section explores the participants’ experiences of the content of SFT sessions with focus on the process of co-creating meaning and mutually agreeable symptom understanding between therapist, youth and parent.

Invading the family space

Family members sometimes felt their personal and family space was invaded during family therapy, especially when the therapists targeted the family context and dynamics as possible perpetuating factors, and when these explanations were at odds with the family’s views.
Britta was referred to CAMHS with functional paralysis of the legs, and these symptoms improved rather quickly during therapy. Her symptoms had changed the family dynamics, as the parents were afraid of exacerbating Britta’s symptoms by overloading her with expectations. Britta recalls how therapists addressed this by suggesting that Britta should participate in family chores:

Britta: “Well we kind of got into an argument at one point, actually, about the fact that they interfered – a lot – with what happened in our home. They almost decided exactly what we were supposed to do. They said I should help cooking dinner, because I should be more independent and stuff. And we did understand that, but maybe they thought that I was more of a spoiled kid than I really am. And I did not want to cook because I really don’t like to cook. But we had to do what they said, and I was really angry about that.”

Britta felt that her voice and input were not sufficiently heard. She disagreed with the therapist’s interpretation of the reasons and significance of her not cooking dinner at home. Furthermore, she felt the therapists implied that she was a ‘spoilt kid’. Britta did not seem to accept or agree with the relevance of addressing these family dynamics in relation to her symptoms. The use of “we” suggests a feeling of unity and agreement with - and support by her parents, and further, it could be interpreted as a demonstration of Britta’s resistance towards the therapists’ interference with- and invasion of her family domain.

Mie had been struggling with severe and disabling leg pain for years, resulting in complete absence from school and temporary use of a wheelchair. Her parents felt very strongly that Mie’s symptoms had a physical cause, which had not been sufficiently explored, thus they did not agree with a multifactorial explanation. They had only agreed to the referral to SFT in a CAMHS setting, as they felt that the healthcare system left them without other options (Hulgaard et al., 2019b). Mie’s symptoms did not improve during family therapy, and the whole idea of psychotherapy and of engaging in a dialogue about family dynamics and relations as perpetuating factors, did not make sense to the family members.

Mie’s mother: My experience was that we were looking for a reason that had caused this pain almost spontaneously without a physical cause. And I felt, well it was almost as if it was all about poking around in our personal life in an indecent way.
With Mie’s parents, the efforts to co-create meaning and explore possible perpetuating factors failed, as therapists and parents were unable to establish any common ground about symptom understanding. Thus, the therapists’ efforts to gain insight into family dynamics was seen by the parents as irrelevant in relation to Mie’s symptoms. With that context lacking, the discussion of family dynamics in relation to their daughter’s symptoms was experienced as invasive and even ‘indecent’. Further, the parents’ sense of not being listened to by health care professionals, something they had been struggling with for years and specifically in relation to referral to CAMHS, was exacerbated by a focus on - for them irrelevant – family dynamics.

Addressing family dynamics and relations could be experienced as an invasion of the family space and associated with a feeling of being judged as a family. These feelings were exacerbated when family dynamics were suggested as relevant themes for therapy by the therapists but not recognized or agreed upon by the family.

Empowering explanations

As a general proposition, the explanation about FD as bodily reactions to various biopsychosocial stressors made sense to families and was helpful, when mutually agreeable stressors were identified and addressed in family therapy. During interviews, youths and their parents frequently employed symptom explanations such as “stress”, “the body is stressed”, “it is when I take in too much”, “my brain is overloaded”, "the brain is over stimulated", “the body says stop”. These concurred with the written and oral psychoeducation provided previously in the paediatric department and were repeated by the therapists during treatment in CAMHS.

Sanne had suffered from both physical illness (fractured foot and thyroid disease) and severe functional pain for years (table 2), the latter causing her to miss school and social activities. Sanne and her mother described that the family members during the course of SFT reached a mutually agreeable and new symptom understanding about the functional stomach pain as a bodily reaction to “stress”:

Sanne: The explanation helped a lot. It was that - now I understood why I got the stomach pain and that nothing was actually wrong in my stomach. But it was because I was stressed.

For Sanne it was essential to be able to attribute symptoms to being stressed, as this explanation was meaningful and operational, and further provided legitimacy to the
discussion in SFT of ways to alleviate stressful activities, e.g. addressing within family stressful conflicts or stress at school.

Results from the previous study on the parenting experience (Hulgaard et al., 2019a) (figure 1), showed how within-family perpetuating factors could evoke parental feelings of guilt or even of being blamed for their child’s symptoms. In line with these findings, Kira’s parents described feelings of guilt in relation to Kira’s symptoms, especially at the point of referral to SFT. Kira had suffered from severe functional back pain and inability to walk. Her parents sought various public and private treatment approaches and recalled their scepticism and ambivalence towards psychological family-based treatment for Kira’s symptoms. For them, psychoeducation about the biopsychosocial multicausal explanatory model for FD was helpful.

