

THERAPEUTIC FOSTER CARE

Mateo —A Case Study

A boy with a shy smile and caution in his eyes, Mateo* is learning that life is predictable and fun, that asking for what you need gets better results than throwing a punch and that adults are kind, caring and ready to praise, practice and support him. These are new concepts for this 9 year old child, who was born to a mother who struggled with substance abuse, who often found her family without food to eat and a place to live and surrounded by violence and danger. And after 7 years of trauma and uncertainty, Mateo was taken into DCFS custody as his mother tried to put her life together. A family member became his foster parent doing her best to help him as she loves him deeply and is committed to caring for him. And Mateo loved his mother just as dearly and worried about her and fretted about being separated from her. His fears became reality when he learned that his mother, who was 9 months pregnant, died the very day she had visited with him from an aneurysm. The baby brother she was carrying died as well. His life was over as he knew it, there was no going back and this little boy did not have the words to express his grief, his rage or his fears.

For Mateo, grief, rage and a life of neglect and trauma translated into extreme tantrums, physical aggression towards teachers and peers, bedwetting, food hoarding, as well as very poor social skills and boundaries.

School was a particularly difficult place for him. His behaviors were becoming more and more dangerous, with several stays in a child psychiatric unit. With an official diagnosis of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, it was clear that he was on a path that was leading to more tragedy. His foster family was desperate to find him the help he needed and, through their caseworker, learned of a new Therapeutic Foster Care (TFC) program at LSSI. The TFC program, is an evidence based treatment where children are matched with highly trained Professional Therapeutic Foster Parents. The Foster Parents and TFC team deliver the intensive individualized intervention focused on developing pro-social behaviors in the home, school, and community and moving each child into the carefully chosen and prepared aftercare home within 6 to 9 months of treatment. It was the hope the family was looking for and, although it meant temporarily leaving his relative foster family, Mateo was quickly admitted into the program.

Moving was hard for Mateo, but he settled into the program with his TFC foster mom setting up the program right from the beginning. She showed him his room, went over the daily routine with him and as she was putting him to bed on his first night, she told him that the minute he felt an urge, he could get up and go to the bathroom attached to his room. She

practice it with him. She assured with him that he did not need to ask, that he could just go. When he asked in the middle of the night, she gently reminded him, he could just go. And she celebrated his success that morning and every morning since. She has met his many concerns and fears with gentle, positive reassurance, no matter how many times it takes. When he asks “Will we run out of food?” she reassures him. When he grabs and holds on, she calmly show him how to ask for a hug. When he has “a bad day” at school, she reminds him that tomorrow is a new day. His “bad days” are becoming further and further apart, and Mateo enjoys working with his Skills Coach and his therapist as he learns, practices and masters. Patience, practice and positive reinforcement has been the key, and slowly the funny, caring and considerate boy is becoming more confident and less cautious.

His TFC team is working closely with his relative foster family as they learn how to parent this child and to support Mateo’s gains. Mateo is spending more and more time with them as the date of his graduation is growing closer and the entire family is excited about a hopeful future together.

**Name changed to protect confidentiality*