



## Case History

### **Student (name has been changed to protect privacy of student)**

John, tall for his age, is a smart, gentle 6<sup>th</sup> grader. He's funny and has a full, rich laugh although he can hide his feelings when he needs to. He's also in charge of taking care of his four younger brothers and sisters. He gets up at 5:30 AM to get them ready in the morning and bathes and feeds them at night. He takes them grocery shopping and even babysits while his mom is at home or sleeping due to her double shifts at a local shipping warehouse. His father is absent, so John has nowhere to turn for advice about growing up as a young man.

John has been falling asleep in class in the late mornings before lunch and getting in trouble with his teacher. By noon, the day has already been long for him. He realizes he has to take care of his siblings when he gets home. Before he can do his own homework, he has to make sure they do theirs, as well as other chores. His teacher sees him with his head down and thinks he just doesn't care about his lessons. She also feels personally insulted that he's not listening to her; she thinks maybe he's just lazy, one of those kids who probably won't make it out of high school.

The teacher referred John to the school's JPA therapist because of her own feeling that he was lazy and deliberately ignoring her. She was writing him off. He was convinced she didn't like him but was too proud and too defensive of his family to let her know what was going on.

After a few sessions, John began to open up about his home life and all the responsibilities he'd had to assume as the oldest, even though he was only eleven. We talked about what it takes to manage not oneself and also younger brothers and sisters, who may not appreciate being bossed around. And because his mother worked, he didn't really have support at home. John had most of the responsibility with little support. □

Gradually, John began to process the critical and heavy expectations he'd borne since he was nine. Speaking about it with his therapist, he found he could understand the toll it has taken on him while also recognizing all of his efforts and his ability to step up for others. He learned how to put words to his experience. Expressing himself in therapy gave him the confidence to share with his teacher and help her understand why he has been tired. John's ability to advocate for himself gave his teacher, Ms. Moss, a new empathetic understanding of John.

With the lines of communication open, Ms. Moss and John created a compromise where John can read silently during recess and/or self-led times where he requires some one-on-one time to recharge himself. The ability to have some pressures lifted, even temporarily, as well as having his teacher's empathy, understanding and support gave John the breathing room emotionally and physically to get through his academic day. His grades have improved, and he even gained 12 points on his standardized testing!