Kira’s mother: “I also think that illustrations and material that can illustrate explanations, like the biopsychosocial model, they can provide hope, and further, they can take some of the guilt away. And I have felt a lot of guilt, and some of that could be taken away, which was a good thing.”

Kira’s mother used the complexity of the multicausal explanatory model to relieve feelings of guilt, possibly as it facilitated the view that family relations and dynamics may be relevant to address, without being the sole cause of symptoms.

Symptom understanding, and explanations were an important and sometimes challenging theme of SFT for FD in youths. Mutually agreeable symptom explanations could provide legitimacy to themes addressed during therapy and to the use of SFT for FD in youths. Explanations were more likely to be agreed to by the family when they pointed towards ways to manage and alleviate symptoms, such as the explanation about “stress”, which provided a rationale for exploring possible stressors and ways to reduce them.

Theme 2: Clinical encounters in family therapy promote dialogue

This theme pertains to the SFT setting, the therapeutic dialogue and the experience of joint participation by family members.

A room for talking and listening

Attending family therapy was experienced as providing a space for dialogical opportunity, where therapists facilitated conversation and listening among family members about their individual understanding of the child’s symptoms but also about their family as such. This was emphasised as important by most youths and parents and provided meaning to the
concept of joint participation of youths and parents during family sessions: “We got to talk about everything”, “we just talked a lot about our family”; “just being in there together”; just sitting down and listening to everybody”; “we shared the experience”. Some parents described however how sharing therapy time with the whole family could not accommodate all their needs, as they also felt the need for consulting the therapists without their child present. These parents described a reluctance to address feelings such as frustration, powerlessness and insecurity with their child present.

Still, in general families recognized the type of dialogue which they engaged in during SFT as helpful, not necessarily explicitly in relation to symptoms but for the family as a whole, as illustrated in the following quote:

Kira: Talking helped us a lot. Not at first. At first, I felt that it was really irritating, but later I enjoyed it. Talking during family therapy was experienced to be helpful for “us”, signifying the whole family. Kira describes a process of growing comfortable with this new way of talking, from being irritated at first to enjoying it in later sessions.

“Listening” was also emphasised as important. Kira’s family described how they used to try to fix any problems or difficult emotions that Kira would face through parental comfort and advice. This possibly left Kira with a sense that emotions such as sadness and anger were wrong or unacceptable and could exacerbate her physical symptoms. For Kira’s parents, a key element of SFT was to learn new “listening skills”.

Kira’s mother: I think that the information we were given over here right from the start was about listening instead of talking. This very concrete information, I think that helped a lot.”

Becoming a better “listener”, both in the therapy session and in the everyday family life, was helpful for within family communication and further helped relieving Kira’s symptoms.

The setting of SFT was experienced to be beneficial as it facilitated a dialogue that differed from everyday family conversation, a space for potential sharing, listening, being together and talking. Further, SFT shifted focus away from the child with symptoms towards the family as a whole.

Discussion
The current qualitative study aimed to explore participant experiences and possible empowering processes for youths with severe FD and their parents during SFT.

The previous papers from the overall study (figure 1), conducted at the point of referral, found resistance and scepticism among parents and youths towards SFT (Hulgaard et al., 2019b, Hulgaard et al., 2019a).

As the study was conducted in a secondary public healthcare setting, the SFT could only be accessed through referral by a paediatric department, and while all of the included families had accepted referral, none of them had actively sought SFT treatment and some families’ had critical preconceptions towards the family therapy format (Hulgaard et al., 2019b).

We identified two overall themes:

Theme 1) Challenges of creating meaning and understanding of child- symptoms in family therapy, illustrates how symptom understanding, and explanations were an important and sometimes challenging theme of SFT for FD in youth. The content of the sessions was experienced relatable, meaningful, beneficial and empowering by most families, when it was mutually agreeable, helpful and meaningful.

Theme 2) Clinical encounters in family therapy promote dialogue: The SFT setting was experienced by most families to be beneficial as it facilitated a dialogue that differed from the everyday family conversation, a space for potential sharing, listening, being together and talking. New ways of family communication and relating could be practiced and adjusted during SFT, providing meaning and purpose to joint family sessions for parents and youths.

The emphasis on dialogue and listening during family therapy was in line with fundamental principles of empowerment theory which by definition is a relational concept (Salmon et al., 1999, Salmon and Hall, 2003, Kirmayer, 1988, Kirmayer et al., 2004).

