

SUCCESS STORY

Mustafa's Miracle

Children's Hospital Boston | Massachusetts

Moving to a new community, attending a new school, and making new friends can be daunting and stressful for any child. But when that child has already experienced significant trauma; when the move to a community means traveling halfway around the world; when new friends and teachers speak a different language, then the challenge of adapting can be overwhelming.

For Mustafa, a 6th grader originally from Somalia, the challenge of adapting to life in Boston was almost too much. Mustafa and his family were victims of Somalia's civil war. In the chaos of violence and displacement, Mustafa was separated from his parents and placed with relatives he barely knew.



Eventually, Mustafa's relatives won refugee status in the United States and they joined the Somali community in Boston. Mustafa was suddenly expected to adapt to American schools, cultures and norms with little support and almost no recognition that he had developed the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

When staff workers from Project SHIFA (Supporting the Health of Immigrant Families and Adolescents) at Children's Hospital Boston first heard about Mustafa, he had already been labeled a "bad kid." His teachers reported multiple behavioral problems including truancy and fights. His academic performance was below expectations and, in an attempt to gain acceptance, he had begun hanging out with other youth who had behavioral problems.

In their drive to get Mustafa help, staff workers uncovered barriers within his family to getting the mental health services Mustafa needed. Understanding what services were available was the first barrier, but overcoming the stigma associated with mental health problems proved to be the primary block. Project SHIFA formed a Family Stabilization Team to work with Mustafa's family and used the services of a "cultural broker," a Somali counselor who could bridge social and language gaps.

Mustafa began to receive the counseling and therapy he so desperately needed. Project SHIFA workers introduced him to other students who could help him make positive decisions and Mustafa began to form new friendships. He also began to trust his therapist and confide in her about both the traumas in his past as well as the difficulties he was facing in school.



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In a matter of months, Mustafa's grades began to improve. He was promoted to 7th grade and he is becoming a model student. He has begun to talk about the future in a positive new way.

Each of our children deserves to have a chance to succeed in his or her community. Yet, in many communities, America's children still do not have access to quality mental health services to help improve their quality of life. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation is supporting *Caring Across Communities* and its partners, such as Project SHIFA, to address this need by increasing and improving mental health services for all America's children. Learn more about how programs like *Caring Across Communities* create innovative solutions for children like Mustafa at www.healthinschools.org.

To learn how *Caring Across Communities* is helping immigrant and refugee students succeed, please visit www.rwjf.org/newsroom/product.jsp?id=60828.

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

About the Center for Health and Health Care in Schools

The Center for Health and Health Care in Schools (CHHCS) is a nonpartisan resource center at The George Washington University School of Public Health and Health Services. CHHCS links educators and health professionals to the information essential to building effective school health programs; testing new school-connected strategies to achieve better health outcomes for children; and promoting awareness of successful new directions in school health programming.

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