

In Whose Best Interest?
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“Aimee! Aimee! throw the ball, right here...” Laurie Cooper, the school’s paraprofessional for special education, waved her hands, taking steps toward the small girl. “Hey! I’m wide open! Throw the ball right here!”

Another kid ran by, caught in a quick game of tag. Aimee began to jump, waving her arms and giggling, her ponytail bouncing up and down with each jump. As the second kid passed, casually bumping into her in the rush, Aimee automatically reached out, wildly flailing to hit. Finding her target long gone, she pulled her hand to her mouth, biting.

“Aimee! Aimee... No biting, right?” Laurie gently pulled Aimee’s hand out of her mouth, rubbing her arms. Aimee’s wail soon filled the playground as she dropped to the grass, crumpled and defeated. Working with Aimee everyday, as her one-to-one paraprofessional, hadn’t made it any easier for Laurie to see the child’s bright blue eyes fill with tears, fists clenched, frustrated, rising.

Two boys nearby stopped and stared, laughing and muttering comments under their breath.

“Weirdo!”

“Weird? That girl’s a retard!”

“Hey! She’s **not** a retard! Leave her alone!”

Hearing Aimee’s cry, her younger brother had come running across the playground, arriving just in time to catch the tail end of the conversation.

“Oooh, Tom, is that your girlfriend? Tom has a girlfriend! Tom likes retards.”

“That’s my sister!” He kicked the dirt, turning red in frustration, while the boys snickered. Hearing their continued mutterings, Tom lunged after them.

“Tom! Tom!”

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“Hey Laurie! Hello Aimee!” Jennifer Atlee was Aimee’s special education teacher, passing through the playground on her way to pick up her next student. Bending to Aimee’s level, she touched her shoulder.

“Hello Aimee!”

No response.

“What’s up?” Jennifer stood up, pulling Laurie to the side. Over the past three years, she had seen Aimee transformed, no longer the seven year old who spent her day on the floor, biting and spitting. Aimee was a girl who laughed, who took turns during games, who looked you in the eyes. She even shared items in snack! Now, here she was again -- lying in the dirt of the playground, slowly shutting the world out.

“I don’t know Jennifer... It’s been like this all week. If it’s not one thing, it’s another. The playground has a lot going on, you know?”

“I thought we were going to pull out a small group of kids today. I talked to Miss Georges about it last week...” Jennifer frowned and bit her lip, thinking of the suggestions she’d made over the course of the year, many never coming to fruition.

“No one really wants to talk about Diego or Dora in 5th grade anymore, though, Jennifer... Even playing ball has been hard.”

“Yeah, well, Aimee’s not really a ball player, right, Aim?” Laughing, she bent down again to tickle Aimee’s sides.

No response.

“What about the Uno cards? The bowling set? I told Miss Georges to send some kids to my room, I have a ton of stuff that Aimee has been practicing in our sessions. She even keeps score!”

Laurie shrugged. "My hands are kind of full just getting her down the hall and onto the playground. It's been a struggle. I don't really know--"

The bell rang.

"Oh! I'm late picking up Derek. We'll talk about this later, okay?" Jennifer rushed off.

Laurie hurriedly nodded, her attention back to Aimee. She pulled her off the ground, anxious about the impending halls, full of students, the noise, the chaos. It wasn't going to be pleasant. She sighed. It was only her first year working with Aimee, but she had seen this happen to many kids in her twenty years of working as a paraprofessional. Something about fifth grade. And sixth. Sixth was even worse.

"We have to go back inside now, Aim, okay?"

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"Hey honey! Where's Aimee?" Jana Smith kissed her husband's cheek while walking in the door.

"The bus is late today. She should be home any minute. I got a call from Miss Georges today. And the principal."

"Oh? What happened?"

"Well, she wanted to let us know that Aimee's IEP meeting is coming up in a few weeks."

"Yeah, I know, I'm waiting for them to schedule the date. What about the principal?"

"Tom got in a fight today."

"What?!? Tom?? I thought you were going to say something else about Aimee."

“Well... I talked to Tom about it. It’s about Aimee. She tried to hit a boy from Tom’s class on the playground. They started making fun of her. He went on the attack.”

“What? I’m calling him right now, we have to have a talk.”

“Jana, I don’t think Tom’s the problem.”

“What? He’s fighting! At school! Hitting other kids. How is that not a problem?”

“But listen to yourself -- he’s in one fight. One day. Defending his big sister. It’s almost sweet. I think we have a different problem...”

“With what, Matt?” Jana narrowed her eyes. “With Aimee? Are you trying to say that *Aimee’s* the problem?”

