Case Study: The Yellowbird’s Family

Referral Source

Issues of abuse and neglect prompted the referral of Jason Yellowbird, aged 8, and his family for child protective services. The Child Welfare Placement, Assessment, and Review Committee (PARC) recommended that Jason be placed into treatment foster care following a 6 month placement at the W H. Hatton Center for emotionally disturbed children. The Valley view Treatment Foster Family Care program was serving Jason by the time he was 9 years old. Following a short-term placement in treatment foster care, Jason, was reunited with his mother and stepfather even though the parents were initially hostile to this idea. Eventually Jason entered the juvenile justice system, and a second period of treatment foster care was recommended. Now 13 years old, Jason has begun to live with Sue and Brian Lasting, treatment-foster care parents with the Valley view program' Jason remains in contact with his mother Carol and stepfather ]eff. The goa1 of the second placement in treatment foster family care was to prepare Jason for return to his parents.

Family Composition

Jason Yellowbird, aged 13, is the son of Carol and Stone Yellowbird. Carol, aged 31 at the time of Jason second treatment foster care placement divorced stone when Jason was 4 years old. Carol and Stone had married when she was 17 years old and pregnant with Jason. Jason has had only intermittent contact with his biological father.

No other information is known about this family.

Family Background Information

Carol didn't much like the idea of Jason being in the w H. Hatton center because she had spent her teenage years in an institution herself. However, after a childhood with an alcoholic father and a rejecting mother and after an early and disastrous first marriage to Jason’s father, having Jason in out-of-home care was the only peace she had ever had.

With Jason in out-of-home care, Jeff, too, was enjoying his first taste of a stable lifestyle. His own mother had died when he was a child, and he had lived with his grandparent, until his father remarried. He had then returned to his father, but his .stepmother had made it clear that she didn’t want Jeff, which was why Jeff, as a stepfather, had done his best for Jason.

Placement Information

Jason Yellowbird, at the age of 8, was mean and tough. He boasted, he argued, and he broke things-his own and other people’s. He lied, stole, cheated, and bullied his schoolmates. He hit his mother and sometimes his mother's husband. He knew that people thought he was a bad boy' His mother's husband did not like him much. No one liked him much. Moreover, he was allowed to say that he felt lonely and confused sometimes. Carol didn’t like him to say how he felt. Jeff liked him to do as he was told. Jason's teacher had put him in a short-term observation program at school, which didn’t help’ Jason continued his life as a tough guy, occasionally becoming a baby. During his times as a baby, he clung to adults and demanded their attention and sometimes soiled his pants. He could read, though, and he could count, and he liked to write. For a kid in fourth grade, as far as his schoolwork went, Jason was doing all right.

Carol approached a center she knew about that took children like Jason. The children lived

together in cottages and were disciplined and cared for. It would be good for Jason, Carol

thought, and it might keep her marriage together. Jeff, her second husband, didn’t hit her and

Jason, as her first husband had. In fact, Jeff had adopted Jason to make her happy, but enough

was enough. Jeff and Carol were tired of Jason and were fighting daily over him. Jason had to

go; he was out of control. In summarizing their thoughts about 8-year-old Jason, his mother

and stepfather concluded, "This kid is crazy!"

Jason was one of 68 residents at the center for emotionally disturbed children. He was accepted into the residential treatment center under custody by agreement order. The voluntary placement agreement said that he would go home in 6 months; but in 6 months, his parents did not want him back. His mother and Jeff were doing all right without Jason. At the end of the 6-month period, Jason was nearly 9 and nothing had changed. In fact, Jason's behavior had deteriorated rapidly. He did not get along with the boys in the residential treatment center; he did not get along well with anyone. He still lied, stole, and bullied. He still broke things and argued and hit people, and he didn’t do as he was told. The consulting psychiatrist had prescribed a program of medication but discontinued the drugs after observing no appreciable changes in Jason's behavior.

