

Home Visit

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Everyone in education does, or will, wrestle with what we want to teach, the uniqueness of the child we want to teach, and the life circumstances of that child. "We could do so much more, but you know what Jason's family life is like," goes the familiar complaint. In the interest of creating more functional partnerships and of getting to know more about Jason's family life, we make home visits.

On one such home visit, Sarah Crandall's teacher, Debby Tarrant, and I sat in the Crandalls' living room, drinking coffee from chipped, dirty mugs.¹ The room was also their TV room; their pets room; their 3-year-old's bedroom; and, as I later learned from Sarah's brother, Robert, the place where Mrs. Crandall and her friends "smoked drugs."

In this 10' x 10' room, the front door on its warped frame never quite closed against the 30-degree November cold. Despite this, the room was stifling. A not-so-air-tight wood stove dominated the room with its bulk, its oppressive heat, and its pervasive smoke. Five flypaper strips suspended strategically throughout the room swirled gently, responding to the heat circulation. A sixth flypaper banner, slung above the stove, capped the effect of bizarre, fly-studded prom decorations.

A 40-gallon glass case with a wire screen cover secured by duct tape nearly filled one wall. It was 15 minutes into our visit before I saw a boa uncurl from beneath its pile of branches, rocks, and bark in the tank. Across the room was a 5-gallon case, home to perhaps a dozen, constantly frolicking white mice. Robert later explained that on Friday nights his parents would invite friends over, drink and smoke for awhile, put a mouse in the boa's tank, and then sit back to watch. "Snakes only havta eat once a week, ya know, Mr. Wilkens."

The reverent focus of the fourth wall was a photo display. Individual 8" x 10"

color glossies of Robert, Sarah, and their little sister, Molly, surrounded an 18" x 24" family portrait. When I admired her photographs, Mrs. Crandall apologetically assured me that the broken glass over Sarah's would be replaced as soon as they could get to Owen's Variety Store.

I moved aside a saucer of bologna and corn chip crumbs, careful to avoid the ketchup smears, and placed my coffee mug on the color TV/VCR entertainment center. We reminded Mrs. Crandall that the reason for our visit was our increasing concern over Sarah's frequent and violent outbursts against her peers, her teachers, and, more recently, herself.

Sarah's absenteeism, her antisocial behavior, her decreasing self-control, her social isolation, and her academic performance had become alarming. Her teachers, the counselor, the school nurse, the district social worker, and I had marshalled our resources during that time. We held student support team meetings and invited Mrs. Crandall to join us. We scheduled four home visits, only to have her cancel each at the last minute.

After various ineffective interventions and more heart-wrenching encounters with Sarah, Debby Tarrant and I decided to pay Mrs. Crandall a spontaneous visit—no appointment, no invitation. In the tradition of rural Vermont, we decided just to drop by.

During the first awkward moments, Debby and I adjusted our approach with Sarah's mother, and Mrs. Crandall adjusted to our being there. She seemed to realize we were not there to impart judgment or impose a sentence; we were there because we shared a concern, responsibility, and fondness for Sarah.

Her recognition of all that was palpable. She sat forward more, unfolding her arms from across her chest. Her eyes stopped darting around the room, and she looked directly at us. She held her smile as she offered me more coffee, unaware that I had yet to drink any.

We discussed the need for her to become more aware of Sarah's school life—to become a part of it. Debby suggested that perhaps Mrs. Crandall could stop by once or twice a week just to say hello to Sarah and see how things were going. Mrs. Crandall liked that idea but

had three problems with scheduling. First, she worked only intermittently for a local logger and did not know from day to day when she would work. Second, she still had some community service hours to work off for her court diversion program. And third, their car was not working because they could not yet afford a new water pump.

We finally decided on a plan that had Mrs. Crandall stopping by just once each week for a few weeks, whenever she could find the time and the transportation. She would visit with Debby, me, and the nurse or the counselor, if possible. Debby would also send special activities home for Sarah to do with her mother.

We thanked her for her time, her coffee, and her help in working together for Sarah. She assured us that she would drop by next Wednesday because her neighbor had a car on Wednesdays and the logging boss would be out of town.

The cold air on the way back to my truck was refreshing after the sauna of that living room. Debby and I did not say much on the brief drive back to school—only enough to gently acknowledge the conditions of Sarah's life. We did feel better, though, that we had made the connection and that we had a plan.

Mrs. Crandall did drop by the next Wednesday and once a week until Christmas break. But contact with her became much less regular in subsequent months.

Later, in March, Robert came into my office. He talked a little about himself and Molly and Sarah. Then he told me that on Saturday he had called the State Police to come "help my mother and the little kids because my dad, who's not really my dad, was beatin' up my Ma."

Clearly, it was time for another home visit. □

¹The names of the family members discussed here (the "Crandalls") are fictitious.

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