

## SUCCESS STORY

# Julio: Healing a Family After Tragedy

Los Angeles Child Guidance Clinic | California

Julio was an 11 year old 5<sup>th</sup> grader at Norwood Elementary School. He lived with his mother, father, three sisters, and two brothers. His parents migrated from Mexico without papers when he was 2 years old, with all of his siblings. They left a countryside where they could barely make ends meet in search of better economic opportunities in America. They knew that there would be risks to living in Los Angeles -- crime, violence, Immigration and Customs Enforcement raids, and racial tensions. Despite these concerns, they believed that their family would have a life in the United States. Once in Los Angeles, their lives worked out well enough because they had work and their children were getting an education. Julio did well at school, got along with his classmates, and had a happy family life.

One day, tragedy struck when Julio's 19 year old sister was on her way to pick up their 13 year old brother from school. She was caught in the cross fire of a random drive-by shooting and was killed.

After her death, Julio could not concentrate on his schoolwork. He was scared, angry, depressed, and confused. His grades dropped, he had no appetite, and he refused to go outside. Of all the children, he was taking it the hardest. His mother was very worried and went to the Norwood Healthy Start and Parent Center, a community mental health agency. The case manager listened empathetically and referred the family to the 3 R's Project: Building Relationships, Resiliency, and Recovery in Children. The 3 R's Project is a partnership between the school system, the local clinic, and the community that provides access to culturally competent, trauma-informed, school based mental health services for immigrant students and their families.

To help Julio deal with the tragedy, the 3 R's Project assigned Julio to a clinical therapist. Julio's initial reaction to the therapy was anger, and he stayed angry for weeks. However, the clinical therapist allowed him to participate at his own pace. It soon became evident that the entire family, not just Julio, needed to be involved in treatment and so the clinical therapist invited all the family members to participate.

Julio's family was close-knit which made the death harder for them to bear. They knew of the violence in their neighborhood, but had taken precautions and had escaped its impact. The loss of their sister and daughter shattered their world. They were overcome with grief and fear. They did not know what to do for Julio or themselves. They were a large family, so the clinical therapist gave them extended time each week to talk about their feelings, loss, questions and plans.

This process went on for several weeks, yet Julio and his family appeared unable to move beyond their intense grief. A turning point came one night as the family followed up on a homework assignment to write a personal letter to their deceased sister and daughter, as a way of honoring her.



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2

Each family member read his or her letter one at a time, noting the funny and good memories, and the tears began to flow. The outpouring of their emotions was almost too much to bear, but they found release and relief in this experience. After the emotional session, they expressed themselves more freely and directly with each other and were able to make concrete future plans.

Julio's family decided they needed to move out of the area, to feel safer and make a new start. The clinical therapist referred them back to the Healthy Start staff who provided help in locating housing and obtaining financial assistance. Julio became less fearful and sad. His appetite returned, he renewed his interest in his schoolwork, and his grades improved.

Although Julio and his family still acknowledge times of great sadness and feelings of emptiness when they realize that his sister is no longer with them, they have been able to carry on with their daily responsibilities. They express much gratitude to Healthy Start and the 3 R's Project for the support and help it provided during a most difficult time.

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation is supporting *Caring Across Communities* and its partners, such as The 3 R's Project, to address this need by increasing and improving mental health services for all America's children. Learn more about how programs like *Caring Across Communities* create innovative solutions for children like Julio at: [www.healthyschools.org](http://www.healthyschools.org)

For more information about the 3 R's Project, contact Eric Inouye at: [einouye@lacgc.org](mailto:einouye@lacgc.org)

For more information about the Caring Across Communities national program and related resources visit: <http://healthyschools.org/Immigrant-and-Refugee-Children/Caring-Across-Communities.aspx>

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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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