



September's Story: From Silence to Smiles

With such a pervasive lack of trained mental health professionals in schools, the question is clear, ***“Who is around to ask students how they’re doing?”*** This is a story of someone who asked. JPA’s therapist, Jenna, describes what happened:

Presenting issue: *Children often internalize their feelings, believing they have no real voice or control. Those with heavy burdens may shut down with friends or in class because they have not yet developed the communication skills necessary to express what they feel or say what they need. As a result, they may appear disinterested in what’s happening in the classroom or they seem sullen or depressed. These children can be difficult to reach but there is a way - that way is through play.*

Background: Stephanie, a bright but shy eight year old, stood wearily in the classroom doorway, seemingly unable to move. As other kids flowed through the hallway, chattering and laughing, she remained silent, almost mute. She looked at the floor, unsure of what to do. Despite her hopes, she feared third grade was going to be another hard year. There was too much on her mind to enjoy the pleasures of reading and learning about bugs, or of trading tales with her friends, or showing her teacher stories she’d written.

She enjoyed school, but her mother’s alcoholism and her father’s on-again off-again presence made her the “grown-up” in the family. With two younger brothers always hungry or running around, everything she enjoyed at school quickly fell away when she got home in the afternoon. And by the time Stephanie left for school in the morning, the pressure of keeping everyone together weighed heavily on her.

Ms. Glade, her teacher, had noticed. “I see the spark in her,” she said, “But sometimes she just stares at her paper and can’t take the next step. She’s quick in arithmetic and a great speller, but she’ll have days when it’s all she can do to even raise her hand. I’ve tried to talk with her, but she just tears up and won’t say anything. Her teacher from last year noticed the same thing.”

Treatment approach: Jenna explained, “Ms. Glade and I talked about Stephanie. I realized it was important to help Stephanie express her feelings so she could gain perspective and insight into what was weighing her down. She needed to build tolerance to distress so she could sit with difficult emotions. I created a treatment plan that involved talking with her about her worries and practicing talking through them and imagining ways Stephanie might solve them.”

Jenna arranged to meet with Stephanie once a week. It was tough at first because it was hard for Stephanie to trust strangers, or anyone. Stephanie had learned to trust only herself. At first, she kept her back to Jenna while coloring or silently playing with dolls.

“I love how you color,” Jenna said. “It’s so bright and lively.” No response.

“I see your dolls are really well behaved. How did they learn that?” Silence.

For most people, silence can be tough, so we try to fill it with sound. For Jenna, it was an opportunity to build trust with Stephanie. “She came to realize she didn’t have to ‘perform’ or play a role during our time together. She understood that I was happy just to be there with her.”

After a few sessions, Stephanie shyly offered to let Jenna color with her, then play together. As they played, Jenna could see and, more important, hear, her. “I think this doll is very tired,” she said as she moved closer to Jenna, as if whispering a secret.

“Why do you think that?” asked Jenna.

“She has too much to do at home,” replied Stephanie. “Like cooking and taking care of her brothers. She doesn’t have time to play with her friends.”

“That can be hard,” Jenna observed.

Stephanie laughed suddenly. “That’s right!” she said, smiling.

After that, Stephanie began expressing her thoughts more and more, sharing her hopes and fears as Jenna quietly listened and learned, taking note of patterns in Stephanie’s play and areas of prime concern. She spoke about her brothers and how much she enjoyed school but how hard it was to take care of everything she had to do. Formerly silent, she filled the room with stories about home, school, friends, and family. She had realized that Jenna was someone she could share her thoughts and feelings with. She was an adult who thought Stephanie had important things to say.

What happened next: Through these insights, Jenna and Stephanie created a treatment plan with goals which focused on growing Stephanie’s ability to share her feelings with adults who would ensure her safety, understand and put words to the complex emotions inside her, and understand when and how to ask for help at school.

Back in the classroom, Ms. Glade and Stephanie’s classmates noticed the difference in Stephanie. She skipped to sessions and became more involved in class. The spark Ms. Glade had noticed began to glow as Stephanie joined her friends in class projects and on the playground. The trust she had built with Jenna carried her through the day and helped her at night. She had found her voice and that adults would listen. Although there would be many challenges ahead, Stephanie had taken important first steps to taking charge of her future.

Note: JPA has changed the names in this story to protect the privacy of our partners & clients.