

## Act Up, Calm Down

### Mental Health Consultants For Preschools Surprise With Their Success

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Terrence Williams started school in September and by October was well on his way to being kicked out.

His teachers described him as a human tornado. He was unpredictable. One minute he was happy, the next he might slap or spit at his teacher. The other students were afraid of him.

At just 3 years old, Terrence easily could have become another pre-school failure - and would have had plenty of company. Connecticut ranks among the highest in the nation in its rate of expelling pre-kindergartners from school.

"His teacher was threatening to quit because of Terrence," said Erica O'Loughlin, Terrence's mother. "They were calling me at work telling me if this continues, you're going to have to pick him up early. I would dread going in there."

But instead of getting rid of Terrence, the director of Hartford's School for Young Children on Asylum Hill got help from an early childhood mental health consultant. The consultant, a licensed psychotherapist, made suggestions for how his teachers could better deal with the boy's outbursts.

Instead of becoming a statistic, Terrence has become a model for success.

### Simple Strategies

States across the nation have experimented with placing mental health experts in preschool classrooms for about a decade. But while such programs can cost millions and look good, nobody has ever been sure they work.

Now, the results of a first-in-the-nation study of Connecticut preschools released in May suggest that they do.

"The results are strong enough to say, at least from a teacher's perspective, that children in the classrooms [with consultants] were significantly improved," said study author Walter Gilliam, an assistant professor of child psychiatry and psychology at the Yale Child Study Center.

Connecticut adopted the program, known as the Early Childhood Consultation Partnership, in 2002. By the end of this year, the program will include 20 consultants at a cost of \$2.6 million a year, paid by the state Department of Children and Families.

While any preschool or day-care center is eligible to participate, centers catering to large numbers of low-income families have priority.

The School for Young Children on Asylum Hill is fairly typical. The progressive school, created as a laboratory for diversity and training top-level preschool teachers, opened in September at Asylum Hill Congregational Church. Within a month, Terrence's behavior had tested his teachers' patience to the breaking point.

Heather Starkey, a licensed psychotherapist, arrived late in the fall. With the consent of Terrence's mother and his teacher, she started by observing Terrence's classroom. She said she saw a funny and exuberant boy who was disrupting a well-run classroom because of his inability to control his impulses and his difficulty in using language to express himself.

Instead of working directly with Terrence, she offered his teachers simple, common-sense strategies that they could apply to any student - troubled or not.

Starkey noticed that after Terrence launched into his mid-morning tornado mode, one of his teachers would usually take him for a walk to calm him. She suggested that instead of waiting for the tirade, they take Terrence for a walk before he blew his fuse.

Starkey also suggested that the teachers give a lesson about feelings to help all the children associate their moods with such words as "frustrated," "mad," or "happy."

"When we give children words for the feelings they will act out less," said Starkey, who since has been named assistant manager of the consulting program.

She said she noticed that when Terrence needed to unwind, he would hide in the space between the sides of the art easel. It worked, but it was not a safe or convenient spot.

So Starkey suggested that the teachers create a nest in one corner of the classroom - a child-sized basket, cushioned by soft pillows and surrounded by white mosquito netting. The "cozy area" now provides a protected refuge for Terrence or any other child who needs a few minutes alone.

By January, neither school director Irene Garneau nor Erica O'Loughlin needed a study to tell them that something was working.

About a month ago, Garneau peeked into Terrence's classroom and saw him waiting patiently while another child used Terrence's favorite toy giraffe as a model for a picture he was painting.

Terrence looked sulky. Six months earlier, Garneau said, he probably would have ripped the giraffe out of the other child's hand.

"I said, Terrence, you don't look happy," Garneau said. "He looked at me and said, 'I frustrated, I don't want to wait a turn.'" He wasn't happy, she said, but his teachers had taught him the strategies he needed to help him wait.

## **Positive Signs**

The study by Gilliam examined 43 preschools whose directors had requested consultants because teachers were struggling with classroom behavior problems. Consultants were assigned to 23 classrooms. The other 20 schools were told they'd have to be put on a waiting list.

Before and after the consultation period, an independent evaluator rated each of the classrooms enrolled in the study. The evaluator did not know which classrooms had consultants and which did not.

The ratings showed that classrooms with consultants showed significant decreases in behavior problems, while behavior problems in classes without consultants remained relatively unchanged.

While it is unclear whether the behavior improvements resulted in fewer expulsions in Connecticut, experience elsewhere indicates it might have. In an earlier look at preschools nationwide, Gilliam found that 14 percent of classrooms with no access to mental health consultants reported expelling a child within the previous year. For classrooms with consultants on-site, only 8 percent reported having expelled a child in the last 12 months.

The results are important because children with unchecked behavior problems in preschool are far more likely to end up on a bumpy road through the rest of their school years.

"If children don't get the support they need in kindergarten, they can expect more expulsions in third and fourth grade," said George Coleman, Connecticut's deputy commissioner of education and an early childhood specialist. "They are five times as likely to drop out of high school and far more likely to drop out early."

In a study released two years ago, Gilliam found that for every 1,000 pre-kindergartners in Connecticut, 12.3 are expelled - ranking Connecticut seventh in the nation for preschool expulsions. The 2005 study found that preschoolers are expelled at three times the rate of children enrolled in kindergarten through 12th grade.

The new analysis of the consultants' work left several questions unanswered, including exactly how the consultant visits resulted in better behavior and whether that better behavior continues when a child moves on to kindergarten.

"But it did reduce behavioral problems," Gilliam said.

Before the consultant came to the Asylum Hill school, Leslie Bird feared that her grandson, E.J., would add to the state's grim statistics. Heather Starkey also intervened in his classroom. In the beginning of the school year, E.J. had no friends. He was almost 4 years old, but could say only about three words.

To join a game, he'd barge into a group, pushing and karate-chopping like a Ninja superhero.

On the school playground recently, E.J. held another boy's hand as they whipped around a tree trunk. He happily accepted the other boy's invitation into the game, and played cooperatively without any visible aggression.

"That was a very different scene in September," preschool teacher Amy Del Campo said, watching the boys play. "We would have seen E.J. wanting to play with Justin, but more pushing his body into Justin and then more wrestling." Inevitably, she said, there would have been a fight.

"Now," said E.J.'s grandmother, "he has a special friend."

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