

TRAINING SCENARIO

Equal Access Expectations

Setting: An emergency shelter project that houses 15 families in a large renovated home with shared kitchen and bathroom facilities. Project staff support families to move into more permanent arrangements throughout their 90-day stay. Each shift has a manager onsite throughout the shift. Shift manager Ahmad receives a knock on his open office door, and Jack, a resident, walks in.



Jack: Hey, can I talk to you?

Ahmad: Sure, come on in. Take a seat, what's up?

Jack: Listen, I don't want to get anyone in trouble. We really appreciate that you guys were here to take us in and I don't want to cause any waves...

Ahmad: No, please. There are lots of families that depend on this project. If there's an issue, I definitely need to know. I'm sure we can figure it out and for most things I can keep your concern confidential.

Jack: Thanks, I really appreciate that. It's Joanna, our case manager. She's giving Ben a hard time.

Ahmad: Your son? He's 13, right?

Jack: Well, you know how we told you Ben was born Megan and later we found out he identifies as a boy? It created a lot of problems in his old school and it's part of the reason why we moved here without a job or anything. So I felt like I should tell the staff all this in case there was a problem, but I didn't expect the staff itself to be the problem.

Ahmad: What happened?

Jack: Well, she keeps implying that Ben might be happier doing girl things. At first my wife and I didn't notice; we thought she was just encouraging Ben to play with the other kids. But then we realized she was only encouraging Ben to play with the girls, and only spoke up to encourage him to do activities when there was a group of girls playing. It's not like she's blatantly challenging how we're raising Ben, but we're worried that's where this is headed. It was hard enough going through this the first time; my family doesn't need someone putting Ben through the wringer again. He's just getting settled at school and making friends. I really don't want any problems.

Continued

This exercise discusses how a supervisor can intervene and review project policy with a staff person.

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Ahmad: I really appreciate you bringing this up with me. From here I'm going to follow up with Joanna and address these issues with her directly. I may not be able to discuss with you the specific solution I decide since Joanna is an employee and has a right to confidentiality, but, if this continues, I want you to alert me or the manager on duty as soon as you're comfortable.

On Joanna's next shift, Ahmad schedules a meeting with Joanna.

Ahmad: Hey, thanks for making time to meet, I know things are really hectic right now with a full house.

Joanna: No problem, what's up?

Ahmad: I wanted to touch base on the Ramirez family. How are things going? You're their case manager, right? Are they settling in ok? Any concerns at this point?

Joanna: It's funny you should mention them. I actually do have some concerns. You may not have known but their oldest, Ben — well she's really a girl. They're raising her as a boy but that's creating all kinds of problems for her. I've been trying to help her get more comfortable here with some of the other girls, but I think we should be doing more.

Ahmad: Joanna, I think we should review the guidelines around what family issues concern staff and which ones are up to the parents to figure out. We get lots of different kinds of families here as you know. Sometimes it can be tough to see a family struggle with any challenge, but we have to really careful about how we become involved.

Joanna: Well, I think it could be child abuse. I mean, look — how is she going to be successful in life if they're doing this to her?

Ahmad: Joanna, I appreciate that you are concerned about Ben, like we all are concerned about all our clients. You know they are working closely with their doctor on this from the case notes I read and that they had a meeting with the principal at the school to make sure there wouldn't be any issues. If you are concerned about any abuse within this shelter our protocol requires you report it to the shift manager or page the project manager. What specifically do you think is endangering Ben? He seems like he's doing well from my interactions and the daily logs I've read.

Joanna: We need to show parents how to raise their kids. It's part of what we do all the time here; teach them how not to hit their own kids; how to feed them nutritious meals; how to read to them when they're little. You know, it's one of those basic things.

Continued

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Ahmad: I think it's great that you're concerned about Ben's well-being. Actually for kids experiencing gender identity challenges, most mental health experts now believe that the best approach is affirming the young person's feelings and letting them have the time and space to figure out the issues. In some cases, that means supporting them in living as the gender they feel they are. I can pull some articles for you on the issue and I can email you a link to a great documentary on the subject. But to be clear Joanna, this issue is very much outside of our purview as staff at a shelter. Ben's parents are working closely with both his school and doctor to ensure he's making healthy choices. Moving forward you need to focus on the milestones established in their case plan and not second-guess Ben's parents as long as he seems to be doing well, ok?

Joanna: You think this is okay to allow this to happen at the shelter?

Ahmad: Regardless of what I think, as a staff member at this project, I know we have very clear rules on what is appropriate to work on with our clients and what is not. If it's helpful we can review those guidelines and make a plan for moving forward with the Ramirez's. I can also do some shuffling and assign the Ramirez's to someone else if you would prefer that.

Joanna: You're right. I got hung up on something that wasn't my business. I think I can keep working with them if you're ok with it? I'll read these articles and get back to you if I have any questions.

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These steps supported non-discrimination, respecting individuals and confidentiality

- » The project had literature, guidelines and intake forms that let the client know it would be safe to bring his concerns to the shelter manager.
- » The manager heard the client's concerns and confirmed that the staff person's actions were not appropriate. The manager also indicated that some issues would not be covered by confidentiality (issues related to the imminent harm of an individual trigger mandated reporting requirements) and that the employee's own right to confidentiality may prevent him from following up with the family to relay the result.
- » The manager was able to initiate the discussion with the employee without disclosing the underlying complaint. Depending on a client's preference, the nature of the complaint, and appropriate personnel action, this may not always be possible. Being clear with a client about the limitations of confidentiality ensures there is no unexpected disclosure or action taken by management. If management must act based on the nature of the complaint even when contrary to a client's preference, acknowledging the decision and the client's frustration may help alleviate some of their dissatisfaction.
- » The manager gently, but firmly, reminded the employee of the child's correct gender pronouns.

Questions to consider

- » If you were in Jack's position, is there another way he could have handled the problem?
- » Did Ahmad choose the right approach to discuss the concern with Joanna?
- » What if Joanna had not been forthcoming about her concerns about Ben's gender? How could Ahmad have brought up Jack's complaint about Joanna's behavior?
- » Is there anything you would have done differently?
- » Ahmad did not address Joanna's use of the wrong pronoun to refer to Megan. If you were in Ahmad's role, how would you have handled this situation?