



## PERSPECTIVE

# PREVENTING EXPULSION FROM CHILD CARE: HOW A MENTAL HEALTH CONSULTANT HELPS

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A recent national survey on the expulsion of preschool children from child care centers reports that centers with access to mental health consultation have lower rates of expulsion than centers without access to classroom-based behavioral consultation (Gilliam, 2005). But what exactly does a mental health consultant do to prevent the expulsion of a young children from child care?

The story of Damion, his teachers, his family, and the mental health consultant who worked with all of them (this story is a composite of many experiences) illustrates in some detail the ways in which a consultant might intervene at various levels of a child care program and with different members of the child care community. This story is by necessity tidier than any actual human interaction could be, and we have chosen to describe a consultative process of which the positive results were relatively swiftly recognizable to all. In reality, of course, even the most gifted consultant stammers, falters, offends, alienates, and underestimates, overidentifies, misjudges, forgets, and oversleeps. We do not here portray the consultant doing these things. We have,

however, endeavored to elaborate in the discussions which follow each vignette the enormous complexity of the difficulties to which the consultant pays attention, the risks and losses as well as the gains inherent in various interventions, and the limits of the consultant's ability to ameliorate circumstances for the center. It is our hope that the moments and processes described may convey with specificity the spirit of the consultative endeavor as we believe it may best be undertaken.

### **Vignette Part One: Toddler Room**

Damion did not like these pants. His pants were blue; these were red. His pants had an elastic waist; these had buttons. His pants smelled like his grandma's house; these smelled like the center. He had kicked and kicked when Nancy put them on him. She had told him that all the children at the center wear clothes. She had put his blue pants, which were wet, in a plastic bag and tied it closed. He had tried to take the bag of pants from her. She had told him she would put it in a safe place to give to his grandmother when she picked him up. The place was the top of the teachers' shelf. In climbing the

ladder of the elephant slide, Damion stepped on Jillian's hand. Mary stopped Damion from sliding and told him that Jillian was crying because her hand was hurt and that she didn't like it when he stepped on her. Mary told Jillian "You can tell Damion that you didn't like that." Damion didn't want to look at Jillian or Mary or the pants on his legs. Damion wanted to slide.

By kicking and wiggling at the same time Damion got his arm out of Mary's hand and slid down the slide. But the elephant's trunk was very short. At the bottom Mary held on to Damion's shoulders and said to him, "I can't let you hurt the other kids or me. Kicking and stepping on people is not okay. I'm going to help you take some quiet time until you are ready to be with the group again." She carried him to the book corner and put him down on the pillows. She walked away, back to Jillian who was still crying.

Damion lay on the pillow for 2 seconds. Mary had carried him there with gentle arms. But here were still the red pants. Mary and Nancy and the other kids were on the other side of the bookshelf now. On the third second, Damion had a book in each hand. By the eighth second five books had cleared the top of the shelf, one knocking over Brian and Hannah's tower and a hardback snipping Jose in the shin. Nancy glared at Mary and said "This one's yours."

Nancy and Mary had been disagreeing for weeks about how to handle Damion. Nancy thought things got worse when he was "disciplined" and that it was better to ignore him when he was in one of his "ploughing through the room" moods. Mary thought "ploughing through the room" wasn't good for him or the other kids and that he needed help to behave in acceptable ways. But now, heading for the book corner, she had no idea how to help,

and she wondered miserably whether Nancy's approach was better than hers after all.

### Discussion

A consultant who was called in to determine what was "wrong" with Damion or in what ways the teachers' efforts were "failing" would be doing a disservice to all if he were to draw any conclusions from observing, let alone simply hearing reported, the scenario just described. That things are not going well—for Damion, for Mary and Nancy, or for Jillian, Brian, Hannah, or Jose—is clear. But that is the only thing that is clear from this isolated incident. In order to understand the many possible determinants of Damion's actions and the complex developments between him and the teachers and other children, one would have to acquire more information about the situation and be able to have frank conversations over time with the teachers and with Damion's family.

In fact, in the case of Damion, age 20 months, this *was* possible. A child care consultant had been working with this center for 2 years when the above incident occurred. The focus of consultation had shifted many times during these years. Most of the teachers had come to trust that the consultant would not evaluate, analyze, or judge them harshly, but would join them in endeavoring to understand children. They had learned how to notice things while they worked, even during the most chaotic moments, which might be helpful to talk about later with the consultant, the other teachers, or the parents. Today, in fact, Mary had been using with Damion many skills and strategies which she had developed in part as a result of the ongoing conversations she had with the consultant.

