



Direct Support: How it Works

Brian is 14 years old and has been receiving mental health care since he was three. By the time he entered 5th grade, Brian had been to four different schools. Shortly thereafter, he was hospitalized and entered a residential treatment center. After seven months, the treatment center closed and Brian went home to live with his mother Ruth, his father, and his older brother. Because of funding provided through a grant, Brian and his family had the opportunity to get help in their home and in the community. That is when they met Scott, a direct support specialist who has been working with the family for about a year. Brian's story is based on a series of interviews.

Brian's Story

My name is Brian. My favorite things to do are play video games and have my friends come over. I really like it when we all play together. My hero is my older brother who just moved to California and lives near the beach. My favorite subject in school is science and I especially like it when we learn about animals. I am hoping to someday get a job at McDonalds.

I met Scott [Brian's Direct Support Specialist] at around Halloween last year. I have a lot of fun doing things with him. Usually we play games, go to the mall, and spend time together at my house. But we have also been to some concerts, the fair, and even Golf Land. Sometimes he stays for dinner and eats with me and my mom and dad. It's great to just hang out and do things together.

Since working with Scott, I have changed. I don't get as angry anymore. I used to get really angry and now not as much. I don't fight with people as much any more and I cuss less—I get along with people better. So because of that I have been going out a lot more and I can do a lot more different things than I used to. Like, we get to go to movies together at the theater. The last movie we saw was *The Simpsons Movie*. It was good and I had fun doing that. And lately my friends have been able to come over more. We play video games together and play on the computer. And my mom will be around and she will make cookies for us sometimes—I like it when she does that! It feels good to do all these things.

Ruth's Story

I knew from early infancy that something was unique in Brian. One night shortly before he turned three, he was crying in bed. I went in his room to comfort him and he hit me—a closed fist punch. The psychologist dismissed my concerns about Brian by saying, “He was having a nightmare and didn't know what he was doing.” I took on a lot of guilt and began to doubt my parenting skills.

We sent Brian to preschool to give him more structure. We believed someone could do better with him. Right away we were getting calls from the school, and I said, “It's bad isn't it?” He had a hard time socializing; he was hitting other kids. Then, when he was in first grade, Brian was transferred to a self-contained classroom. He was totally comfortable there. He completely blossomed in that smaller classroom—the lights were dim, there wasn't too much stuff on the walls—it was the right environment. He was safe and the other kids were safe with him. But then, due to class size, Brian was sent to another school during second grade. By February he was

no longer doing well. We took him to the doctor for more tests, and that is when he was diagnosed with bipolar. With new medications, he was OK for a few years. But things got worse in 5th grade and he was hospitalized and then admitted to a residential treatment center (RTC). After seven months, the RTC facility closed and Brian came home. Our case manager told us that thanks to a grant we would be able to get someone to help us work with Brian in our home. So, we met Scott, a direct support specialist. And that was it. He taught us how to deal with our son.

All along we needed someone to be in our home. We needed someone who really knew how to work with Brian. Scott is a great big teddy bear—a big guy with a soft heart. Early on, there was one day when Brian was upset. When that would happen before, I would lock myself in the bedroom. This time, Scott made eye contact with me that said “stay here.” So I backed up, but stayed and watched. I saw how Scott was able to figure out how to work with Brian—that when Scott could take a step towards Brian that meant he could talk to my son. But even when Brian would hit Scott hard, Scott always knew when to step in and intervene; and he has done it like any loving parent would want it done. Because of Scott, I am no longer afraid of our son. I know how to give him time and space.

Scott showed us how to see when Brian is testing his boundaries to make sure things are safe. He showed us how to help Brian make choices by breaking down the options and helping him decide. And that is fun for Brian. He is learning responsibility for his actions. Now we are at the point where if he breaks something, he knows that he has to pay for it himself. He has come a long way.

I love having our son at home. I love tucking him in at night and saying prayers with him. Just doing regular stuff together. I am happy that I am able to teach him the lessons that a mother needs to teach her child.

Brian did not ask to be born with this. If he can learn to help himself, he can be a productive member of the community. Having Scott in our home saves taxpayers money. If it weren't for Scott, our son might not be in our

home; chances are he would either be in a therapeutic group home, a residential treatment center, or juvenile detention. Having our son at home is best for us, and best for society—it's really the best for all of us.

Scott's Story

I have worked with Brian's family for one year. In the beginning I saw a mom who was crying due to fear and frustration. I saw a child who was out of control, occasionally violent, and not respectful towards his family's property.



The very first thing I did was build a working relationship with the family, including Brian. I helped the family decide together what goals we were going to work on. With Brian, I always valued his feelings and encouraged him to express them freely to me and to his Mom. I did this by teaching Brian to talk with his Mom in a calm and respectful manner. I helped Brian understand why teachers and family members were asking him to do certain things. This helped him make sense of things, which in turn helped him buy in to the plans and goals.

Every single day with Brian is different. I do some pre-planning, but I have to be ready to think outside of the box and change those plans according to Brian's mood. If I see that he's having a bad day, I can bring him to a better place by using humor

and empathy. I help him take breaks and calm down, and get into a better frame of mind. I do that by prompting him to walk away and divert his attention to one of his interests. Lately, I've been asking him questions about Halloween because I know he's excited about that. That helps get him un-stuck and re-focused.

I get to Brian's house before he gets home from school to see what Ruth's plans are. She may want to run errands with Brian, for example. I help her plan the time by creating scenarios that could possibly arise during these outings. This helps Ruth by getting her to think about how she will communicate with Brian about being respectful and following rules. I think it gives her the confidence that she can do it even without my being there.

In the beginning, when things got escalated, Ruth would go into her room and lock the door out of fear. I encouraged her to stay and handle the situation and show no fear even if it was there. Over time she gained confidence in herself. It has been almost a year since Brian has shown any physical aggression towards his mother. However, I still bring the possibility up every day to increase her confidence about handling the most challenging situations in case they do happen.

Brian has gained more respect for the safety guidelines that have been set for him. He has learned how to use his coping skills with his anger. Things have become safer, and his parents have more of an understanding of what their child wants and needs.

Authors*

Brian is an 8th grader living in Arizona.

Ruth is Brian's mother, and is a very active parent participant in Behavioral Health Systems of Care work in her community.

Scott is a direct support provider who has supported children with unique needs for several years.

**Actual names have been changed to protect the privacy of the authors.*