

Caring Across Communities

Success Story

Children's Hospital Boston



From Fear To Understanding: A Journey Toward Good Mental Health

When Dalmar and his family arrived in Boston from Somalia, they hoped the stress and trauma of living in a war-torn country would be left behind. But something followed them.

Fourteen-year-old Dalmar enrolled in high school and began the arduous process of adapting to a new home, culture and language—largely on his own. He was intimidated by his classmates and tried to make up for his insecurities by acting tough. He noticed immediately that other students kept their distance from him. Even his teachers seemed unfriendly and unhelpful. Dalmar kept his fears to himself...and quickly began getting into trouble.

After two years in high school, Dalmar had earned just half a credit. He was suspended often for fighting and talking back to teachers. He began picking on other children—including his younger brothers and sisters—and was regularly disruptive in class.

Although school administrators knew Dalmar had experienced the consequences of violence in Somalia, he wasn't offered mental health services. His family was reluctant to seek help for fear of being perceived as a burden in the community. Even his teachers seemed wary of reaching out to him.

Dalmar was on the verge of expulsion. In an effort to do something for Dalmar, a school counselor turned to Project SHIFA (Supporting the Health of Immigrant Families and Adolescents), a Caring Across Communities partner in Boston that supports a mental health program for children and teens. Project SHIFA, which works directly with the local Somali community, assigned Naima to Dalmar's case. Naima personally understood many of the issues faced by Dalmar and his family.

In her assessment of Dalmar's case, Naima uncovered rumors that had been circulating about him since his arrival; he was trained to be a child soldier in Somalia, he had killed people, and he was still dangerous. None of this was true, but the stigma of the label shackled Dalmar to a destiny that he could not control.

Naima worked with administrators and teachers to debunk the rumor—a lie that many of Dalmar's teachers admitted they believed. Naima also worked to educate the staff and Dalmar's classmates about the reality of life in Somalia, the challenges faced by refugee families like Dalmar's, and about the cultural differences they must manage. "When Dalmar acted out, I just assumed that the stories about Dalmar

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were true,” said one of Dalmar’s teachers. “But having learned about life in Somalia and more about Dalmar, I now know the truth and am not afraid.”

In the meantime, Dalmar began counseling. His newly informed teachers started to engage Dalmar more effectively in class. His classmates stopped feeling threatened by him and friendships began to form. Dalmar, in turn, stopped feeling the need to disrupt the class and began to focus on his studies.

The challenges Dalmar faces as a result of the violence he witnessed in Somalia, the fear he still has about being accepted in his school, and the ongoing transition from refugee child to American teenager, will require more therapy. But he has reason to hope for a better future now. Dalmar is not alone in his struggles and, for the first time, he is beginning to think about graduation and beyond.

For Dalmar, a path has emerged toward good mental health and success in his new community. It’s up to him to walk the path, but help is there now when he needs it. Dalmar’s struggles are not unique to him. Throughout the U.S., many children who come here from another country face extraordinary stresses and mental health challenges. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation is supporting Caring Across

Communities and its partners to address this need by increasing and improving mental health services for all of America’s children. Learn more about the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation sponsored solutions for better health at: <http://www.healthinschools.org>.

For more information about the Children’s Hospital Boston, contact Heidi Ellis at: heidi.ellis@childrens.harvard.edu

For more information about the Caring Across Communities national program and related resources visit: <http://healthinschools.org/Immigrant-and-Refugee-Children/Caring-Across-Communities.aspx>

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