“Aimee’s hitting almost every day now. The principal said that another parent complained -- her son is afraid to sit near Aimee during lunch. She comes home, she’s tired, she’s stressed, she’s cranky. She doesn’t interact, she’s losing words. I mean, with her IEP coming up, I just --”

“Just what? What do you think?” Jana’s face turned stony. “You want to put her somewhere else? Our daughter? She’s our daughter, Matt, our daughter. She belongs with kids, with kids her age, playing, learning. They don’t understand!! They have to be doing something wrong, she’s been doing so well... She can do it. I know she can.”

“I know Jana. I know. We’ve had this discussion before. I agree. I just -- she’s stressed, that’s all I’m saying. The IEP meeting’s coming up, and she’s stressed there.”

“Well, maybe we should go to school. I mean, she wasn’t this stressed last year, or the year before. We chose this elementary school for a reason! Its philosophy has always been to change the environment, rather than to try to change Aimee. What’s going on with that teacher? Maybe I should go to school and find out!”

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“Hi! Jana! How are you today?” Jennifer reached out to shake her hand, warmly, greeting one of her favorite parents. Jana was so involved in her child’s life, so eager to try new suggestions, always continuing the schoolwork into the home.

“I’m just worried. Aimee’s so sad now. It’s really hard to get her out of the house in the mornings. It’s like she doesn’t want to come to school anymore. I’d really like to see her classroom.”

Jennifer was sympathetic. Aimee had been having a tough time, and it was easy to see that she no longer thought of school as a safe space. Fifth grade was different. Children were growing up, hitting the preteen years, and Aimee was being left behind. Classroom changes, flexible schedules, new teachers... Her aggression had increased. A parent had complained when Aimee hit her son during snack recently, questioning her son’s safety at school. Jennifer firmly believed that inclusion should be at least part of every child’s day. It was the reason she had chosen, seven years ago, to be a special education teacher in a general education school, despite private schools trying to woo her with salaries twice as large. But the new principal was pushing Jennifer to search for openings in self-contained classes, even if it meant that Aimee had to switch to another school.

“It’s true that Aimee’s having a tough time. I’ve been increasingly concerned myself. I believe Miss Georges is actually on a prep right now. Maybe we can all talk about this together?” Jennifer suggested,

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Miss Kayla Georges, Aimee’s fifth grade teacher, was sitting at her desk, finishing the last of her students’ recent compositions about their holiday experiences. Once again, Aimee’s work looked to have been done mostly by Laurie. She sighed, wondering how to address this for what seemed like the hundredth time. She knew exactly how the conversation would go. Laurie would complain, stating that this work was far ahead of Aimee’s level, that it was impossible to get her attention or keep her attention. Jennifer would stop by, give some suggestions on a few adaptations. And then Kayla would be left to figure out a way to implement any of them.

It was becoming too much. She had four other children with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) in this classroom. A dozen more who were not reading at grade level, including several who were still learning English. The differentiation was becoming a nightmare, leaving her stuck at school until long past dark. And nothing in her teacher education program had prepared her for the intense needs of a child like Aimee -- the daily schedules, the distraction-free environment, the structure... It was hard not to feel like giving up some days.

“Miss Georges?” Jennifer knocked, “Aimee’s mother, Jana, is here. I thought maybe we could speak about Aimee’s progress in school together?”

Kayla stood up, ready to shake Jana’s hand. She was afraid, though, that this meeting would not go well. It was only Kayla’s second year teaching, and her first working with a student like Aimee. Too often, it felt to Kayla that Mrs. Smith seemed to think that she was incompetent, or that she wanted to simply kick Aimee out of her class.

“Miss Georges, I’m very concerned about Aimee. Tom tells me that other kids on the playground are making fun of her. Every day she comes home terribly upset, and is getting more and more withdrawn by the day. We worked so hard for Aimee’s words, for her to make friends... We feel like she’s losing them more each day. What is she doing in school?”

“Mrs. Smith, we try every day with Aimee to get her more involved in the class. It can be challenging, but we all know that it is in Aimee’s best interest. We all want to see her succeed. The other students in the classroom love Aimee. She has many friends in this classroom. Unfortunately, not everyone outside of the classroom knows Aimee well. And kids, well, kids can be mean, frankly, when they are not used to something or someone.”

Mrs. Smith continued, “My husband wants to know if Aimee would be better in a different class, but I’m not sure. I’ve seen what happens to kids like her! They have a classroom in the basement, they get the last lunch, they never get invited to school plays. Everyone laughs, kids make fun of them, they’re scared of them! We fought really

hard to keep Aimee out of that kind of a classroom, and I don't want her going back there now!" Mrs. Smith was visibly upset, tears in her eyes.

