



## Building Trust Maria's Story

*By Courtney Fischer, JPA Therapist*

Maria Garcia (not her real name) was initially referred for JPA individual counseling sessions by the school director and social worker to provide additional emotional support, as her family had recently experienced a traumatic event in the home.

Maria, a 13-year-old girl in 7th grade, was described by teachers as “overlooked.” Being the oldest sibling with a younger autistic sister (who requires 1:1 services/staff support), it was apparent that Maria put herself last. She was often called on at school to help de-escalate her sister when she was having a difficult time. Often, Maria was helping her sister up to three times a day, which took her away from her academics, lunch, social time with friends, and special classes.

Teachers described Maria as the ‘do-good’ big sister, who often appeared depressed and shut down, occasionally engaged in “negative attention seeking behaviors” with peers in the classroom. But her presenting symptoms were exacerbated after the traumatic incident at home. School personnel shared how Maria and her younger sister witnessed their mother being shot “accidentally” by their father while he was putting away his gun. I collaborated with the school director and social worker to engage this family, believing Maria would benefit from having her own therapist to process her feelings and experiences in a safe place.

I called Maria's mother, explaining my role at the school and wondering if she'd be interested in exploring individual therapy for her daughter. Mrs. Garcia felt hesitant about treatment, telling me “We don't believe in therapy. It's just not something we do.” I wondered if she'd be open to discussing her concerns/hesitancy about therapy in person at the school. Mrs. Garcia agreed to meet with me the following week.

Upon meeting, I greeted Mrs. Garcia warmly, thanking her for taking the time despite her hectic work schedule. I started with basic engagement, asking Mrs. Garcia how she was doing and how this school year felt so far to her and her family. I again outlined my role at the school and the services JPA offers. I mentioned that JPA staff therapists are separate from the school administration and how any information she shared with me was confidential.

Mrs. Garcia told me she was feeling “overwhelmed” and struggling to support her children emotionally while recovering from her gunshot injury. I acknowledged how difficult it must be to manage her physical pain while also attempting to hold the emotional pain of her children.

Mrs. Garcia again asked if our conversation was confidential. I reassured her that details she shared with would be kept private. I presented myself calmly and patiently to highlight my attention to her, engaging through actively listening while providing empathic reflections and attending responses to demonstrate my care and concern.

Mrs. Garcia shared more about her recent injuries and how she struggled to support her family financially, while also emotionally supporting her spouse and children. I allowed her to lead the conversation and discuss pressing issues. Mrs. Garcia added how she and her spouse had immigrated from Mexico, leaving their parents and other family members behind. She spoke about how she missed her family but recognized the need for her children to be raised in America. She discussed the culture differences and pros and cons of raising a family in Chicago versus Mexico.

I continued to listen to Mrs. Garcia, acknowledging her thoughts, feelings and perceptions, supporting her pace as she elaborated on her experiences and concerns. Towards the end of our 75-minute session, Mrs. Garcia said she was open to her daughter's "trying" therapy and she agreed to sign consent paperwork.

Over the course of two years, I worked closely with Maria and her family, creating a space for her to engage in treatment, while also inviting her parents to share their concerns. I emotionally supported the family during challenging times of transitions and shifts in family dynamics and several family relationships.

In the therapeutic relationship, I built rapport with Mrs. Garcia, creating a foundation of trust, safety, and genuine concern and attention. Acknowledging her resistance to treatment enabled us to focus on her feelings and experiences. Focusing on her feelings led Mrs. Garcia to identify the kind of support she needed. Together, we shaped our time into a trust-filled process and therapeutic relationship she could participate in.

Towards the end of our treatment time (as Maria moved towards graduation), Mrs. Garcia spoke of how she could see the "benefits of therapy" and how our parent-therapist relationship had offered her a place to "really talk" about things on her mind. Additionally, she shared the power of this relationship, encouraging friends and close family members to try therapy. Mrs. Garcia told me how therapy had had a positive impact on Maria as well: She had encouraged her young cousins to talk to the social workers/counselors at their schools.

Despite cultural norms and taboos that initially led Mrs. Garcia to resist therapy and treatment, building trust enabled her to be open to its possibilities. Mrs. Garcia grew in her ability to explore her own feelings and experiences, leading her to prioritize her own emotional needs, which also helped her relationship with Maria. Mrs. Garcia's self-awareness became a vital part not only of her progress in counseling, but of her daughter's participation in treatment. The therapeutic relationship we built together enabled her to see the power of self-care. **JPA**



## Parent Child Relationships

**What:** Do consistently communicate with your children.

**Why:** Talking regularly with your children about things that are important to them like sports, relationships, interests, and hobbies, communicates that they're your priority. Do this during dinner or in the car, a predictable and meaningful time for your family. Even if you're not that interested in the topic yourself, remember that it's your children's interests that are important. Be open to learning from them and trying new things yourself!

**What:** Be accepting of who your children are. Has your child asked if he or she can dye their bangs purple or go to a local band's concert? Your child may have interests unique and different from yours, or be different from who you were when you were their age.

**Why:** Making room for their unique selves promotes healthy identity self-exploration while living under the safety of your roof.

**What:** Take a non-judgmental approach to listening and reacting.

**Why:** Hear them out before responding. Try to keep a neutral expression even though you may be angry or anxious inside. This will allow your child to feel supported, even when they may have things to share they think will make you mad or be hard to hear. These are exactly the things you want them coming to you with. Don't react right away. Listen carefully and ask open-ended questions that focus on your child's thoughts and feelings about what's being reported. ("What do you think about that?" "How did it make you feel?" "What do you think will happen if...?") That also enables you to have a discussion, not an argument. **JPA**