

SUCCESS STORY

Too Afraid to Say “Help”

Minneapolis Public Schools | Minnesota

When Eduardo arrived in the 1st grade at Jefferson Elementary in Minneapolis, his teacher noticed he was shy...very shy. In fact, Eduardo didn't speak at all for the first week. By the second and third weeks of school, Eduardo's teacher had heard him mumble only a few words. Even at recess, Eduardo kept to himself, avoiding interaction with other children and refusing offers to be included in play.

A little more than a month into the school year, the teacher began to doubt Eduardo's language ability and became concerned that he had a significant developmental delay. Eduardo's promotion to the 2nd grade would depend on—at least minimally—him participating in class. His teacher suspected he was simply unable to say more than a few words in English and that he was probably not ready for the 1st grade.

Fortunately for Eduardo, La Familia Child Guidance Center, the community-based partner of the Minneapolis Public Schools, heard the word “help” even though he couldn't say it. After reading the teacher's assessment that Eduardo may be afflicted with mutism, the Center's school mental health clinician visited with Eduardo. She discovered that Eduardo was frightened, too frightened to open his mouth. Eduardo's family had recently come to the United States from Latin America. The journey from his poverty-stricken village to Minneapolis had been difficult and Eduardo had become frightened of nearly everything—including speaking English even though it was being carefully taught to him at home.

The mental health clinician, trained by La Familia Child Guidance Center to work especially with children from different countries, carefully established a therapeutic goal and program that would build Eduardo's confidence, both as a speaker of English and as a young boy. The clinician worked with Eduardo's teacher to create incentives for Eduardo to use his English in class, to allow for mistakes, and to encourage him to celebrate his Spanish-speaking abilities and cultural assets.

The clinician also used culturally competent therapies, using both Spanish and English, to help Eduardo build a rapport with his teacher and classmates. During class he learned to participate and, during recess, he learned to run and play with his new friends.

As his mental health services progressed through the school year, so did Eduardo. His teacher withdrew her recommendation for special education and Eduardo more than earned his promotion to 2nd grade. “Eduardo made significant progress,” says his teacher. “I love



watching him work to fit in. He wants to achieve his progress on his own in class and is proud he can do it without assistance. He’s become very popular with all the teachers here.”

Eduardo is a smart, capable, articulate boy who almost fell through the cracks. But because of the quick and effective intervention by La Familia Child Guidance Center, he was able to transition from an overwhelmed child—too frightened to speak—to a boisterous and successful little boy.

Each of our children deserves a chance to thrive. Yet, in the communities where they live, learn, work and play, too many of America’s children do not have access to the mental health services they deserve and need. 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 ground-level solutions to improving health that supported Eduardo and other children like him 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 Minneapolis Public Schools, contact Mark Sander at mark.sander@co.bennepin.mn.us.

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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