For example, 2 years ago the "time out" spot was not the book corner but a small room next to the classroom with a window in the door. It had been the custom in the center to discipline children who were

aggressive or disruptive by having them take "time out" in this room, watching them through the window, and then having them rejoin the group. When children were disruptive initially they would be threatened with isolation in the "time out room." A number of children were cycling through the room a few times every day. Also, a game had developed on the play yard in which children were locking one another into the Fisher Price log cabin and shouting "time out!" Mary had brought all this to the consultant's attention because she felt that the "time out room" was not working but she had no other way to manage the class.

Together Mary and the consultant had considered the role of the "time out room" and how it was experienced by the children. Its use seemed to eliminate the disruption momentarily but not to positively affect the children's behavior over time. As a result of observations and conversations over a 3-month period, Mary and the consultant decided that the small room was too cut-off from the classroom. Spending time there left children feeling (among other things) out of synch with the class, and it made it more difficult for them to re-enter the group. The book corner was selected as an alternative so that the children could see and hear everything that happened in the classroom even though they weren't taking part.

Also, Mary had identified the fact that the words "time out" had come to be larger-than-life and did not reflect the particularity of the different reasons for which children needed at times to be apart from the group. She decided to say "quiet time" or "book time" or "time apart" or "help your heart stop racing time" or whatever seemed to best describe what she thought the child actually needed at a given moment. Hence her suggestion that Damion should take "quiet time."

One of the issues which had emerged during these conversations

was how hard these moments were for Mary because she felt torn between attending to the "disruptive" child on the one hand and the "disrupted" group on the other. She told the consultant that she felt she had to choose between the one and the many. The consultant had assisted her in thinking about all the children as being simultaneously individuals and group members whether they were playing alone, in parallel play, in clusters, or as a whole, like during circle time. This complex way of thinking was reflected in Mary's words to Damion. She said "I'm going to help you..." rather than some version of "I'm going to punish you." And she reminded him even as she asked him to move apart from the group that he belonged to the group and would return to it. Rather than feeling furious as she might have at such a moment 2 years ago, Mary had felt very tender towards Damion as she carried him to the book corner. And yet—something was not working.

### Vignette Part Two: Staff Meeting

Nancy is the head teacher and Mary the assistant teacher. Mary has worked at the center for 2 years but Nancy has been here for 2 months. She was transferred from another center under the same administration when the previous head teacher, Sonia, left suddenly.

*Nancy:* We really need to talk about this Damion thing because it's escalating.

*Consultant:* What is the Damion thing?

*Nancy:* He gets out of control. It happens a lot when he wets but it happens other times too. And he's wetting more lately. Today Mary put him in the book corner and he lost it and threw books across the room. He's hitting, kicking, throwing, the works. We've tried ignoring him, we've tried setting

limits, nothing works. Today two other kids got hurt.

*Consultant:* Do you think it'd be useful to think about what's going on in terms of the whole class or should we consider focusing on Damion?

*Nancy:* I think we need to pay special attention to him because lately almost all the uproars happen around him.

*Consultant:* All right. Nancy, I don't think we've focused on a particular child since you've been here but you and I did talk about case-centered consultation as one of the ways we might decide was a useful option, and about how we always start with the parents when we are thinking of moving into that mode, right?

*Nancy (hesitantly):* Yeah.

*Consultant:* So what do you think would be the best way to bring it up with Damion's parents? (Stony silence. Mary stares at her coffee. Nancy stares at her tea.)

*Consultant:* It seems like something is making it difficult to talk about this. Would one of you feel comfortable enough to talk with Damion's parents or is the notion hard for everyone?

*Mary:* Well, the thing is I know Damion's grandmother—that's who takes care of him—but I don't want to talk to her because I know Nancy would think I was trying to do her job.

*Consultant:* Oh, so the question of who should contact the grandmother doesn't seem like such a straightforward one?

*Mary:* Nope.

*Nancy:* It doesn't seem straightforward to me either.

*Consultant:* Why should it be? I'm realizing that we have spent a lot of time thinking and talking

about Sonia's leaving and your coming and how these changes might affect the kids and how you two might help them to understand but...we haven't talked much at all about how it's been going for you two as a team.

*Nancy:* No—not at all.

*Mary:* That's right—we really probably should, I think.

*Consultant:* So should we use the rest of this meeting to think about “the Damion thing” some more or wait until next week? What do you think? (silence) Should we talk about your roles and relationships with parents or should we shift back to Damion?

