

CASE 18

Throwing Tantrums

Although Tyler Lipton is listed on the roster of Allie Schenk's third-grade class, he spends most of each day in Sharon Osmer's resource room. Concerned that Tyler is so often segregated from his classmates, Allie has arranged a meeting with Sharon, Principal Cecila Dawson, and Tyler's parents.

Allie begins the meeting. "I'm concerned that Tyler is away from my classroom as much as he is. He's missing many of our instructional activities, and he has few opportunities to make friends with the other children in the class."

"Our son is severely dyslexic," explains Mr. Lipton, Tyler's father. "He's already repeated first grade, and now he's repeating second grade as well, yet he still can't read. I'd like him to spend as much time with Ms. Osmer as he possibly can."

"I worry about his behavior, too," Ms. Lipton adds. "Sometimes Tyler gets so frustrated that he throws horrible temper tantrums. It would never work to have him in a classroom with 25 other students. He needs as much individual attention as he can get."

Sharon Osmer is quick to agree. "Yes, Tyler's in my room so that we can address both his dyslexia and his behavior problems. I've had him for two years now, but his behavior is becoming even worse than it used to be. For example, he breaks pencils and tears his paper to shreds when he's frustrated or angry. Sometimes he screams when he doesn't want to do his work."

"Didn't Tyler's screaming start about the same time that you started working with Marcus?" Allie asks.

Sharon thinks for a minute. "Well, yes, now that you mention it, that's true."

"Who's Marcus?" inquires Ms. Lipton.

"Marcus is a boy with autism who's also in my room," Sharon replies. "He frequently screams and flaps his arms, especially when he's frustrated. It's pretty typical behavior for someone with autism."

"What do you do when Marcus screams?" Allie asks.

"Well," Sharon says, "as you know, I almost always have several students in my room at the same time, and each one of them is likely to have different academic needs. I usually give them individual assignments and put them at separate work stations around the room, then I circulate and give everyone a few minutes of one-on-one instruction. When Marcus gets too noisy, I pass out ear plugs so that the other students can concentrate on what they're doing. Then I try to find out why Marcus is so upset. He usually settles down after I've spent a little time with him."

"This meeting's about Tyler, not Marcus," Cecila Dawson reminds the group.

"I think we should keep Marcus out of the discussion."

"Well, let me explain why I brought Marcus up," Allie says. "I talked with Kendra Westover, who had Tyler in her classroom two years ago, and she doesn't remember Tyler ever screaming in her classroom. She told me that he was placed in the resource room only for his reading problems, not for any behavior problems. So

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I'm wondering...could it be that Tyler has learned to scream in your classroom, Sharon? After being with Marcus so much, he may think it's okay to scream when he's frustrated."

"Hmmm...that's an interesting idea," Ms. Lipton says. "I think about it, I realize that Tyler's temper tantrums didn't really start until this year. Before that, he usually just talked to us when he was upset about something."

"I've been attributing his screaming more to his decreasing self-confidence,"

Mr. Lipton says. "Tyler's nine years old, and yet he still has trouble reading even the simplest words. He certainly doesn't feel good about that fact."

"I've been worried about his self-esteem as well," Sharon replies. "I've tried to boost it a bit by assigning him tasks that are easy for him. You know, completing color-by-number worksheets, listening to stories-things he can do successfully by himself. Yet his screaming seems to have increased rather than decreased."

"Sharon, you do wonderful things with the children you have in your resource room," Allie tells her. "But it sounds to me as if Marcus's behavior is rubbing off on Tyler. I'd like to suggest that we move Tyler back into my classroom for most of the school day. Perhaps you could give me some ideas about how I could help him with his reading skills."

"But you're forgetting about Tyler's behavior, Allie," Principal Dawson points out. "Tyler's a very disruptive child, and his presence in your room would be a great distraction. You must remember your other students. After all, they have the right to a classroom environment in which they can reasonably get some work done."

"It seems to me that Tyler needs to see how normal children behave," Allie observes. "I have a really good group this year-not a serious behavior problem in the bunch. How is Tyler ever going to learn appropriate classroom behavior when he's in a room with kids like Marcus all day?"

"I think you're being unrealistic, Allie," Principal Dawson says. "Tyler may feel ostracized when you put him with children who can read and write. By putting him in your classroom all day, we might destroy what little self-esteem he has."

"But there are many things that Tyler would be perfectly capable of doing in my classroom. For example, he could participate in science experiments. The children conduct the experiments in pairs, and he could certainly contribute. During reading times, he could listen to the other students read aloud and get involved in group discussions. And I see no reason why he shouldn't participate in physical education, art, and music along with his classmates."

Seeing that Allie is getting a bit hot under the collar, Principal Dawson tries to calm her down. "Now, Allie, I wasn't intending to ruffle any feathers. I'm just trying

to point out that the approach you're suggesting might not be as easy as you think it will be."

"I have no idea what I can do for your son," Allie turns to Mr. and Ms. Lipton. she tells them bluntly. "I'm certainly no miracle worker. But it's clear that Tyler Needs to learn to deal with his frustrations appropriately, and he can do that only if Throwing Tantrums 57

he interacts with regular kids on a regular basis. All I'm asking for is a chance to work with him. Will you at least think about it?"

Mr. and Ms. Lipton do think about it, and in a formal staff meeting later that month, the decision is made to place Tyler in Ms. Schenk's room for most of the school day. For a half hour each morning, when his classmates are meeting in their reading groups, Tyler will go to the resource room to work with Ms. Osmer on his reading skills.

Tyler has neither screamed nor torn up his work in the three weeks since he's joined Ms. Schenk's class. He still can't read or write at the same level that his classmates do-a continuing source of frustration for him. But he's making many new friends and cooperating well with others during group activities.

When Ms. Schenk asks Tyler why he used to scream in Ms. Osmer's class, his response is very revealing. "Well, wouldn't you get pretty upset if you had to do the same stupid worksheets and listen to the same dumb stories all day-every day-while all your friends get to do new and exciting stuff?"

NOTE: Tyler continued to be mainstreamed throughout his schooling. He is

expected to graduate with his peers this spring (1997).

Possible questions for “Throwing Tantrums”:

- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.

Using concepts from social cognitive theory, explain why Tyler begins screaming soon after he is placed in Sharon Osmer’s classroom.

What advantages are there in placing Tyler in Allie Schenk’s classroom for most or all of the school day?

Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is the range of tasks that a student can perform only with the assistance of a more capable individual. Using Vygotsky’s concept of the ZPD, why are the tasks that Sharon Osmer assigns to Tyler developmentally inappropriate?

*How does Ms. Schenk **predict** that she can teach within Tyler’s ZPD?*

If you were Tyler’s teacher, what strategies might you use to accommodate his special needs?

Self-esteem is the extent to which one believes oneself to be a capable and worthy individual. Sharon Osmer tries to enhance Tyler’s self esteem by giving him tasks that she knows he can accomplish successfully (e.g., color-by-number worksheets), yet Tyler’s self-esteem continues to decrease. Why?

*Concerned that Tyler’s academic needs are not being met, Allie schedules a meeting with the special education teacher, the **school principal**, and Tyler’s parents. Is this an appropriate strategy? Why or why not?*