Case Vignette—Tommy

Child: Tommy
Age: 4
Point in Child Welfare System: Removal from family, entering CW system
Trauma Type: Domestic violence
Culture/Ethnicity: This child could be of any racial or cultural background.

Case Exercise

1. Read aloud the section on **Presenting Situation.** On flip chart paper (use as many sheets as you need), record what you know about:
   a. Tommy's trauma history
   b. Tommy's areas of strength or resilience
   c. Domains of functioning in which Tommy is having difficulty
2. Read aloud the section on **Background/History.**
   a. Add to the list of potentially traumatic events, or other experiences with separation, loss, and/or placement disruption.
3. Read aloud the **Evaluation/Assessment.**
   a. What other information do you need about the child's history?
   b. Identify list of potential areas for assessment, case management, and planning next steps.
   c. Make predictions about short-term and long-term outcome for this child and how a child welfare worker could modify this outcome.

You will have approximately 30 minutes for your discussion. Please take notes on the flip chart paper throughout your discussion, as your group will be asked to report back to the larger group on one of the questions in Section 3 (i.e., 3a, 3b, or 3c above).

Presenting Situation

Four-year-old Tommy entered foster care eight weeks ago, following an episode of domestic violence he had witnessed between his parents. Police had come and arrested his father and an ambulance had come to take his mother (bleeding and unconscious) to the emergency room. Extended family members were not available to care for him and he was placed in foster care.

He was initially quite withdrawn and resisted soothing or nurturance, but has gradually joined foster family members in petting and playing with their dog. He was initially very restless in sleep, awoke every hour and a half or two, and required about a half-hour to fall back asleep.

He remains restless, wakes twice a night with or without nightmares, and falls back asleep more easily. He appears irritable and fatigued during the day. He wets the bed two or three times a week, after being dry for years.

He has begun day care three times per week, but is at high risk to be excluded, because of intense episodes of aggression toward peers, especially girls. He can also be very helpful to others, appears sensitive to their upset, and attempts to comfort them. He is not interested in books or being read to, but is exploring drawing and painting. When frustrated, his demeanor tends to darken, eyes glare, and muscles tense and he breathes heavily. He is likely to attempt to get his way without regard to feelings or safety of others. He typically ignores verbal limits and desperately fights physical restraint, to the point of exhaustion. Following visits with his mother, he tends to isolate himself. He does not visit with his father who is incarcerated.

Background/History

Father has a history of domestic violence. Mother was physically abused as a child. During an especially loud argument, neighbors called police. Police intervened and called Child Welfare to assess child safety.

Evaluation/Assessment

Tommy is frightened by escalating parental arguments, has difficulty falling asleep and wants to sleep beside parents, has returned to bedwetting, is irritable during the day, and becomes aggressive with other children in child care. Tommy's feelings are very intense in foster care. When frustrated, he has a hot temper and hits, screams, bites, and stomps his feet against the floor, and may hit his head. Other times he cries and cries and can't be consoled, just goes limp. On the way to foster care he repeatedly tried to run away, saying he had to go back home.

Across his first five sessions in play therapy, Tommy typically enacts themes of cars crashing, police sirens wailing, and ambulances speeding to the scene. Sometimes the police cars and ambulances are caught up in the vehicle crashing. Tommy is not interested in continuing the play to the hospital or including doctors on the scene. There is little interpersonal interaction in his play. He sometimes gives the therapist a vehicle to drive and be crashed into, but he remains strongly in control of the play sequence. His therapist will be observing him in the day-care setting and parent-child visitation center.

Mother is distraught about separation from Tommy, furious with her husband for precipitating the foster placement, and is becoming increasingly depressed and at risk for return to substance abuse. Within visits, she tends to be worried about Tommy or near tears. She often finds fault with the foster parents. She is defensive when the therapist comes to observe a visit, and after Tommy leaves, she complains at length about her own experience in foster care as a young child and her difficulty arranging transportation to visits, since dad had wrecked her car several months ago after drinking too much at a family reunion.