



Case Story: Mrs. G and Ramona

“Wow! It is so great to talk with [JPA] about this — teachers very rarely hear about the things they’re doing right!”

A positive student–teacher relationship is a powerful predictor of future student success. One of JPA’s strengths is its focus on helping teachers create and recognize the importance of that relationship as their students adjust to school and classes. Teachers need the most help with students who have experienced trauma, often exhibiting challenging behaviors in the classroom, but sometimes we simply have to help teachers recognize the good work they’re already doing.

Establishing supportive classrooms often begins by consulting with teachers to hear their own feelings, worries and areas of needed support, including understanding the meaning behind student behaviors that often leave them confused, frustrated, and overwhelmed. When JPA therapists support teachers, they in turn are better able to support their students.

Not surprisingly, this support is most crucial at the beginning of a school year, as teachers and students enter a transition that can be both exciting and stressful. Mrs. G. was a kindergarten teacher new to the school and to teaching such young children—she had previously taught 2nd and 6th grades. Introducing myself to Mrs. G the first week of school, I referred to a professional development workshop I had provided for her colleagues about what to do when you’re concerned about possible abuse or neglect. Mrs.

G. mentioned that she had had to deal with these concerns far too often with very little support at her previous school. She also mentioned that she was unsure about what it would be like teaching kindergarten, which she described as a “whole other world” compared to teaching middle school students or even 2nd graders.

The following week, while I was talking with the kindergarten teachers about our upcoming parent group, Mrs. G. mentioned Ramona, a child she liked but was having a very difficult time with. Ramona had run from the room several times during the week and attempted to pull the fire alarm in the hallway. Mrs. G. laughed nervously as she told me the story, expressing her uncertainty about how to “handle” Ramona, who she also believed had a very chaotic home environment. I asked her if she would like me to observe the class and we set up a time for later in the week.

I observed Ramona in the classroom for a little over an hour and was quite surprised at what I saw. I had expected to see what is all too familiar—a child who had a difficult time controlling her behavior and a frustrated, overwhelmed teacher harshly imposing limits. However, I actually saw many responsive and caring interactions between Ramona and Mrs. G. Overall, I saw a child who appeared to be developing trust in her teacher and comfort in her classroom environment.

I met with Mrs. G about 30 minutes after the

observation. The first thing she said was, “I am so sorry for how chaotic my room was while you were there!” This apology told me that maybe she thought I was in the room “evaluating” her teaching skills; I also realized how much she was still adjusting to kindergarten, just like her students.

The “chaotic” environment Mrs. G. apologized for was actually one I perceived as developmentally appropriate and supportive of her young students. For example, Mrs. G. included breaks for “freeze dancing” and many opportunities to learn through play. Of course, this would seem chaotic compared to the classroom environment Mrs. G had probably strived to establish with her former middle school students or 2nd graders. We discussed her perception of “chaos” within the context of her adjustment to the “World of Kinder[garten]” and I could see her begin to relax with my reassurance and affirmations of the strategies she was already using with her students. At one point, Mrs. G. exclaimed, “Wow!

It is so great to talk with you about this— teachers very rarely hear about the things they’re doing right!”

We then discussed Ramona. Mrs. G asked, “Did you see anything?” I

went on to describe her great ability to “connect” with Ramona. For example, when Ramona wasn’t following directions, instead of yelling at her or focusing on what she was doing wrong, Mrs. G. quietly called attention to what she was doing, gave her a “funny look” and then a smile and thumbs up when Ramona corrected himself.

Additionally, I observed that Ramona, like many kindergarteners, had a very difficult time sitting still and keeping her hands to herself when sitting in a group when she was expected to listen to other students relating their “autobiographies.” I observed that any time Mrs. G. stood next to the student telling a story and drew pictures on the board to go along with it, Ramona immediately came back to attention and settled down without any direct correction needed from Mrs. G.

We developed two hypotheses for this behavior: First, Ramona seemed to have a much easier time paying attention when there were visual cues to go along with group discussions (as many young children do). It also seemed that Ramona was motivated to participate and engage when Mrs. G. became part of the focus of group discussions. We wondered what this meant about the relationship that had developed between Mrs. G and Ramona. It seemed that Ramona actually had developed a strong positive attachment to Mrs. G, perhaps seeing her as a calm, steady adult.

Mrs. G. became intrigued and asked, “What else did you see?” We went on to discuss a few strategies to support Ramona with her attention and emotional regulation in class. For example, I helped Mrs. G. understand that behaviors like running to the hallway to pull the fire alarm may be a way that Ramona is actually communicating that she is feeling overwhelmed and needs help to maintain control.

Ramona actually had developed a strong positive attachment to Mrs. G...

To deal with that, it would help if Mrs. G. could take some time to talk to Ramona quietly about why she felt she had to do that.

At the end of our consultation Mrs. G

exclaimed, “You’re making me love her even more.” When I heard this, I thought, “This is the goal of our teacher consultation —to support and help sustain a more positive teacher–child relationship.” While I was able to talk with Mrs. G. about specific strategies for supporting Ramona, it was most important that I validated all the things she was already doing. Our conversation boosted her self–confidence, and helped her to begin seeing her relationships with the children in her class as keys to their success.

JPA