

SUCCESS STORY

Little Lucy: Alone in a Crowd

Los Angeles Child Guidance Clinic | California

By the time Lucy's mother, Silvia, reached out to the Los Angeles Child Guidance Clinic (LACGC), she feared she had lost her little girl. For months, Silvia had not seen Lucy smile or play. She was fixated on biting her nails, would cry frequently and was doing so poorly in the 1st grade that she was required to repeat it.

Lucy was losing weight and complaining of headaches. She had stopped listening to her mother and father and would lash out in anger or simply ignore them—behaviors Silvia was at a loss to explain. She had always known Lucy to be a happy little girl, eager to please and eager to learn.

“When I first met Lucy in my office with her mother, she was a cute, 7-year-old girl with long dark hair,” her counselor recalls. “She avoided looking at me and moved her little fingers nervously as her mother and I talked. Her mother told me that Lucy complained frequently of loneliness and was begging to return to Mexico.”

Lucy's teacher referred Lucy to the Los Angeles Child Guidance Clinic's 3Rs project, part of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation funded program, *Caring Across Communities*. Although counseling was a completely new idea to Silvia, she was willing to try it for Lucy's sake. From September to May, Lucy and her counselor worked together with the support of her mother to learn more about Lucy's thoughts and feelings and how to help her.

In the first session, details emerged that helped explain Lucy's emotional state. “Her mother knew their living situation was not the best—four adults and Lucy in a one-bedroom apartment,” said the counselor. “They couldn't afford anything else. They barely eked out enough income, even though all the adults were working.” But there was something that bothered Lucy more than her living situation: the loss of her brother.

Silvia had noticed that her older son was being threatened by local gang members. Terrified, she and her husband were compelled to send their son back to Mexico. Now, even though he was safe, Lucy's only sibling and the person who made her happiest was gone.

Careful of Lucy's fragile state, her LACGC counselor spoke to her in Spanish and used art therapy to encourage her to express her feelings. “From her art,” said the counselor, “I began to realize more fully the impact of her migration from Mexico.” Lucy slowly began to talk more and her favorite topic was her life in Mexico. She missed her friends, the foods she loved and even her cultural customs. “Lucy hadn't expressed this to anyone before,” said her counselor. “We began to talk about the Mexican traditions she would like to continue in Los Angeles.”



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Lucy also began to work through the grief she felt over living in the United States without her brother. But the sadness eased when her counselor suggested she write to her brother about her life and about how she missed him.

Over the course of the school year, Lucy became more confident in her English, she tried new things and gradually began to think of herself as a person with possibilities—not just loss. One day she eagerly reported that she had tried—and succeeded—at jumping rope. Something so simple, yet so important in the life of a young girl. Before long, she was making new friends, improving academically and reported that she wanted very much to stay in this country.

Lucy's mother, Silvia, reported that Lucy's problems at home had disappeared and her bright, happy daughter had returned to her. The ability to connect to her roots—while moving forward in acclimating to her new country—had proved to be the key to Lucy's happiness—an answer Lucy's mother believes would never have been found without the counseling and support of the LACGC.

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation is supporting *Caring Across Communities* and its partners, such as the Los Angeles Child Guidance Clinic, 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 Lucy at www.healthinschools.org.

To learn how *Caring Across Communities* is helping immigrant and refugee students succeed, please visit www.rwjf.org/newsroom/product.jsp?id=60828.

For more information about the Los Angeles Child Guidance Clinic, contact Eric Inouye at einouye@lacgc.org.

About the Center for Health and Health Care in Schools

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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