

Magic Moment Memo **October 2015**

As someone new to the field of infant mental health, I am continually finding myself surrounded by “magic moments” – mostly as I learn something new or see something in practice with my own children that I’ve learned in a classroom. As a central intake hub, we at Essex Pregnancy and Parenting Connection (EPPC) link families to many others who provide direct services, and we hope and trust that the families are having “magic moments” of their own as they work with their home visitors, or perhaps after attending a session of “Incredible Years.” Thus, the experience of seeing a magic moment unfold during the work day is particularly special.

EPPC was fortunate enough to receive funding to run a Music Together® series in Newark. We recruited a number of families and were excited and hopeful about the experience. Our first session was nerve-racking, as I handled all of the humdrum work of the day - registrations, photo release forms, introducing our teacher, etc., and then settled in to sing and drum with some adorable babies and toddlers and their parents. One of the first participants to walk in was Cheryl. Lugging a baby carrier, with a tiny baby inside, I noticed how stiffly she held herself and the total lack of expression on her face. I smiled and introduced myself, and noticed with shock the tiny baby had a similar lack of expression as his mother. The class began, and Cheryl had to be prompted to remove the baby from the carrier. She held baby Aiden away from her, facing outwards. Her arms didn’t cradle him, and she never sought out his gaze. Around us, mothers and babies laughed and danced, while Cheryl continued marching along with the rhythm, but without joy or pleasure. It was almost like I was watching a real-life version of the Still Face experiment, only with a baby that no longer had any reaction to his mother being completely expressionless.

After the class, the teacher and I conferred as we both expressed concern about Cheryl. We agreed to work hard to engage her, and figure out a way to draw her and her baby together.

The weeks went by. My colleagues at EPPC all noted Cheryl’s seeming lack of attachment to Aiden, and his lack of attachment to her. Week after week, our wonderful teacher did everything possible to engage Cheryl and Aiden, pointing out when he reached for instruments, or bobbed his head or clapped to the music. We made funny faces with him, gently prompted her to rock him, hold him closer, notice the changes in his body when the music would change. The other mothers and babies also got in on the act, encouraging baby Aiden, smiling and laughing and tickling him. Slowly we saw Cheryl start to more naturally turn Aiden towards her, respond to him reaching for a particular instrument, and clap her hands with his to the beat. We realized with joy that Aiden would start wiggling and squirming the moment he was brought into class and caught sight of the teacher. Although his affect was still startlingly flat, we started to see the occasional smile and coo.

After eight weeks, our series was done. Cheryl and Aiden were our most regular attendees. Despite transportation difficulties, they made it to nearly every class. We were also thrilled to see Cheryl had signed up for our Parenting Palooza, where she was going to again participate in Music Together. The day was hectic, but I caught sight of Cheryl and Aiden several times. I smiled when I realized that Cheryl

had positioned her stroller so that Aiden was facing her and she was peeking at him throughout lunch. Our team was thrilled to see her there and participating. I remember feeling so pleased by how much progress she had seemed to make.

My “magic moment” didn’t happen until the very end of the day. In the hustle and bustle of packing up the event, everyone exhausted and eager to go home, I saw Cheryl and Aiden by the front door of the facility, waiting for their ride. My heart swelled as I watched Cheryl crouch down in front of Aiden, take a large colorful balloon and bring it to his gaze. She smiled and laughed as he caught sight of the balloon and reached out for it. She cooed and brought the balloon closer and shook it slightly, and I heard her speak softly to him about the pretty balloon. I watched as his eyes sought out hers, and their gazes locked. Small smiles were on both their faces. I watched them for a few more minutes continue to play with the balloon.

I’m certain that for the rest of my professional career, I will always remember that magical moment of mother and child connecting and engaging in a way that had previously not been possible. While I knew that the Music Together class would be a wonderful opportunity to improve parent and child interaction, I had no idea how powerful the series would be for our families. I feel so fortunate to be doing this work and being able to help, in whatever small way we can, to enhance the mental and emotional health of babies and their caregivers.

** All names have been changed to protect confidentiality.

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