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"Oh! Excuse me!" Laurie looked up, bumping into someone on her way out of the bathroom. "Oh! Mrs. Smith! Hey! I'm Laurie, Aimee's para? We met on open school day a few weeks ago?"

"Hi Laurie. Of course I remember you," Jana sniffed, taking a tissue to wipe her eyes. "Thank you for working with Aimee. I know she's been difficult recently."

"Oh, it's my pleasure. It's true that Aimee's been upset in the past few weeks, but she always keeps it interesting! My day is never boring." Laurie and Jana both smiled. "Do you want to talk?"

Guiding Jana to a bench, Laurie began chattering about some of the projects that Aimee had participated in recently. "The school garden has been wonderful for Aimee... She loves painting the flowers she sees, and the art teacher has been teaching her to use chalks and pastels too. I heard that she's been bowling and keeping score with Jennifer, and a couple of girls from class have asked if it would be okay to invite Aimee to their birthday parties. I gave them your number; their moms should be calling you soon."

"Thanks," Jana smiled. "It's really nice to hear those things. It seems like every phone call recently... Aimee hit this student. Aimee's biting her hands. Aimee's refusing to eat..." her voice trailed off.

"I know how it can be... My nephew, he has a disability... But there are things they can get into sometimes! When he started after school at his new school, they started painting, and he decided the best thing to paint was himself! Everyday, whiskers and a nose, self-made... It was a wretch to clean, but so adorable, and man he loved art!" Laurie laughed, nudging Jana's arm. "It's awful, I know. But I take my laughs when I can. Like I said, it's never boring!"

“I just-- They want her to leave her class, maybe the school. I don’t know what to do... I want her to be able to go to birthday parties of other girls, to have playdates in our community. I want her to be able to walk into the garden and paint to her heart’s content. Her brother’s here. She’s been with Jennifer for three years now. It’s just... They think changing to fifth grade is hard! Changing classes, changing schools?” Jana sighed again,

“You know, it’s not all bad, though. My nephew... His teacher thought he was a terror. Ripping other kids’ work, taking scissors to his hair. The school wanted him gone, and his mother got angry. She pushed back, and he stayed for a while, but it just got worse. At home, he was kicking and biting my niece. My sister was really worried -- he was only 8! What about when he was 18? But they shopped around, found a public school that specializes in kids like him, like Aimee. They were scared, too, but now he goes to art class, he goes on weekly field trips, they have a whole room full of swings and trampolines and yoga classes. Even at home, it’s like he’s another person. They *get* the kids there. They know how to help.”

“I guess.” Jana pursed her lips, staring into the distance. “I guess.”

“I mean, I love Aimee. I’d miss her. I love that we get to go bowling and that the girls invite her to their birthday parties. But the pain in her face, Jana? It’s getting worse each day. Just think about it, okay?” Walking away, Laurie patted Jana on the shoulder, but Jana just kept staring into space.

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Jennifer smiled brightly as Jana and Matt entered the room. “Welcome! I’m so happy to see you guys again!”

Laurie and Kayla were already seated at the small table. Both smiled at the Smiths, although Kayla’s smile was a little forced. Jennifer grabbed Aimee’s file and brought it to the table, passing around an attendance sheet.

“So, as everyone knows, we’re here to discuss Aimee’s IEP for the upcoming school year. We’ve had several conferences about Aimee, so I think we’re all on the

same page of understanding Aimee's strengths and weaknesses. There are lots of things we need to talk about: setting goals for the upcoming year, current therapy services, and so on. We all know the drill."

Everyone nodded, as Jennifer passed around a copy of her most recent progress report on Aimee's goals, as well as reports from her occupational and speech therapists.

"The first thing that we have to decide is whether Aimee's current placement continues to be the least restrictive environment for Aimee. Just to review - the least restrictive environment is the place that finds the maximum balance between spending time with typically developing peers and helping Aimee to meet her IEP goals and achieve her best. Currently, Aimee is in an inclusion classroom with Kayla and with support from Jennifer as a special education teacher and a full-time one-to-one paraprofessional, Laurie" Jennifer laughed nervously before continuing, "Given the reports we have received from the staff supporting Aimee, we must consider whether a self-contained classroom in a community school or in a special school would be a more appropriate placement for Aimee at this time."

Jana winced, grabbing her husband's hands under the table. He squeezed her hand, and leaned towards her, whispering, "we are lucky parents with a beautiful daughter, no matter what we decide -- don't forget that."

Discussion Questions

- 1) What do you think is the best placement for Amy?
- 2) What options are available to the school, other than placing Aimee in a more restrictive environment?
- 3) What assumptions and beliefs are driving the Smiths' concern for Aimee's placement? Jennifer's? Miss George's?
- 4) Does the ability to include students with disabilities change due to the severity of the disability? Type of disability?