

Case Study Two

Keeping James in School – individual work in a primary school

Context

James is 7 years old of African-Caribbean heritage. His mother removed him from his previous school before he was excluded.

His new school described him as verbally and physically abusive with a bad temper. They said he did very little work in class and whatever he did, he destroyed by scribbling all over it and tearing it up.

James described himself as 'hard' because people were scared of his temper. He liked children to be scared of him but also wanted them to be his friend.

James' mum worked shift. Sometimes she left home early in the morning before he was up. Other times she got home after he had gone to bed.

The work

The school didn't want to exclude James they just wanted his behaviour to change. When I first met James he looked 7 but acted 14. I wondered whether he had a problem knowing who he was and what he could do. The work, as I saw it, was to help him find out who he was so that he could choose to behave differently.

We met for an hour every fortnightly for nine months. The work went through three phases.

- (1) helping James talk about his temper instead of acting it out.
- (2) helping James know who he was.
- (3) helping James find age-appropriate ways of behaving that would benefit him and his relationships in school.

Michael White's theory of externalization was the basis for my work with James. I used it to help him see his temper was not the only thing that defined him.

Phase one :

I asked James to draw what he looked like when he was in a temper, then to make his temper using play-dough. We talked about the temper as separate from him. He learned to manage it, gave it wings and finally allowed it to fly away.

Phase two:

Now that James' temper didn't show up as often in school, we focused on his home life. He drew getting up in the morning - we talked about who was there, what he did, how he got ready for school - and his journey to school. He took two buses to get to school and sometimes arrived late. He hated being late. It made him upset. He sometimes had to make a decision whether to get off the bus a stop early and walk past the man with the big dog that frightened him or stay on the bus and be late. Making the decision to walk meant he had to be strong and courageous even when he didn't feel that way inside.

Talking helped James to see himself as resourceful. He acknowledged that he was a child and it was OK to be afraid and not have all the answers. James was transforming himself. Gone was the 7 year old going on 14. He had turned 8 and was acting like an 8 year old.

Phase three:

The school noticed that James' behavior had improved but thought he could do even better. James, however, wasn't sure he should still be seeing. I wondered what other children thought about him coming out of class to see me. The Special Education Co-ordinator (SENCO) and I agreed that if James didn't want to come to a session, he would come and tell me himself.

I called this developing his negotiation skills. James liked the fact that he could negotiate; more importantly, the school began to see him as someone who could negotiate rather than act out.

It emerged that a part of James problem was his relationship with his class teacher. I asked if she could come to one of our sessions and he said no. He didn't think his teacher liked him and was worried about what she might say.

James' teacher's input was important if we were going to (a) make a difference to their relationship and (b) his behavior. I wanted him to have a central role in how that happened.

I showed James my "list of questions to ask teachers" and asked him to pick 10. I wrote a letter to his teacher enclosing the questions. I asked James to give this to her and bring her response in the envelope provided for our next session.

An example of the kind of question is given below:

James is able to manage difficult situations	Not at all	Just a little	Most of the time	Nearly always
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His teacher had to put a tick against the answer she thought best showed his ability.

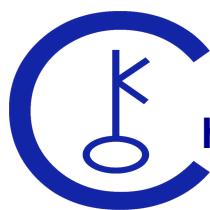
When we looked at her responses, James was surprised at her positive view of him. He told me that he sometimes pushed her away when she was trying to help him

and that made her sad.

James' behaviour changed significantly after this episode. The school thought he was a different child.

Attached is the certificate presented to James, in assembly, in recognition of his achievement.

Reference: White, M., (1988) The Externalizing of the Problem and the Re-authoring of Lives and Relationships. Dulwich Centre Newsletter Summer 1988/89.



Chiron Consultation and Therapy Services

TEMPER TAMING CERTIFICATE OF ACHIEVEMENT



PRESENTED TO: JAMES SOMEBODY

PUPIL AT: No Name Primary School

For this extraordinary achievement
of taking control of his temper and the brilliant
way in which he has developed his abilities
to negotiate in many different situations

Awarded 9th July 2002

Sharon Bond: _____

Headteacher: _____