Jason's case went before the Child Welfare Placement, Assessment, and Review Committee

(PARC) in December, and this was the first of many reviews to come. His social worker from the Child Welfare Department was there, but Jason wasn’t and neither were his mother or Jeff. The conclusion of the PARC, which included Jason's social worker, a psychologist, consulting psychiatrist, teachers, and supervisors, was unanimous: Although moving Jason would most likely compound his problems, Jason could no longer stay at the institution. His social worker advocated a less restrictive placement, but the response from others who knew Jason was that Jason's problems were too severe for a regular foster home. The only alternative was to put him into a treatment foster home as soon as a bed became available. Meanwhile, he was placed in a group receiving and assessment home. His child welfare status changed to temporary guardianship.

Once a treatment foster family placement was found for Jason at the beginning of February,

contacts with Jason and his family were initiated. Jason had several overnight visits with the

foster family. Carol and Jeff met a few times with the treatment foster parents at their home.

Meanwhile, Jason's case records from the institution and child welfare had been sent to the

treatment foster care program. Meetings took place between the treatment foster care staff, the

institution staff, and Jason's child welfare worker to discuss what Jason would need from treatment foster care services. On the basis of these discussions and the treatment foster parents'

observations of Jason, the treatment foster care staff decided to formulate tentative goals that

were discussed with Jason before being entered into the case plan.

Within a month, Jason moved into the treatment foster care placement. His treatment foster

parents, Diane and Lee Barker had taken one other foster child since the program began, and this child was still with them. When Jason arrived, there were already three children living in the home: Lee and Diane's own two children, a boy of 12 and a girl of 7, and one foster child,

a boy of 10.

One of the first things Lee and Diane did was contact Jason’s school to talk to his teachers about

his new situation. Jason had been lucky enough to stay at the same school despite his changes in

living environments, so his teachers were familiar with his history. However, his behavior had

been troublesome, and his teachers had not related well to his mother. Much work needed to be

done to establish the necessary cooperation between school and home. It was decided that

Jason would have a homework book that would list the day’s assignments. A school card would be stapled to the book on which the teacher would check off Jason's daily observed behaviors. How many times did he obey or fail to obey instructions? Did he hit another child? Did he make any self-praising statements or act supportively toward another student? How did he react when he was criticized or praised? Diane and Lee would look at this book every evening and focus their work with Jason on the areas that seemed to need improvement. They also kept a daily log for the other foster child, for whom they noted progress toward individual goals, the child's general emotional state, and any major incidents.

Jason went home to visit twice in April, and his parents visited him three times in the placement.

His mother had spoken to his teacher, and this interview went much better than previous interviews because Jason's behavior at school had improved, his teacher felt involved in his improvement, and Jason’s mother was more relaxed. There was a bake sale at school in April for which Jason's mother made cookies. There was an operetta the following month with Jason on stage and his mother and grandmother clapping in the audience. Jason made five visits home in May, three of them overnight stay, and these visits went well. Nevertheless, when the end of May came, Jeff did not want Jason to return home, and Jason’s mother was uneasy about it because of Jeff's attitude.

After discussion among all the parties involved, it was decided that Jason should go home,

but with a lot of in-home support from the treatment foster parents and staff. A staff member

would visit Jason's home as often and for as long as required, staying overnight for a week at a

time if necessary. Between these visits, Jason's parents or Jason himself could phone the treatment parents or staff for help with any problem. The return home worked better than Jeff had expected. Jason was now doing well at school; relations between the school and his parents

were good; and Carol had learned from Diane and Lee how to improve Jason's self-esteem, how

to handle his aggression, and how to communicate with him. Her expectations of Jason had

been reduced to expectations reasonable for a child of his age.

