

Handout 12

This family story can be used in workshops and meetings, as a way to begin a discussion on implementing a family centered approach.

FAMILY STORY

Mrs. Hamachek, Gabe's Mother

It all began with a broken fuel pump. Well, to be truthful, it started way before that. We were doing okay--Ernie (that's my husband), Gabe (he's six), Maggie (she's three), and me. True, we still lived in Felony Flats (also known as Mt. David Housing Project), but we were putting money aside every month to get us a place where we could get away from the drug deals and the fights and the paper-thin walls; where we could have a vegetable garden for Ernie, and a flower garden for me, and a cat for Gabe and Maggie; and rooms bigger than closets; and a place for the kids to play.

Ernie was working for the McKinley Farm Machinery Company. He'd been there for only six months, but was getting tons of overtime; enough so that I dropped down from full-time to half-time at Kinder Care. It was hard on Maggie to share me with 25 other kids, and Gabe wanted me to be there when he came home from school. The pay wasn't great, but I love the kids and it beats Taco Bell. Ernie would tease me, "Why did the daycare worker cross the road? To get to her other job," he'd laugh. "Very funny," I'd say, "but I don't need another job with you around to bring home the paycheck."

Ernie and all the folks at McKinley were working so hard for so many hours, they were breaking all kinds of records and the company was making record profits. So, when the boss called them all in for a big meeting, everyone was sure it was to get a raise and a bonus just to say thanks. When the boss told them they were closing the plant to move to West Virginia, everyone walked away numb. They just couldn't believe it, you know.

When Ernie came home that day, he was different. He didn't say much, just kept staring out the window. He could have worked another week, but he didn't. He just stared. And now he's gone. And it looks like we're never gonna get out of here. I guess I should be grateful, though, cause at least we have cheap rent, and if we'd moved out, the waiting list for the projects is 8 years long.

I went on ADC for a couple months, just to get on my feet. All because of a company that was so greedy, they sold out their people just to get a tax break. Talk about people like me being on ADC -- what about Aid to Dependent Corporations! But my hours at Kinder Care went up to almost full-time, and we're squeaking by.

Then, Maggie got sick and Gabe started making trouble at school and the fuel pump went out. And how am I supposed to ride the bus to get us all where we have to go by 8:00 in the morning? This isn't New York--the busses run every 45 minutes. So, there we are, standing in the rain, waiting for the bus, with no car and no husband, and no way to pay for health care, and heat, and car payments, and food on \$650 a month.

So, when my caseworker calls me and wants to know why I've been late to work so many times, and tells me he can't help me pay my baby-sitter because she isn't old enough; and Gabe's teacher keeps writing notes home saying Gabe doesn't sit still and do his work, and my mother -- well, that's a different story. Anyway, what am I supposed to do?

Sure, the baby-sitter's only 14 -- but she's got a lot more sense than my caseworker. Besides, who else is going to come to my house and feed Gabe when he comes home from school for \$1 an hour?

But all the caseworkers talks about is self-sufficiency and job attachment. Well, I'm attached, but how can anyone be self-sufficient on my wages. I'd like to see some of those politicians supporting their families on \$750 a month. It won't be my fault if I lose my job.

And Gabe--he misses the only dad he's ever known. And yeah, he hates to sit still and he's so nervous about holding a pencil, he holds them so tight he breaks them. I always said, if Gabe couldn't ride it or throw it, or climb it, he wasn't interested. But watch him ride his bike or play ball!

So, what are schools for? Like my neighbor says, "When the corn don't grown, you don't blame the corn. You say, 'Am I watering it enough; am I feeding it enough?'" So why blame me and Gabe? Why doesn't she figure out what to do so he can learn? I'm doing my job, and then some. Why can't the school do theirs?

Mrs. Lady, Gabe's teacher

I'm worried about Gabe. He's such a bright kid. But, he just won't do his work. And he mother won't answer my notes. I can't say he gets much support at home. His mom -- she can't be more than 21. She's never even been to a parent/teacher conference. If she would at least read to him every night.

Jane, the kindergarten teacher, says he did fine in her class. That doesn't surprise me -- she's a developmentally appropriate devotee. So, of course, all he did was play last year. If you ask me, DAP is just an excuse not to teach. No wonder the kids coming from her class can't write their names or sit still. Gabe can't even hold a pencil. And hyperactive! You should see that kid. He's out of his chair more than he's in it. I wouldn't be surprised if he's drug affected. Not that that's unusual. I'd say that almost half my class would have been in self-contained classrooms ten years ago.

We spend more time working on behavior problems than we do on teaching. And we're supposed to bring all the test scores up to above average! How can we do our jobs when parents aren't doing theirs?

Mr. Able, the Caseworker

It's not that Cindi is a bad parent, or even that she doesn't try. But, she makes all the wrong decisions -- like hiring a baby-sitter who's not even 15 and expecting us to pay for it. Sometimes, I think I should turn her over to Child Protection; but I suppose she thinks 14 is old enough--she was already a mother at 16. It's probably good practice for the baby-sitter--she'll be a mother soon enough.

And the fuel pump--if she hadn't spent the money on Christmas presents for her kids, she'd have had enough to fix it. And now, she might lose her job because she can't get to work on time. But there it is -- babies having babies -- with a different father for every kid. And wanting the tax payer to pay for it. 160 families on my caseload--it's enough to discourage anyone. But someone has to help those kids. They don't pick their parents.

POSSIBLE QUESTIONS TO EXPLORE

What structures in the school need to be in place in order for teachers and family advocates to be aware of family situations that may affect a child's learning?

How can we ensure that schools and human service agencies provide respectful, non-stigmatizing and non-intrusive support?

What are some of the strengths of this family? Risk factors?

How does each person see the situation differently?

What is Ms. Hamachek's perception of the role of educators? How does this affect the support that she and Gabe receive from the school?

What are some ways that Gabe's teacher and his mother can work together to help Gabe succeed?

How can Ms. Hamachek be helped to become an effective advocate for her family?

What are some ways that Gabe's mother and teacher can help him to become more engaged in reading and other literacy activities?

How can teachers/family advocates/service providers link the family to needed help?

What are some of the limitations of your ability to help this family stay afloat?