

TASHA

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We read her lengthy chart. We discussed how we would deal with certain behaviors such as stealing and lying, which she frequently exhibited at home and in school. We formulated a plan of action to guide our interactions with her based on reports of what had sometimes worked in the past. But no member of my clinical team was adequately prepared to deal with Tasha. Despite all the warnings we had received, no one expected her first words of the summer to be, "Get the fuck out of my face you asshole-bitch-slut-whore. I never wanted to come to this dumb-ass stupid camp anyway." Tasha was coming to what might be the hardest, yet most instrumental, three months in her eight years.

At the therapeutic summer camp (technically a short-term residential center for emotionally disturbed children) children, ages 5-18, participated in sports, art, and water activities, as well as an encouraging and fun school. Multiple therapeutic techniques were applied by staff to help alter deviant behavior. My clinical team was fortunate enough to have Tasha placed in our group. It made the summer all the more interesting. Tasha quickly became renowned throughout the camp, as she was the camper most frequently restrained and no doubt made the most noise about it.

Although my focus had to be on Tasha's behavior as well as that of every other child in our group, Tasha was the child who stands out most in my memories. She and I probably had more staff-child conflicts than any other staff member or child, yet I refused to let up. I saw in her so much potential for growth, even though she would not let anyone within a mile of her heart. Throughout the summer I, as well as all the other staff, kept plugging, insisting, and setting firm limits. Through our consistency and determination we made a difference: made Tasha make a difference. However slight her behavior changes may have appeared at the end of the summer, I believe that during those three months Tasha constructively transformed the internal working models that seemed engraved in stone upon her arrival.

Looking at Tasha's chart, it was difficult to believe that this child was still functioning at all. Born to a drug-addicted mother, Tasha had been placed in multiple foster homes, intermittently returning to her natural mother and father or one of many boyfriends her mother was living with at the time. Additionally, her mother had a history of psychopathology and there were reports of domestic violence, drug-related crime activity, and short-term jailings of both parents. A previous social worker had reported that Tasha had been both physically and sexually abused.

Tasha had attended a number of different elementary schools because her foster homes were located in different areas. She was two grades behind, but was reported to have normal intellectual functioning (it seemed to me that she might even have above average intelligence). Just months prior to coming to camp, Tasha witnessed her mother shoot her father to death during a domestic quarrel. Her mother was subsequently put in jail and Tasha was placed in yet another foster home.

Although I knew all of this prior to Tasha's arrival at camp, it rarely entered my mind when dealing with her in everyday interactions. When she was hitting another child, my first thought was to stop her. I did not pause and think about all of Tasha's previous experiences. But now, removed from the situation, I can better understand why she displayed the behaviors she did and how these coping mechanisms were probably the only way she could deal with the environment, given her highly unstable background. Tasha had reason to carry a shield, reason not to trust, and reason not to allow herself to get close to anyone. From her past experiences, she knew that she would merely be setting herself up for disappointment and pain. But could Tasha remain inside her protective hardened shell forever?

I do not know the exact nature of Tasha's experiences in infancy, but I would venture to guess that it was difficult for her to form secure attachment relationships with any adults as she was frequently shuttled between her natural mother and foster homes. Because her biological mother had a history of mental illness and was also abusive, Tasha probably formed an insecure attachment with her. Although some of her foster parents may have been nurturing, she was removed from these caring environments without any understanding of the contingencies surrounding her displacement. Tasha likely became used to an unstructured and unpredictable life and developed coping skills accordingly; she was constantly wary since change and abandonment were frequent and unpredictable.

So what were we trying to do with Tasha in a three-month period? How were we to show her that we would be there for her, regardless of how she acted? I believe that consistency and predictability were the keys. The program was structured so that every day was a routine, and although this became unbearably repetitious for the staff, it was a necessity for the younger children. These children, so used to havoc, needed to know that no matter what they did, the staff would not abandon them, nor would we ever lash out and hit them or verbally attack them. For some children, such as Tasha, accepting this took a long time.

Tasha resisted structure in every way possible: by trying to make the group late, by attempting to alienate particular staff members, and by performing her usual deviant behaviors, such as lying, stealing or hitting other children. These behaviors usually elicited negative attention, as they were difficult for staff to ignore. Tasha vehemently hated praise. If complimented, she would throw a fit, denying she did well and performing poorly on subsequent tasks. But despite all her protests, both verbal and

physical, the staff continued to praise Tasha when she did well, and to talk with her when she behaved inappropriately. When Tasha lost control she was consistently held until she had calmed down enough so that she was no longer a threat to herself or others.

And slowly, very slowly, Tasha began to realize that things were not going to change, no matter how hard she tried to manipulate them. Her working model of an unpredictable environment must also have begun to break down and make room for these new experiences. Tasha's nightmares became less frequent and terrifying. She wet the bed less frequently. She was able to respond to a question without swearing or talking back. Tasha began to laugh more. Although these behavioral changes were slight and usually brief, we could see that we were beginning to chip away at the thick brick wall she had built around herself.