*Nancy:* I don't see how I can just wait a week before responding to Mary's accusation.

*Mary:* It wasn't an accusation. I think we better talk about it now too.

In the conversation that followed, it was revealed that most of the parents appeared to be more comfortable talking with Mary than with Nancy. Nancy felt that Mary was undermining her position as head teacher and preventing her from establishing relationships with the parents. Mary felt that Nancy wanted her to “act cold” with the parents. Mary imagined that Nancy, who had more formal training in early childhood education than she, looked down on her for not being more “formal and professional” with the parents.

The consultant assisted the teachers in untangling some of these thoughts and feelings by helping them to identify and articulate their feelings to one another. Nancy was able to explain that she envied Mary her warm relationship with the parents and felt at a loss as to how she might ever establish such comfortable relations with them herself. Mary clarified the fact that actually there were a number of parents she did not feel easy with at all, and that she felt

overwhelmed when the parents “swarmed” her but tried her best to be responsive to them in spite of this.

The consultant also worked with the caregivers in problem-solving around these issues. Together they decided to introduce Mary at the upcoming parents meeting, as this had not formally happened at the last meeting. This forum would, they decided, provide an opportunity for each of them to describe to the parents primary caregiving, a practice they had discussed and recently implemented with the consultant's assistance. The consultant suggested that they let parents know that, as their child's primary caregiver, they would be the one greeting the parent each day and would be the one having the most ongoing contact with the parent. She offered to discuss this with them further before the parents meeting if they thought this would be helpful.

## Discussion

The consultant in the above scenario demonstrated one of the most frequently relied upon consultative skills, flexibility. Had she pushed ahead with the agenda of contacting Damion's parents, she would have missed the important set of difficulties which had developed between Mary and Nancy. The consultant's flexibility does not result from her having no mooring, however. She is anchored in her commitment to removing impediments to communication so that interpersonal understanding may occur. Her deviations in course are responsive to the shifting sites at which obstacles to communication present themselves.

Initially the consultant was prepared to assist in the creation of a place-in-thought in which Damion's behavior might be received as meaningful communication. When it later became clear that Mary and Nancy were misunderstanding and second guessing each other, the consultant (with the teachers' permission) lent her attention to these collapsed chan-

nels of communication. Even so, a consultant makes such a move with a special kind of double consciousness. She pursues the conversation with the teachers having in mind the idea that their difficulties have some meaning in relation to the child although they may well also extend beyond or pre-date the child's troubles. And she keeps in mind also the ultimate purpose of the conversations: the amelioration of all relations at the center on behalf of all the children.

This double consciousness both demands and facilitates a particular kind of restraint on the part of the consultant. The tugs she perceives in various conflicting directions are real, and are at one level really conflictual. So in the above scenario the consultant felt genuine concern for Damion and for the other children, but was also keenly aware that the teachers were struggling. She had understood why Nancy had felt accused by Mary at the same time that she had been impressed with Mary's forthrightness. She had further been aware of the fact that Nancy and Mary were of different ethnicities and that this impacted their feelings about and perceptions of each other and the families in complex ways. From among these many thoughts, impressions, and hypotheses the consultant chose to articulate with the teachers the ones which in her best judgment would assist them in reaching an understanding that would allow them to work well together with the children.

In order to make these selections, the consultant kept a certain kind of loose grip on the many feelings she herself experienced as the meeting progressed. She felt alarmed at the thought that a child was in such distress that he was hurting other children. She felt frightened about waiting a week to try to help him more directly. She felt angry at Nancy for leaving Mary out of the conversation initially. She felt grateful to Mary for speaking her mind and at the same time worried that it might be too early in their working

relationship for Nancy and Mary to work through overt conflict. She felt exhausted to be beginning all over again with a new teacher and resentful of Sonia for leaving suddenly after all the work they had done together.

On the one hand a consultant lets such feelings stir to the extent that she can identify them. On the other hand she does not permit these feelings to emerge in the form of action, even action in words, until she is as certain as she can be that those actions might be of some use. The consultant regards her own responses as information to be calculated into the equation along with the things she learns from the consultees. Out of all of this she repositions herself continually in order to open up spaces in which the voices which need to be heard—always ultimately the small “voices” of the children—might find audience.

