

Case Study

Zoe and Tom Harper's Story

Tina and John Harper have two children, Zoe (10 and in year 4) and Tom (7 and in year 1). The children have attended Fernbark Primary since they started school. John works full time, and Tina has returned to part-time work this year. When Tina works, her parents look after the children before and after school.

Tina and Grandma have noticed that lately, Tom has been losing his temper a lot and finds it hard to settle down after an outburst. Tina has noted it has been harder and harder to get Tom ready for school. Also, when he comes home, he fights with Zoe, sometimes shoving her. He likes to read and do homework, play on his iPad and watch TV.

Tom's teacher has said he isn't following instructions in class and asked if there was anything at home that might be upsetting him. Tina has shared with the teacher that John did not want her to go back to work and that the lead up to this was difficult at home. "We've been fighting a lot about what is best for the kids and who should look after them. Tom has been asking lots of questions and seems worried about what will change for him and does not like seeing us argue," she said.

Tom's teacher also mentioned that Tom does well during sport and physically active times, but during class time he is easily distracted and seems to forget what he's doing. Tom has one close friend, Alex, who he spends a lot of time with, and he often plays alone when Alex is away. Tina also told the teacher that Tom has difficulty falling asleep sometimes, wants to sleep in their bed, and sometimes wakes up with nightmares. He has had quite a few absences because of stomach aches this year.

Tom's teacher spoke to his teacher from last year, who said this his first year at school went well, and that she had a good relationship with him. Sometimes he had trouble separating from his mum when she dropped him off, but was fine by the end of the year.

Zoe is happy at school and doing well academically. Tina notices she puts a lot of pressure on herself and thinks she spends more time on school work than she should for her age. Tina has observed she wants everything to be perfect and has trouble starting tasks or projects for school. She seems to have a nice group of friends but she worries about adult type issues and picks out things from the news, worrying and questioning her parents about them. This concern for the world around her seems to be increasing. Her teacher is pleased with her academic progress and has spoken to Tom's teacher and feels that Zoe might need some extra support.

Fernbark Primary School has been doing KidsMatter Primary (a mental health promotion, prevention and early intervention initiative developed for primary schools www.kidsmatter.edu.au) for the last 2 years and has developed a school policy for when there's a concern about a student. Tom's teacher has followed the first few steps, namely chatting to other teachers who know Tom, and raising his concerns with the parents. He then arranged Tom's parents' permission for him to see the school counsellor.

The school counsellor saw Tom for 3 sessions, and was concerned about his level of anxiety symptoms. She suggested that his parents might wish to take him to an external counsellor, as she was not able to see him regularly.

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Around this time, Grandma took Tom to the GP for a persistent cough, and got talking about Tom's behaviour and Zoe's worrying. The GP has known the family since the kids were born and has some suggestions. The GP indicated that Tom could see a psychologist and provided the contact details of a few who work with children.

The GP also raised the possibility that Tom could be referred to the Child and Adolescent Area Mental Health Services (CAMHS are specialist mental health services for children and adolescents up to the age of 18yrs and their families) to support him, his family and the school to manage the concerns.

The school principal has offered to make a referral to a nearby Medicare Local, who have some funding to work with children under 12, who have, or are at risk of developing, a mild to moderate mental, childhood behavioural or emotional disorder, and who could benefit from short-term psychological services. This would allow Tom to see someone whilst arrangements are made to see his family GP again to get the referral. It will also be a cost-effective option for the family as the funding covers any costs.

The school have known the family for a long time and with the parents' consent and agreement, would like to stay informed about Tom's progress to determine how they can better support him at school.

The school counsellor arranges a meeting with Tom's parents and his teacher to discuss the various options for support available in the community for Tom and his family, as well as ways the school can continue to provide support.