

THE DAY I UNDERESTIMATED A CHILD...

STORY OF BOUDIAF ABDELLAH



During Boudiaf Abdellah's participation in the Mutual Learning Program, he shares the following story with us:

“This entire module led me to revisit an event I experienced with a child at the end of last year...

When working for the protection of refugee children, I often find myself having to assess and respond to the needs of unaccompanied or separated children. At the end of last year, we received a 13-year-old boy from Mali who had just registered at our office. It was the end of the day, and I was exhausted. This last “task” of the day felt endless to me (and I do say task, because that’s truly how I saw it that day—or maybe it’s more accurate to say that when I’m tired, my work becomes less human and more mechanical. I need to rethink how I perceive my limits).

I received the child for a 30-minute interview. It was very formal; he had no energy left for “child-friendly procedures.” In other words, he wasn’t very “human,” either. Before even meeting him, I had already called the partner in charge of our secure apartment to come pick him up, because I assumed that a 12-year-old child would only need accommodation. I wanted to resolve the case quickly and efficiently.

I completed my assessment, recommended accommodation, and the child was placed. The next day, the foster mother called me to say that the boy had run away. I didn’t even have time to start looking for him, because he was already standing at our office door, holding the door handle in his hand. He explained that he had dismantled it in order to leave because his foster mother had locked the door when she went to buy groceries at the local shops.

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When I interviewed him to understand why he had done this, he surprised me by saying: “I am a free man. They don’t put me in homes without my permission.” (Yes—this is a 13-year-old talking.)

I explained to him that it was for his safety, and for the safety of other unaccompanied children, that we had developed this foster family system. But the boy wanted to know how the families were selected. I explained the procedure, and he surprised me again by criticizing our recruitment process. He said: “So you do one or two interviews with families, and you think that’s enough to trust them and give them little kids?” (Again, yes—this is a 13-year-old speaking.)

I had to spend a lot of time convincing him of our procedures, and I ended up offering him a new host family from Mali to reassure him and convince him to return to our apartments. The boy ran away again a week later. From my inquiries, I learned that he had been seen bathing at a beach in town for several days. But we were never able to meet face to face again. The only messages I could send were through an adult living near that beach, who assured him that our houses would always be open to him if he wanted to return, and that our office would always be available if he wanted to communicate with us again. (As I was writing this message, more thoughts came to me about how to find the child.)

In any case, I had clearly failed to establish effective communication with the child, to build a relationship of trust, and to properly assess the child’s wishes and resources. I think I took him for “a poor little child who knows nothing and must be protected,” rather than a human being with resources—a person with a point of view that must be heard and respected. I don’t know how I could have maintained this relationship or conversation in a dialogic way. If you have any answers, please don’t hesitate to tell me.

In any case, I learned a very hard lesson (one that I already knew theoretically, and believed I was applying—but apparently was not): “recognize that the client is the expert in himself and his world.”

So what do I think needs to be transformed in the way we work with and relate to children? I will give them more space to be “people,” and I will take up less space as a “protection officer.””