Although there was no single turning point in the summer for Tasha, there was one interaction with her that stands out the most. It was about two months into the program and Tasha was having a terrible day, more than her typical bad day. She had multiple time-outs and restraints and refused to participate in several activities. Tasha was taken to the staff area where, according to the children, the "really bad ones" were sent. I was in the process of a messy restraint with her when my supervisor arrived. He was angry with her for taking so much staff time away from the other children and with her bullying and intimidating behaviors. He took her to the camp's entrance and told her to go. Plain and simple. He merely said, "go." Tasha began to cry. Never before had she cried, unless she was in a terrible restraint and struggling furiously. This time she let down and cried without anger. She cried out of sadness and fear. But my supervisor knew that this was not enough. Tasha would not be jarred so easily. He continued talking to her sternly, reprimanding her for frightening and hurting other children, refusing to participate in activities, stealing and lying, and showing disrespect to the staff. I kept waiting for him to soften, to tell her that if she shaped up things would be all right. But he just stood there letting her cry. She then did something that no one would have ever guessed she would do. She put her arms around me and said, "I don't want to leave. I have nowhere else to go." Never before had she shown understanding of her life situation. Not only did she realize her fear, more importantly she verbalized it. It was at this moment that I first felt that Tasha and I had developed a connection and that she finally trusted me.

A relationship for Tasha would be a tenuous venture. Her trust in adults and supposed caretakers had been violated so many times. How could anyone expect Tasha to form new relationships when her many earlier attempts were unsuccessful? Yet here I was, standing at the outskirts of the camp with a sobbing child clinging to my waist. Did this represent a relationship? Perhaps it was another one of Tasha's manipulative behaviors. Yet something about the situation seemed so genuine, so honest.

The nature of my relationship with Tasha changed after that day. Although Tasha would still swear and hit, she became less hostile towards

me and would occasionally listen and follow directions. One night, after a lengthy restraint, she broke down and told me fragments of her past, intermingled with scenes from her nightmares. She allowed me to hold her as she talked from a seeming stream of consciousness. Tasha admitted that night that she was scared.

Although I felt close to Tasha that evening, I knew, based on her past, that she would defend herself against rejection and therefore have difficulty maintaining this proximity to me. Sure enough, for the next few days following this interaction, she distanced herself. I knew that what happened that night was a novel experience for Tasha, and that she was somehow trying to process and make sense of it. But to do so, she needed protection, and thus the barriers came back up. I tried to remain as consistent as possible to let her know that I was still going to be there for her regardless of how much she tried to distance herself from me.

As the summer was coming to a close, the staff on my team began to discuss the progress the children in our group had made and their probable futures. This was a process designed to enable the staff to examine the results of our hard work and to write reports for future child care workers involved with these children. While we had little difficulty identifying the positive behavior modifications that most of the children in our group had displayed, when it was time to discuss Tasha, most staff members insisted they had seen little progress. I tried to come to her defense, even though it was difficult for me to label specific behaviors that she had altered. I knew, however, that something within Tasha had changed, and that however slight it might have been, this change represented hope.

According to many theorists and empirical studies, mental health is believed to remain relatively stable throughout a person's life. While such labels or other measurements of early development are not meant to be seen as rigidly deterministic, the significant associations between behaviors in childhood and later functioning cannot be overlooked. Examining the statistics from longitudinal studies, one would find little hope for Tasha. She had insecure attachments as a result of multiple foster placements and an abusive home situation, poor communication and social skills, a history of academic failure, and a genetic predisposition for the development of psychopathology. She had already been diagnosed with conduct disorder by several psychologists, and although only a percentage of children with such pathology go on to become antisocial adults, Tasha clearly seemed headed in this direction.

But not all research supports this continuity assumption. Indeed the statistics, which show that most children with psychopathology do not grow up to be pathological adults, are evidence that something within these children is allowing them to conquer adversity. Perhaps these changes are a result of early intervention and intense psychotherapy. I am not sure however, that at eight years of age, Tasha would have been ready for intense psychotherapy. The most important thing for her at this point in her life was to learn that the world was not always such a scary and unpredictable place.

Only then could she begin to trust and form relationships which might start her on the road to recovery.

At the beginning of camp, Tasha's old internal working models were in full force, her defense mechanisms primed, and her shell hardened. But slowly, through the consistency of our actions, she must have found it difficult to work these new experiences into her old meaning structures. And slowly, I believe she began to integrate and transform these novel experiences, however slightly, to make new cognitive and affective meaning structures. Even if Tasha left the summer with only a change in her internal representations and not in her external behaviors, all of her hard work and the work of the staff was worthwhile. If Tasha was able to be a little more trusting when approaching new situations or a little less resistant to forming relationships, then this experience made a difference.

I know that the summer must have been scary for Tasha. In order for Tasha to allow herself to begin to form relationships, she had to give up some of the protective mechanisms she had created to block out her painful environment. While these defense mechanisms may be viewed as pathological, they had enabled Tasha to exist in her world. To transform these meaning structures would be to give up some of her past, yet in restructuring them she would gain new ways of interpreting incoming information. Tasha left camp not a radically changed child, but a child, I hope, with a slightly altered perspective, with a new mindset that would enable her to continue to transform her working models and interpret new experiences within existing frameworks.

Tasha refused to say goodbye. It was too painful, and we all understood. Yet as the bus rolled away, she turned back and pressed her tear stained face to the window. Tasha had made connections.

BIOGRAPHY

Heather Nicole Taussig, originally from Tucson, Arizona, recently completed her undergraduate degree at Harvard University. In the fall she will begin graduate studies in clinical psychology at the University of Colorado at Boulder.