### **Vignette Part Three: Mrs. Smith's Kitchen**

The following week at staff meeting Mary and Nancy and the consultant had returned to the subject of Damion, along with focusing on three other children who were of particular concern. Both teachers still wanted to move into a case-centered mode with respect to Damion in order to see if there were ways they might better work things out. They had agreed that it would be necessary to speak with Damion's grandmother, Mrs. Smith, and that Mary should be the one to initiate a conversation with her. There was a sense from the group that Mrs. Smith was the source of Damion's problems and that this was a significant contributor to his troubles in the classroom and their frustration with him. Mary spoke with her and Mrs. Smith agreed, warily, to having the consultant meet with her at her home.

*Consultant:* I really appreciate your taking the time to meet with me. I can see you're a very busy grandmother.

*Mrs. Smith:* Well, it's OK. They sure do have a lot more trouble with Damion than I do—not that he's the easiest.

*Consultant:* That's why we need your help. I think we feel stuck and there's just a lot I don't know and the staff doesn't know about Damion.

*Mrs. Smith:* That's right. You're surely right about that. I just don't think they are helping that boy. They're hurting him. The way they talk about him—they've got a different kid there. They can get kind of ugly to me about him and they don't know up from down.

*Consultant:* How can you help me get to know up from down with Damion? Has he had a lot of ups and downs?

*Mrs. Smith:* That's sure right. He's been here, let's see—did he come before Terrel? You know, I got five grandkids here....

*Consultant:* That's a lot of work and a lot of responsibility.

*Mrs. Smith:* Yeah—you know—it just happens. Things happen and there you are. When Damion's mother ended on the streets and my son couldn't take hold—well there was no way my grandbaby's going to be on the street or with strangers—get abused and hurt. I know all about that from myself. It's not gonna happen to him. So there he was, no mother and nowhere to go. Little scrap didn't know what was happening. After 4 or 5 months—yeah that's when Terell came—I had to get some help and that's when Damion went to day care. He was lots better. I mean he was skittery and he could be mean and stubborn, but he got lots better and he's OK. here but...I don't know.

*Consultant:* You know—I think I'm beginning to understand something about Damion. He's

had a lot of changes—rough times.

*Mrs. Smith:* Yeah and they don't stop—like his mama—crashing in here middle of the night—never being here when she says. She rattles me up—rattles all of us up!

## Discussion

The consultant genuinely needed Mrs. Smith's help and made that clear. She neither defended nor joined in many of the accusations raised that addressed the anger between Mrs. Smith and the staff. She was empathic without getting involved in the many issues this information revealed such as continued difficulties with Damion's mother. She was aware from Mrs. Smith's demeanor that her own abuse was not an issue that needed attention. Had it been otherwise, she would have taken the time to have explored it and offered to find a resource helpful to Mrs. Smith. As it was, she mentioned the Grandparent's Caring for Grandchildren group and, when Mrs. Smith expressed interest, described it to her.

The consultant had already begun to think of the issue of change, transition, and unpredictability in Damion's life. Already she could imagine how that might shape ways of thinking with the staff about how and when to help Damion organize and feel in control. She knew as well that these were issues relevant in different ways to all of the children. She was also thinking about additional meetings with the grandmother to think with her about some of these same things. Obviously cooperation between staff and grandmother would be of the utmost importance to Damion. Finally, there was a careful exploration of what in their conversation was private information and what could be shared with staff. The consultant was as clear as possible about how she felt certain information could be useful

and why and it was the only information at issue. Even here, however, the grandmother was completely in charge of what was to be shared. The consultant assured Mrs. Smith that if there were anything that sounded useful to her that they had not covered, the consultant would always check with her first.

## Vignette Part 4: The Consultant and The Staff

After gathering information from Damion's grandmother and, with her permission, observing Damion on three separate occasions, the consultant met again with the staff.

*Nancy:* I hope you know now what to do because I really worry we just can't keep him here. The biting, kicking, and wetting is too much for us and too much for the other kids.

*Consultant:* If it were simple, we'd have figured it out already but I think we can come up with the usual in these situations, that is—a beginning. At least I think so.

*Mary:* Oh Lord. Well OK—but it's really, really urgent. I hate not knowing what to do and not knowing what's going to happen. It kind of colors the whole day not being able to plan.

*Consultant:* That sounds natural and just right. I'm sure that goes for all of us. At least I think so.

*Angela (staff):* Sure catches how I feel. Last week when he was sick, I felt relieved. I mean I was sorry he was sick but I—I mean you know. It was a relief not to have to deal, you know?

*Consultant:* Yeah—I do.

*Mary:* We all do—don't we. I mean it's hard. (general agreement)

*Consultant:* Maybe I should just tell you some things I heard from Mrs. Smith—something I think can help us think about him....

