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Reducing the Impact of ACEs: The Power of a Parent/Teacher Team

Sue Jones with Rachael Klug

Johnny was in third grade when he and his mother were each arrested on the same day—his mother for drug abuse and Johnny for causing commotion in the neighborhood. Johnny had not seen his father in several years as he was incarcerated. After his mother’s arrest, Johnny was placed on probation and in the temporary custody of his grandmother, while his mother was sent to rehab. When we first met Johnny, his home life was in chaos, and he was having difficulty in school. He struggled with self-regulation, was verbally aggressive, and often ended up in fights. He lagged significantly behind academically and refused to do homework. It was recommended that his educational needs would be better served in a more restrictive setting within our special education program.

I arranged a home visit with Grandma, and she was very welcoming and trusting. During this home visit, I was able to gain insight into Johnny and the story of his life. It was one of loss, confusion, frustration, sadness, love, and...hope. I was able to learn what truly motivated him and what was important in his life. Seeing his room, books, video games, Legos, pet cat, and pictures of his dad and mom allowed me to understand Johnny at a deeper level.

It was critical that Johnny’s new classroom be a safe learning environment to provide him with the best chance of changing his current life trajectory. Johnny was dealing with a lot. He was away from both of his parents, and his response to stress and perceived threats was immediate. He would push, throw a punch, grab another student and place him in a headlock, curse, and fling anything that was in front of him. His schoolwork would often end up on the floor, ripped in pieces.

After creating an environment of safety and belonging through morning meetings, established routines, clear expectations, and positive interactions, our team began to focus on his social and emotional needs. We worked with him for a year in the area of identifying his anger triggers and cues and ways to implement self-regulation strategies. Johnny began to learn the necessary skills to deal with his feelings in a safe, productive manner.

His academics also began to improve. He would use his English & Language Arts (ELA) time to write letters to his mom and dad:

Dear Mom,

*I almost said the “f” word but I stopped myself.
☺ And I really miss you! And my teacher is the best this year! And daddy wrote me a letter and one of my aunts gave me a twenty dollar bill!
And I love you a lot!!!
I can’t wait to see you!*

*Dear Dad,
I love you dad! You are the best in the world! And I miss you a lot, as much as my cuddle blankie!
Today is my birthday! I brought in a cookie cake into the school. My Grammy bought it for me.
I was being bad in school but I turned it around!
Instead of swearing I calmed down by eating a piece of my cookie cake, two of them. ☺*

When Johnny’s mother returned home from rehab, we reached out to her. Johnny had been with his grandmother for four months, and his mom had to transition back into the role of parent. At our first home meeting she asked, “Have I messed my son up for the rest of his life?”

Johnny’s mother indicated that she very much wanted to be part of the team to support her son. Her positive response and willingness to work with others in finding her way back to her primary parenting role was critical in the success of our intervention with Johnny. When mom reflects on this meeting, she says that for the first time she felt “whole again as a parent.” Knowing she was able to be part of Johnny’s education and his world provided her a sense of hope that she had not felt in some time.

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Johnny responded well to our work with him and improved socially, emotionally, and academically. We talked with his school district about returning to his home school with added appropriate supports. It was decided that Johnny would remain in his current placement longer since his mother was only recently back in her parenting role. A goal was established that would have Johnny return to his school district by the end of the following school year.

Johnny continued to write to his dad during his ELA period.

*Dear Dad,
I miss you. I went to throw a bottle at somebody
and I stopped myself. And then I sat down and
cooled down. We have the apartment downstairs.
I have a blue room and I keep my Lego's in a
draw under my bed. My bed is comfortable and
my mom's is too. I have Netflix on the Wii and
I love my house because it is right above my
Grandma.*

Johnny's mother and I continued to build our relationship of trust. During one of my visits with his mom, we began to talk about trauma and the impact trauma has on brain development and overall health. I introduced her to the Adverse Childhood Experience Study and provided her with a sample of questions that are asked to obtain the score.

Looking at the ACE questions as they pertained to Johnny, we determined that his ACE score was nine out of ten. According to the research, he was four to twelve times more likely to contract health risks such as heart, lung, or liver disease associated to alcohol and drugs or succumb to depression and suicide. As a public health study projecting long-term, health-related consequences from a range of adverse conditions in childhood, the ACE study did not address the impact that therapeutic intervention during childhood or young adulthood might have throughout the lifespan. The study revealed that primary and secondary prevention and interventions appeared to offer hope. The ACE study also indicated the importance of understanding the behavioral coping strategies for someone with a high ACE score. It would be imperative to prevent further trauma risks.

After reviewing these grim indicators, his mom asked me with tears in her eyes, "How do I change my son's ACE score?" Unfortunately, an ACE score cannot be changed though the long-term health implications might be mitigated by timely and effective intervention and support. Once the heaviness of this information subsided some, mom and I talked about the importance of increasing support systems for both her and Johnny. She needed to continue her own recovery by ensuring she faithfully attended her meetings while also supporting Johnny socially, emotionally, physically, academically, and financially in a safe environment.

Johnny's mom moved into an apartment below her own mother's and surrounded herself with a strong support system of members from her church. She was able to reacquire her driver's license and purchase a reliable car. She started classes at the local community college.

As a team, we continued to support Johnny as he improved his self-regulation skills, allowing him to continue to show gains in his social-emotional wellbeing and academics.

We were beginning to understand first-hand the true value that collaboration and support between educator and parent has on mitigating the impact of ACEs.

Thanks to his mom's determination to set her son's life course in a different direction, there is now hope.

As the second school year progressed, we were faced with increases to our program enrollment which resulted in changes to Johnny's classroom assignment. Johnny started to decline socially, emotionally, and academically. After attempts of moving him to other classrooms within the same program, mom decided to move Johnny to a different school entirely.

Although Johnny was no longer in our program, we continued our partnership through words of encouragement, a listening ear, sharing of ideas, and engaging conversations. It was during this time that a long-awaited visit to see dad was coordinated. We were still a team.

Two years have passed. Johnny's mom completed her second year of college with a 4.0 in pursuit of her degree in Criminal Justice. Johnny continues to grow socially, emotionally, and academically. Johnny's dad has since been released from jail. Johnny's letters and visits to his dad provided a sense of hope that they both needed.

Although Johnny's ACE scores will not change, Johnny's current trajectory in life is much improved from where it was three years ago, thanks to his mom's determination to set her son's life course in a different direction. There is now hope. Sometimes this is just what our students and families need. We cannot underestimate the power of a Parent/Teacher Team.

From Johnny's Mom, Rachael:

"To my beautiful son, you are the light that guides my days and the inspiring driving force that pushes me to always be better tomorrow. I love you.

To the teacher that gave me the hope that lit the fire within me, igniting the fight for a better future for me and my son, thank you. For I can only hope you may know someday how, if not for that first meeting, that day with you in my living room, I may never have had that hope I needed to be the mother I am today. I will always remember you and so will Johnny. Because of your way of teaching and connecting to families, a whole new door opened for me and my son.

To the teachers of today and tomorrow,

As a parent today, I now require of Johnny's teachers to have a connection to me because it is essential to his social, emotional, and academic needs. Today, I believe that through these relationships we have reduced the impact of my son's ACE Score.

Thank you!"

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