



Case stories

A family concern: What is really affecting Jack's behaviour?

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Summary

A teacher had come to me with a concern about a child. His behaviour had recently changed. What could I do to help? The table top constellation that I did with Jack required me to understand the order of 'place' – in this case, hierarchy within his family. Jack had been cast into the role of an adult in his relationship with his father, rather than being allowed to be a son and child. His father was treating him as an equal by confiding a secret that was inappropriate for a father to share with a son. He was requiring Jack to act as a best friend. The secret Jack was asked to keep was actually unbearable for a child, making him feel particularly disloyal to his mother. It does not matter how old children are, they need to keep their 'childlike' place in relation to parents. There are certain issues which are inappropriate for parents to share with children of any age. These things remain the business of the parents.

From my training and having attended **dbi** workshops where I have watched full constellations, I had the confidence and skill to 'test' certain phrases with Jack, to see which ones might bring relief and resolution for him. Once they had formed the ones that enabled Jack to return the secret to his father and affirm his love for his mother, he was in a better place to be a child again. He was back in his rightful place. Jack almost certainly never actually said the words to his father and mother, but the utterance of them within the constellation was enough to shift his feelings and restore his sense of balance.

What was my question all about?

I knew Jack, a Year 9 pupil, from some previous work we had done together. He had always been a student who had a sense of mischief and sometimes got himself into trouble by trying to be funny at the wrong time. But, beyond this, staff had little trouble with him.

One day, his tutor came to see me to tell me that, in recent weeks, Jack's behaviour had become more aggressive. He was having strong verbal outbursts and storming out of class. This was not like Jack. Everyone was wondering what had changed for him, but he would not talk. I decided to see him and ask him if he had noticed a difference in his own behaviour,

and whether he would like to come and see me. Jack immediately agreed and we set a time to meet.

What things did I try?

For the session, I decided to use a table top constellation using Place People. I told Jack that this was a new approach and if he was happy to try something a bit different, we would use it to see if we could find what the issue might be that was causing the anger his teachers were witnessing.

I asked Jack to choose some of the key groups in his life – he chose his family, school friends and staff, and other friends. From the start it was apparent that Jack wanted to concentrate on his family, in particular, his parents. I knew his mother had been seriously ill but there appeared to be something else on his mind. I tested my thought by asking Jack whether there was someone else missing from the constellation. He immediately said yes and put the person in. The dynamics changed and there was a sense of tension when Jack put this person in place. He started to cry and told me more about this extra person and who she was. Then we placed his father in front of the 'Place Person' that was representing Jack himself.

I gave Jack some phrases to try to say to his father. The one that seemed best for him was, 'Dad, I will always love you and I am going to be a child again and hand back this secret to you. It's yours, not mine.' There was immediate relaxation in Jack's face and his whole body eased out once he had said this. He also said to his mother's Place Person, 'Mum, I will always love you and you are the right Mum for me'. He liked this too.

We finished with me telling Jack just to let what had happened settle within him, and to come back at any time to see me if he needed to.

What insights did I get?

I discovered that a table top constellation can be very powerful for a young person. We only spent an hour together, but seeing the situation 'mapped out' before him and finding a few key phrases that felt truthful, helped Jack in a way that nothing else could quite have done. A shift in Jack's behaviour took place quite rapidly, once the experience settled with him. Within a

week his tutor and some class teachers seemed amazed at how different Jack was. They asked me what I had done with Jack in that hour. He came to see me himself and thanked me for the session. He agreed that it had helped him see more clearly.

From my training, I recognise that this is a very useful tool to use in this situation, and I was reminded that young people are usually very open to trying any idea that might help them with their issue, even if it is something that is new and seems strange to them.

What difference is this insight making?

It seems an odd thing to say after years of experience working in behaviour support, but before my **ecf** training, when pupils were sent to me because of aggression or anger issues, I would have followed the usual support strategies of anger management. This never really dealt with the root issue, but often just papered over the cracks. I just dealt with the symptoms and the resulting behaviours, but rarely looked for the causes of the anger. I probably wouldn't have known a way to do it, even if I'd wanted to. Inevitably the anger would rise to the surface again at a later time and the emotions and feelings were just being temporarily managed or even suppressed.

Now whenever I am asked to work with a student I think about using constellations to look at the systemic influences interplaying within the student's life. I also try and work with the family if this is necessary, including making home visits, if appropriate.

Words of Appreciation

I'd like to give thanks to the training from **ecf** foundation with particular thanks to Judith Hemming. By observing her work in **dbi** workshops I have begun to find truths and phrases to use with my pupils in constellations. Also, to my head teacher for allowing me to train in this work and to bring it back into the school setting.

Lastly thank you to Jack for trusting me with a new way of working.



'Mum, I will always love you and
you are the right Mum for me'

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