His grandmother has thought a lot about him too and she let me know just how rough a time he's had for forever really. He and his mom moved from pillar to post in his first year—sometimes homeless—never sure one day to the next where they'd be or what would happen.

*Beth (staff):* She on drugs or something?

*Consultant:* I'm not sure. Mrs. Smith didn't really say—just that when Damion came to live with her at 14 months he was real skittery and scared and sometimes mean and stubborn.

*Nancy:* I thought he was mostly easy at home—that's what she says when she says anything.

*Consultant:* Well that's what's interesting. I don't think she's being tricky. He wasn't easy and she remembered when we started talking—he was just like he is here for quite a while. She says it's not always easy there now either because his mom still rattles everything up by just showing up any old time and upsetting everybody and then things settle down again for a while.

*Mary:* So you say he was like he is here now when he first was with his grandmother?

*Consultant:* Yes—what do you think?

*Nancy:* I guess he wasn't used to it.

*Mary:* I guess he wasn't really used to anything. I mean he never knew what to expect? I never get used to it. Babies bouncing around all over the place. You wonder what it's like.

*Consultant:* Yeah, and we were just saying earlier—we didn't like it when—what did you say Mary? You hate not knowing...

*Mary:* What's going to happen—right.

*Consultant:* So? What can we think about that would help him here?

In the course of the continuing discussion the staff identified that Damion really needed to know what would remain the same and what would change. The consultant mentioned that she had observed Damion muttering under his breath about things that were going on. They discussed whether he could be reassuring himself. When that made sense they agreed he needed reassurance from others. Why would he ever believe very firmly that things people and places would stay the same?

Set in motion, with a way to organize their thinking, the staff could realize together that the troubles at nap-time might be due to Damion's being helped into sleep by Mary who was then gone when he awoke. Nancy remembered that whenever Damion woke up he went to the class picture and touched Mary's face. Coming and goings became the topic, and from her observations the consultant could confirm, strengthen, and add to what their cooperative attempts to construct the meaning of Damion's behavior was suggesting. Aggressive reactions on Damion's part to the approach of other children seemed to be an expression of his fear of being hurt and of having objects and people taken from him. Possible ways of anticipating and interrupting that sequence were considered. In the context of this discussion some ideas about changing basic routines and establishing new ones emerged as

being potentially useful to other children and perhaps to all. It was clear to the caregivers that the information Mrs. Smith had provided via the consultant was crucial to their project of understanding Damion. In the weeks and months that followed both Mary and Nancy spoke frequently with Mrs. Smith in an effort to construct together a continually evolving picture of what life was like for Damion day-to-day.

### Discussion

Acknowledging the self-doubt, helplessness, and anger on the part of the providers while offering some possibility of hope is crucial to supporting the providers' wish to persevere. The consultant's awareness of the adult's experience is thus as central as the effort to understand the child's feelings. Her ongoing concern for and interest in them continue to influence the staff's interest in and concern for the child. So too, the steady, nonjudgmental stance of the consultant provides a reliable structure to work within. Knowledge of the early experiences of a child, particularly when they are difficult, as they often are, not only arouses empathy but provides the ready grist for the routes to understanding. A child's subtle behaviors may reveal current and long lasting anxieties and styles of managing as well, but they are less easy to observe or to create meaning from. It is the more obvious defenses the child utilizes that are easiest to recognize and sometimes easiest to track.

In the process of translating understanding into responsive

action, the consultant is aware of the constraints that group care and a particular setting create. She is also eager to be reminded of what will work and what will not when she is overenthusiastic in joining the construction of an intervention. She also uses the opportunity to discuss with the staff their mutual and varied understandings of the children's unfolding development in general, as well as their mutual understanding of why a particular practice is appropriate or effective. The consultant is neither shy in offering special expertise when needed nor in accepting it from the consultees. The mutual process of exploration affords the greatest possibility that the understanding arrived at will be internalized. This allows the caregivers to apply their knowledge in an increasingly inclusive range of situations and with the endlessly unique children they will encounter.

Mental health consultation has a vital role to play in fashioning an environment a child would wish to be in. It is the consultant's work to support, to lend understanding and knowledge, to take in information, to think collaboratively, and, above all, to hold the spaces for communication where they need to be held. The consultant joins in the wish to create an environment that nourishes, the children, the parents, and the providers of care. §

### REFERENCE:

Gilliam, W. (2005). Prekindergarteners left behind: Expulsion rates in state prekindergarten systems. New Haven, CT: Yale University Child Study Center.