

Spotlight on Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation

A proven strategy to support stability for child care providers and parents

At 2-and-a-half years old, Damien's behavior was raising serious worries with his child care teachers, mom, and the parents of other kids there. One of the "bigger boys" in the toddler group, he pinched, bit, kicked and pushed children and staff on a daily basis; the aggressive behavior needed to be addressed before it went further. "We didn't think he was intentionally trying to hurt someone. In his mind, he was trying to play," said Damien's mom, Kari Thompson. "Is it okay to hit and push? Obviously not, but he's two-and-a-half and trying to learn."

Jennifer Jahn, the owner/operator of Kiddie Campus Early Learning Center in Marysville near Port Huron, had additional concerns last fall. Some of her staff members were relatively new to child care and unsure how to distinguish normal from abnormal behavior in young children. Nor did they instinctively have strategies to effectively turn things around. In a field known for its low pay, emotional stressors and high turnover, Jahn knew she needed to take quick action to help her students, the family, staff, and her business.



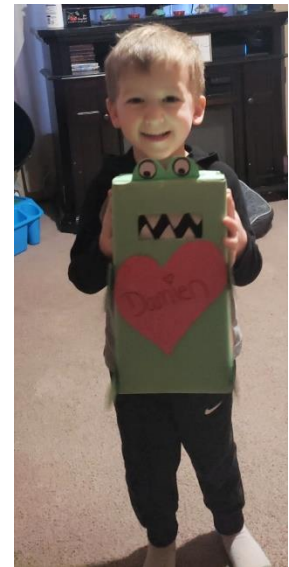
Fortunately, Jahn's center is in a county where she was able to call in Christina Howard, an infant and early childhood mental health consultant working for Community Mental Health, who had already been working with teachers in other classrooms at Kiddie Campus. Howard went to work over several months with Damien's teachers and mother to identify what his behavior was trying to tell them, and uncovered ways to intervene with new strategies in the classroom and at home to help the toddler learn how to be successful with other children and adults, skills necessary for later success. At no cost to Jahn, the service was part of a pilot program funded by the state in a limited number of counties to bring needed expertise to pockets of the state's beleaguered child care sector. As one of only 13 consultants in Michigan, Howard covers a service area taking in all five counties in the Thumb. Somedays she clocks 200 miles a day between visits.

"Early intervention is key. The big picture is having the family on board with a strategy for the child," Jahn said. "If the behavior continues, a child can be expelled from child care and preschool and that can have a very negative impact. Think about how that makes the child feel – like nobody cares, and at a time when they're forming attachments with their caregivers."

Supported by research in Michigan and across the country, there is growing awareness that children under 5 – and mostly boys – experience more discipline and are more frequently expelled from child care than any other age group – up to 3.5 times the rate of K-12 students. Michigan's Children works to improve access to quality child care for the most challenged children and families and to boost child care

providers' confidence and ability to serve them. "A more robust and skilled child care system that proactively assigns consultants to places where we know families have a hard time maintaining child care – kids with disabilities or developmental delays, kids experiencing child welfare and foster care system, and kids suffering from other traumas -- is what needs to be supported, now more than ever," said Michele Corey, Vice President for Programs. "Right now we don't have a child care system in Michigan that can maintain stability in quality care for more difficult to serve children and families," she added.

To expand the program to providers and families all over the state would require a big investment, and building a more proactive system of support would be an even heavier financial lift. Despite the current reality of plummeting state revenues from the economic tailspin, the reality is that the current pandemic is creating additional instability and trauma for children and families. As families return to work and young children return to care, the need for behavioral expertise and assistance will only grow.



One day early this month, Jennifer Jahn was at her center, preparing for a Zoom call with some of the center's families, when she took a break to talk about Damien's progress and transformation. Eerily quiet on this weekday, the center had 42 enrolled children from birth to age five before the pandemic struck. She's hoping the center will bounce back after the health crisis lifts. An entrepreneur with a heart for the welfare of children, Jahn had grown the business first from a small building in Port Huron Township starting in 2005 to the larger Maryville facility opened in June 2018. Over her 15 years in business, she said she's seen the number of children with behavioral problems grow year to year.

"Every year we see more and more children with challenging behaviors – kids demonstrating aggression, kids having anxiety – things we felt we weren't really equipped to deal with. Kids have a lot more stresses in their lives than they used to," said Jahn, who earned a master's degree in early childhood in 2010. "The times are different now. You have many split families. And in the last two years, the increasing numbers of children in foster care have been eye-opening." Never before has she had the number of requests for child care for children in foster care, the majority of whom have experienced the trauma of being removed from their birth families as a result of the opioid crisis, she added.

Without Howard's help, she said she and the staff wouldn't know what to look for and how to help certain students. "I probably would have some staff just throwing in the towel and quitting," she said.

To Jahn's point, Howard said infant mental health consultants primarily focus on stabilizing and supporting the child care system in Michigan by helping providers create an environment that encourages and nurtures healthy social and emotional skills in children. "Our caregivers don't typically have a lot of training, and struggle with trying to help the kids with daily schedules and trying to teach them the educational components of a curriculum at the same time they're trying to meet emotional needs," she said. It's a tough job when kids and their families are also facing additional challenges that led to behavioral struggles at child care, she added.

In Damien's case, Howard started by working with the staff, offering emotional support and instruction on appropriate behaviors for children his age. She studied the classroom environment,

recommending how toys could be set out and activities changed for a better working arrangement for all the children. Howard spent some time observing Damien in his toddler classroom, where he was among the oldest of the mixed age group of babies and toddlers. She determined it was no longer meeting his needs. Mom agreed Damien had become bored at child care. A positive change happened when Damien was able to transition to a Great Start Readiness Program high quality preschool classroom where 3-year-olds were recently made eligible to attend with 4-year-olds. “He was ready to move on. He really flourished in that room,” Howard said.

At the same time, Howard worked with Damien’s mother, learning the child had witnessed violence that helped explain his aggressive outbursts. The family was weathering economic challenges, and his mother was working hard in a demanding but rewarding job as a certified nursing assistant for individuals with mental disabilities. “What we try to do is find out what is the purpose behind the behavior. I ask a lot of questions, and I offer ideas, resources and tools to use to prevent it,” Howard said. After a home visit, she developed an action plan with Thompson and Damien’s teachers, based on the family and center’s input and a professional assessment of his social and emotional functioning.

Jahn said Howard’s advice was straight-forward and easy to follow, including coaching Damien “to use his words” when he was upset. Particularly helpful was Howard’s work with the family, and constructive conversations with Thompson about Damien’s experiences in school and home. “We were able to understand why the little guy was acting the way he was. Okay, he’s not doing this just to act out, but because this happened and there’s a reason behind his behavior,” Jahn said.

Thompson said she was pleased with the tips and tricks the teachers learned, and the advice she received. The books Howard gave her led to wonderful evenings, reading and cuddling with her son. Howard kept in touch, offering information on other community resources. “She’s opened my eyes to talking things out, and what routines work best for their little brains. She taught me how to address situations in a different manner, and how to say things to Damien so it would click in his brain better.”

As a parent, there’s peace of mind in knowing that your child’s child care provider has some place to go for answers, Thompson said. Today, her son is looking forward to the day he can take the school bus to school like his big sister does. “He tells you every morning he’s ready to go to school. I wish all family members in daycare would have someone like Christina. It’s really a benefit for someone to come in and help. It doesn’t necessarily mean your child is bad. They’re learning.”