Symptom explanations and causes were addressed by the therapists in this study before and during family therapy and mutually agreeable understandings between the family and the therapists were reached in some cases. Stress oriented explanations causing the “body to say stop” were generally helpful for youths and parents. Multicausal symptom attribution, as well as exculpating explanations, where parents did not feel solely blamed for symptoms, reduced parental feelings of guilt and thus increased parental sense of empowerment. Further, explanations preferably had to point towards ways to alleviate symptoms. These characteristics of what youths and their parents accepted as meaningful explanations were in line with Salmon’s concept of “empowering explanations” (Salmon,
Empowering explanations are legitimizing, meaningful and lead to an alliance between doctor and patient (Salmon et al., 1999, Salmon, 2007). In family therapy and in empowering processes, the input and viewpoint of both student (patient/family) and teacher (doctor/therapist) is valued and considered necessary, when addressing problems and challenges. By utilising the input of the family to engage them in both defining and working towards a particular health outcome, SFT could provide a framework for such empowering processes (Kirmayer et al., 2004, Salmon and Hall, 2003).

Results illustrated that the therapists sometimes suggested possible explanatory family factors, which were at odds with the families’ own experiences and explanations. Not all families readily accepted these explanations. Validation of youths and parents as significant actors possessing relevant knowledge about the family and possible family stressors seemingly was important for constructing mutual symptom understanding and further for the treatment alliance, when addressing possible family stressors in SFT. This notion is supported by theories about empowering dialogues in health care suggesting that such alliances can be built by acknowledging the family members’ knowledge about their personal life, ideas, values, competencies (Wallerstein and Bernstein, 1988, Anderson and Funnell, 2010, Feste and Anderson, 1995, Halvorsen et al., 2020). Nonetheless, the expansion of the medical field into the social and family life of patients, has been criticised by Salmon and Hall, who have argued that the biopsychosocial explanation can lead medical professionals to feel justified in making judgements about the psychosocial lives of patients and seeking to introduce change on this basis (Salmon and Hall, 2003, Salmon and Hall, 2004).

This criticism may also apply to treating FD through SFT, with results here showing that some families indeed felt judged and their family space invaded by the therapists. Family explanations were experienced to be acceptable by parents, when they were introduced in a way that removed blame from the parents and when they shifted focus towards solutions rather than causes. This is in line with the suggestion by Kirmayer, that a significant step forward in FD consultations could be to shift focus away from the discussion of causes towards a discussion of solutions (Kirmayer et al., 2004).

Strengths and limitations:
The rather small number of participants was in line with IPA sampling principles. However, due to the narrow aim, specified sampling, strong dialogue and thorough analysis (Malterud et al., 2016), we believe the study and its results may be transferable to other
family therapy settings for FD. One limitation though, is that sampling did not succeed in including any families where parents were divorced. As the treatment approach is family therapy, the views of families with different structures would have been important. Separated parents may have presented different views, making it more problematic in family therapy to achieve an agreed way of understanding and resolving difficulties in joint sessions.

A qualitative approach to broaden the understanding of the participant experience of SFT for FD in youth is appropriate as previous research in this area is sparse (Salmon, 2013). Separate interviews with parents and youths, respectively, provided the researchers with multiple perspectives on the SFT participant experience (Salmon and Young, 2018).

**Conclusion**
This study provides important new insights to the under-researched area of how SFT is experienced by youths with FD and their parents. SFT with joint sessions for youths and parents can provide a space for empowering dialogue. However, for explanations about FD to be acceptable and empowering in family therapy, they have to avoid any suggestions of blame, be in line with the personal experiences of family members, be relatable and meaningful for the family. SFT for youths with FD can provide a framework empowering processes in the family. The use of multifactorial explanatory models, where the family is seen as part of the solution, rather than considering them as part of the cause may increase acceptability and potentially treatment effect. The family can be part of the solution either through targeting symptom perpetuating factors such as reducing stress at school or through the introduction of more helpful parenting strategies by the therapists e.g. improvement of family communication.

**Acknowledgements:**
The authors would like to convey their gratitude to all of the families who willingly and honestly shared their stories.

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Structure of sessions</th>
<th>Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Assessment and psychoeducation</strong></td>
<td>Identification of possible:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sessions 1 and 2</td>
<td>- <strong>Predisposing factors</strong> (Family related, e.g. health problems within the family; physical, psychiatric, functional. Adverse family climate)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- <strong>Precipitating factors</strong> (e.g. viral infections, physical trauma, acute psychosocial stress)</td>
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<td>- <strong>Perpetuating factors</strong> (Family related, e.g. overprotective family environment, somatic symptom attribution, family conflicts; child related, e.g. personality traits, coping strategies; iatrogenic, e.g. repeated examinations and disagreement among health care professionals)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Psychoeducation</strong></td>
<td>Family conflicts and conflict-solving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Family therapy</strong></td>
<td>Setting boundaries within the family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>5 - 10 sessions</strong></td>
<td>Family symptom understanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Experiences regarding symptom exacerbation and alleviation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Individuation and identity development of the youth</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Parental feelings of guilt and shame concerning their child's symptoms.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Family illness behaviours</td>
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<td>Number of families</td>
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<td><strong>Sex of youths</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Age of youths</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Marital status of parents</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Family members participating in therapy</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Parents participating in the interview</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Symptoms experienced by youths before therapy</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Symptom duration</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Experienced symptom improvement after family therapy</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>