

## Greg's Story

This illustrates containment and reciprocity

Greg was originally referred to the local Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) by both his health visitor and the head teacher at his private nursery. Greg was three years and six months old and had been attending private nursery half-time for one year. He had not yet managed to allow his parents to leave him at nursery and they took turns to remain with him. He was also reluctant to let his dummy go. At the time of the referral to CAMHS he had also seen a speech and language therapist who felt there were no fundamental difficulties, other than his speech was rather immature. He was due to start school in September. First appointment Mum, dad, older brother Jamie (six years) and Greg were invited to the clinic. Soon after arrival it was apparent that parents were quite ambivalent about attending, (although not hostile), and some time was spent exploring this with the worker wondering if she could be of any help. The parents felt that others were worrying unnecessarily; he would grow out of it, and they had only come because the nursery head was persuasive. They also expressed some frustration that the nursery did not allow them to slip away without saying a clear goodbye to Greg. Jamie and Greg were invited at the outset to be involved in any of the discussion, although it was recognised they would probably listen more than talk. They were offered items to play and draw with. The parents were asked to describe Greg's pregnancy and early life, including their understanding of Jamie's experience of his arrival. Greg had had few difficulties in his life. The pregnancy had been smooth and Greg had always had good health. They gradually expressed their own mild concern about Greg's clingy behaviour and slowness to articulate clearly. They had been trying to allow Greg to 'forget' his dummy by removing it when he was occupied with something else. Jamie had been treated similarly and he had

managed, in time. The worker commented that perhaps one difference was that Jamie had had the arrival of Greg to deal with. They felt he had shown little upset at Greg's arrival. They reiterated their hope that Greg would grow out of his immaturity and identified Greg as being the younger, and final, child in the family as a possible link. The worker made few interruptions other than to seek further detail or clarification, albeit in an interested, non-judgemental way. For example, it emerged that the decision to stop at two children was a somewhat pre-emptive decision by dad to have a vasectomy. They were clearly very loving and attentive parents, dad particularly so. Both boys were bright, responsive and played happily in the room. There was a subtle shift at the time they had been speaking of Jamie's apparently minimal reaction to Greg's arrival, at which point Jamie sought some attention from his father, showing him the sharp teeth of the open jaw of the toy crocodile. Greg clearly found this situation unbearable. He pushed Jamie away from dad and snuggled deep into his father's lap, demanded his dummy, looking like a small contented baby. Mum commented 'that is heaven for Greg'. Jamie looked on longingly, but quietly returned to draw a bold outline of the crocodile on paper.

The worker commented on her observations of the interaction, and wondered aloud that Jamie seemed to have some aggression towards Greg but did not actively express it (receiving a nod from Jamie) and about how quickly dad had responded to his younger son when Greg was feeling 'little' and vulnerable. Mum acknowledged that dad always responded to the boys immediately. On exploration, it emerged that, dad in particular, never left the boys to cry and tried to protect them from anything that could hurt them emotionally or physically. Dad responded vehemently to the idea that a parent might leave a child in distress when the worker suggested that it is helpful for children to gradually begin to experience short,



increasingly manageable, periods of separation or anxiety, and perhaps Greg had not yet had such experiences. As the session progressed, the worker gently wondered whether perhaps there was something in his own childhood that made it especially hard to hear his son's distress. He nodded briefly and said that he had not had a very happy childhood himself. Parents and worker had an awareness that a meaningful connection had been made but by judging the emotional temperature it seemed both parents needed some distance and time to digest the immediate impact of the session. It was agreed the next session would be for just the parents. Second session Mum reported at the next session, three weeks later, that some progress with Greg had been made. By encouraging him to hang on for longer stretches of time he had given up his dummy during the day. They had not yet managed for Greg to be left at nursery but had stopped remaining in the same room. Mum was more positive about her capacity to enable Greg to have a greater thrust towards independence but was frustrated with her husband's inability not to leap in. Dad was able to acknowledge that the last meeting had been helpful but he simply felt unable to not respond to any distress or demands from his sons. It was unbearable for him to hear them cry. The worker said, with care, that perhaps when he heard their cries it reminded him of his own, uncomforted, cries as a small boy. Dad began to sob and spoke of how he had been left shut in alone and ignored for many hours as a child. He had also been physically mistreated. Mum held his hand and said she had not realised how desperate her husband's childhood had been, he had never really explained. She was more understanding of his relationship with Jamie and Greg. There was discussion around how mum may need to take the more assertive role with the boys, with dad's agreement to try not to undermine her efforts. Dad did not feel he wanted to pursue any individual counselling for himself at that time although this option was offered.

The parents were offered a further joint session, a month or more ahead but, in the event, felt they did not need it. Greg started school a term late (he was an August baby) after managing to separate at nursery for the Autumn term. The worker received a letter from mum a year after the initial appointment to say when Greg started school he was one of the best prepared, most confident children in his class, dressing himself each morning, keen to get to school.