



ZERO TO THREE

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DC:0-5

CASE REPORT: EMMA



Case Summary and Conceptualization:

Emma is a 3-year-old Caucasian female who has a history of difficulties with self-regulation and aggression both at home and school. Physical aggression, temper outbursts, and noncompliance occur at a higher frequency and intensity at home with her parents. Factors contributing to increased difficulty at home include parental conflict, family stressors including living in a one-bedroom apartment, the upcoming birth of Emma's sibling, and parental psychopathology. In addition, she has developmental delays in fine and gross motor functioning, which increase frustration in her day.

Based on her presentation, Emma meets diagnostic criteria for Disorder of Dysregulated Anger and Aggression of Early Childhood with Predominantly Reactive Aggression. Other diagnoses considered and rejected included sleep disorders, anxiety disorders, and mood disorders. Developmental Coordination Disorder may be considered, but because of the more recent onset of problems in gross and fine motor development, a more thorough medical and/or neurological assessment would be in order. Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) was considered given parental report on SPAS (Spence Preschool Anxiety Scale), past diagnosis, and family history. However, at this time, parents denied compulsions and rule-based behaviors that rise to the level of impairment to warrant a diagnosis. Further ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) was considered because her teachers have concern about her ability to follow routines, remain on-task, and complete multistep directions. However, at this point, symptoms are sub-threshold for diagnosis and may be reassessed later.



Diagnostic Summary

Axis I: Disorder of Dysregulated Anger and Aggression of Early Childhood, Predominantly Reactive Aggression

Axis II: Caregiving Dimension: Level 3—Compromised to Disturbed relationships with both parents, with different struggles in the parent-child relationship with each. There are power struggles where Emma tries to control her parents, and they do not appear attuned during play. Despite each trying to apply appropriate coping resources to challenging situations, they are not successful or sustained.

Caregiving Environment: Level 3—Compromised to Disturbed Caregiving Environment. Emma's parents are conflicted about how to handle her behavior and have other sources of marital conflict. Parents have trouble regulating their own emotions when Emma has a tantrum. The "family" relationships reflect irregular engagement and some role imbalance.

Axis III: Good health, far sighted (corrected with glasses), recent gross and fine motor problems requiring occupational therapy (OT) and physical therapy (PT) intervention, no other significant physical conditions/considerations noted.

Axis IV: Upcoming birth of sibling, parental conflict, recent separation from nanny due to parental leave, mother's anxiety and depression, and father's OCD.

Axis V: Emma demonstrates normal cognitive and speech functioning. She has gross and fine motor delays being addressed with OT and PT. She has emerging emotional competency, but her social relational capacity is delayed.

This case report was adapted from case submitted by Stephanie Wagner, PhD, licensed clinical psychologist, clinical assistant professor, Child Study Center at Hassenfeld Children's Hospital of New York at New York University (NYU) Langone; and Lauren Knickerbocker, PhD, clinical psychologist, assistant professor of child and adolescent psychiatry, NYU Child Study Center.