When Jason was 11, he transferred to the local junior high school. His reputation for being a

"Bad kid" still lingered, and incidents were related with relish by schoolmates who remembered

that Jason had hit the teacher and refused to do as he was told. Older boys who wanted to use

his locker "to store some things" approached Jason. Jason agreed. He knew that the things being

stored included drugs and stolen goods, but by now he was one of the "in' crowd. He began

to carry a knife as the others did. He experimented with drugs. He started to take an interest in

the gun that Jeff had at home. Meanwhile, he was skipping classes; his grades were going down,

and he was becoming increasingly aggressive toward his mother and Jeff. Jeff and Carol argued

about him, Jeff saying that it had been a mistake to ever have him home, and his mother pleading

on his behalf saying that it was puberty, a phase he would get over. She suggested phoning

the treatment foster care staff for help, but Jeff didn’t want help. He didn’t want a social worker

present in his home. Essentially, he didn’t want Jason.

One night, Jason took the gun to show to his friends at their regular meeting place. It impressed them, it raised Jason's status in the group, and he began to take it on other occasions. A few months later, the gun went off accidentally. No one was hurt, but Jason was charged with careless use of firearms and received 10 days in juvenile detention with one year's probation. His parents refused to have him home when the 10 days were up, and he was sent to a group receiving and assessment placement.

After 2 weeks in the group receiving and assessment placement, Jason ran away and stole a motorcycle. He and his friends had engaged in a good deal of theft over the past year, and Jason thought that he could manage a motorcycle without being caught. However, he was caught. He was charged with theft and spent another 2 days in a youth detention center, where he threatened a staff member with a knife and brought on the attentions of more professionals.

Despite the strong arguments of professionals who worked with Jason, his social worker believed that treatment foster care was not only the best choice for Jason, but offered the only chance for this l3-year-old to learn to live an everyday life in an everyday community. Jason's record showed that he had once been involved with treatment foster care, and the treatment had seemed effective, at least until he entered junior high school. The treatment foster care staff made a point of asking that children who had once been with them be referred back to them if they subsequently got into trouble. Accordingly, the referral was made, and Jason was once more involved in the treatment foster care program.

Jason Yellowbird was now 13. He had acquired skills in theft and was familiar with alcohol,

drugs, and the use of weapons, and his school record and relationship with his parents were

both abysmal. He was described as sneaky and as having an oppositional disorder. Jason had

become particularly aggressive when he was physically restrained for his own and others' safety.

when restrained, he often lashed out at staff with obscenities. Other behaviors that made Jason difficult to care for included enuresis, nightmares, terrible hygiene and table manners and personal property destruction, including the belongings of his peers as well as the furnishings in his room.

He was not able to live with Diane and Lee because their home was already full, but another treatment foster care family was available. Because mutual support between treatment foster parents was a large component of the program and treatment parents met with each other regularly to exchange ideas about their children, Lee and Diane were able to help with the “getting acquainted” period between Jason and his new treatment foster parents. Jason met once more with Lee and Diane’s own children and the foster child he had lived with before, who was still with them' The people around him were therefore not entirely strange., and he was already familiar with the procedures that would be adopted.

Jason Yellowbird’s Placement Sequence

Jason first entered out-of-home care and was placed in a residential treatment center at the age of 9. He was 10 years old when he was first placed in treatment foster family care, and 13 years old at the time of his second intake to treatment foster family. If the first residential treatment setting had been avoided and the child and family services had been directed to the goal of surrounding this family with services in the least restrictive and most normalized environment possible, these events may have influenced Jason’s subsequent behavior and adaptation at home.

Here is the history of Jason’s placement locations:

\* Home of natural parents.

\* Residential treatment center.

\* Group emergency home.

\* Foster family-based treatment.

\* Home of natural parents.

\* Youth correctional center.

\* Group emergency home.

\* Run away.

\* Youth correctional center.

\* Foster family-based treatment.

Since first entering out-of-home care, Jason had experienced 10 placement changes or living environments, one from which he had run away, and five placements more restrictive than treatment foster families. He had lived in group emergency homes (shelters) on two occasions.

Jason's placement history provides a useful review of the frequency and types of out-of-home care provided for him. Ideally, Jason's out-of-home placement should reduce restrictiveness of his environment and care over time. The degree of restrictiveness of each setting varied.