

REAL STORIES REAL IMPACT

Healthy Child Development



By five-years-old, Janine* had witnessed significant domestic violence between her mother and father. By the time the Department of Children and Families placed her in foster care, she had also been homeless multiple times and was living in unsafe housing. The trauma of Janine’s early experiences was evident in her behavior. She responded to others’ attempts at interaction by hitting and biting instead of talking through her frustrations. Janine’s behavior was so problematic that she was expelled from her child care program. Janine needed a nurturing and stable environment in which to grow.

Too many children face the same traumas as Janine. According to the National Center for Children and Policy, a third of all Massachusetts children are exposed to risk factors that threaten their healthy development and success in school. These risk factors, which include hunger, inadequate housing, and exposure to violence, can disrupt the course of a child’s life long before he or she ever has a shot at success.

Janine was referred to the Child Witness to Violence Project at the Boston Medical Center, an agency funded through a United Way effort to help local community agencies and child care providers identify and respond to young children who have been affected by violence. Through United Way investments, the Child Witness to Violence Project was able to work together with Janine’s foster mother and child care provider, enabling them to help Janine develop trusting relationships with her foster mother and new school setting.

Because of this coordinated response, Janine’s behavior has improved dramatically over time. “We knew, if this girl could be stabilized, her anxiety and stress would diminish so that she could experience success,” said Betsy McAlister Groves, project director at the Child Witness to Violence Project. “If we can repair things at this early age, she has a promising future in front of her.”

Last year, United Way served 21,953 children in high quality programs like this one. United Way’s standards for programs include staff who are trained to support not only the children in their care but also the families and other caregivers who have an impact on those children’s lives. These practices have been shown to reduce behavioral and emotional stress in children and improve school readiness, so that we can prevent early negative experiences from becoming obstacles for children’s long-term success.

* Name has been changed to protect the identity of the child.

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—Betsy McAlister Groves
Project Director
Child Witness to Violence Project

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