

Case study: Jade's story

A case study of a brief intervention describing how parental anxiety can lead to a lack of containment for their child's anxieties Jade (age four years) was referred by a health visitor to the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) because of difficulty separating from her mother at school during her first term. School staff reported she was reasonably settled a little while after mum left but there were tears and distress each morning. Jade had also developed a number of behaviours of an obsessive nature; she insisted on wearing tightly laced up boots, tights and even gloves in school. Jade would constantly pull at the edges of the cuffs of her jumper, which caused her further upset as they frayed.

First appointment

Both parents were offered an appointment at the clinic with Jade and her 18-month-old brother, George. In the event, only mum came with the children. After introductions, the worker asked mum what Jade understood about the visit. Mum had managed to prepare Jade with the idea of finding some help for her 'habits' in relation to her clothing and being upset going to school. Jade appeared a very serious little girl and was initially very clingy at her mother's side but gradually moved away during the session, whilst closely listening to the discussion.

After further description of Jade's immediate difficulties, the worker asked for the story of Jade's early life. Mum had been with Jade almost constantly during her first year. If she was left with anyone, it was with her maternal grandmother. Grandmother ran a nursery and Jade would stay with her there when mum returned to work part-time.

During this account, the worker listened attentively, only requesting additional clarification or further elucidation. It was

apparent that mum was a very attentive mother but was preoccupied with keeping her children safe. For example, she stressed that she would never leave her children in the care of anyone but her immediate family; Jade could not be left to play alone in the garden; she would not let Jade use public toilets unless they had disposable seat protectors. Because Jade would not use the toilets at school she could be agitated about lasting the whole day. Jade was always told that 'mummy will miss you' whenever they separated. At this point, Jade returned to her mum's side, bringing her a pretend cup of tea. The worker asked whether mum thought Jade was very sensitive to her feelings and received affirmation of this.

The worker was assimilating a picture of a child who, rather than having her own anxieties processed for her to make them more manageable, was having to contend with her mother's concerns as well. It seems likely that a lack of containment and responsiveness to any distress had led to a need for Jade to try and physically contain herself through her clothes and covering her extremities. The worker simply commented that mum 'seemed to see the world as a very dangerous place'. Mum commented that perhaps this had contributed to Jade's anxiety about separating. The worker wondered whether there was a risk that Jade would worry about her mum when they were not together and perhaps have a sense that she could not be safe without her mother's protection.

It was agreed to have another appointment, hopefully with dad as well in three weeks time.



Second appointment

Dad was unable to attend. Mum arrived with Jade. The worker wondered how things had been since the last appointment. Jade went to the table and began to draw.

Mum described having thought a lot about the idea that she felt there were many dangers in the world that she needed to protect her children from. She spoke of her work with sexually abused women. It felt as if most women she met had experienced mistreatment, many by family members as well as strangers. The worker wondered whether this also made her question her husband's trustworthiness. Mum did not totally dismiss this idea and it appeared she insisted on much of the children's care herself, somewhat excluding her husband.

Mum spoke of how she had been coming to the conclusion that perhaps she had put too many of her own worries on to Jade, had stopped her feeling confident and safe. The worker and mum discussed how it would be helpful for Jade to feel her mum believed she could and should be happy and enjoy school, that she could gradually manage on her own, and that mum would not worry about her. There were many aspects of everyday life where mum could begin to allow Jade a greater sense of her own capacity and independence. Mum also asked whether a positive way forward would also be to allow dad a greater role in childcare, and this was affirmed.

Outcome

A third appointment was arranged, to involve mum and dad on their own. However, a call was received two weeks later informing the worker that, on the way out of the last session, Jade had asked if her mum wanted her to be happy at school. Mum had agreed. Jade had begun to attend school in a much more relaxed way. Her rituals with her clothes had begun to steadily improve, alongside mum's attempts to hold on to her own anxieties and gradually encourage a

less dependent relationship with her and a more active relationship with her father.