

Afterschool for Cindy

Narrator: Nikki was accustomed to thinking a lot about all the needs of her students. She worked at Willow School, a small K-6 school offering a safe, caring, and nurturing environment for students and families. The school looked holistically at the needs of its students, and helped them with a range of needs, sometimes even with clothing or food. The principal, Mr. Wilson, expected his teachers to be advocates for the kids in their classrooms.

Narrator: Nikki, a second-grade teacher in a large town, was grocery shopping after school when she noticed her student Cindy playing unsupervised in the parking lot near the photo-processing store where her mother worked. Although Nikki thought this to be a safe and peaceful community, she nevertheless felt some concern. Cindy was skipping around, peering into car mirrors, waving frantically to anyone who exited the store.

Nikki: I've been working hard with Cindy over the school year to improve her social skills and to help her be more compliant in the school setting. If Cindy could learn to be less impulsive, she could focus better on her academics; if she could learn to make appropriate social overtures to her peers, she would feel better about herself, and even feel more confident in her learning. Helping Cindy develop socially is a critical key to unlocking improved reading and math performance.

Enriching after school experiences are a fundamental part of this formula. If Cindy's out-of-school time could reinforce the work I'm doing in the classroom with her around social skill building, I'm convinced Cindy would see academic gains at school. Her community is rich in afterschool opportunities for elementary school children, and many provide a context for social skill development. There are programs in the arts, a lot of athletic programs offered through the Recreation Department, and programs through Youth Services such as Big Brothers/Big sisters. I wish more than anything that Cindy could be involved in soccer. She is a strong girl with lots of energy and enthusiasm, it would do Cindy a world of good to be part of a team, learn the rules of the game, and have to listen to her coach.

Marla: I've had no choice but to bring Cindy along to work for the past few weeks. Another afterschool daycare arrangement collapsed; this one closed because the provider moved out of town. In another arrangement, I withdrew Cindy from the provider's home for a few weeks, because the conditions in the home made Cindy's allergies worse. My boyfriend's mom offered afterschool babysitting help, but I had a feeling he and I were headed for a breakup and I didn't want to be obligated to his mother. All my relatives live in another part of the country, and I often feel depressed without a family safety net. I would love to have my family babysit. I'm divorced from Cindy's dad, and he's not a part of her life.

I'm proud of being able to stay off welfare, but it's a round-the-clock challenge to raise a child and hold down a job. I'm constantly worried about how to arrange afterschool care for my daughter and all the logistics. I wonder when Cindy will be old enough to walk with a schoolmate from school to my job site, or directly home. But right now, the community is unsafe with dangers for my daughter – hazardous traffic not far from school, and unstable people hanging out on the streets.

Nikki: Although filled with love, Cindy's home life isn't an easy one. I question the quality of the out-of-school life that Cindy has with her mother. Mostly I hear reports that they spend time watching videos that seem to me appropriate only for grown-ups.

Despite all the times during the year that I suggested afterschool opportunities for Cindy, her mother, Marla, never once followed up on any of these suggestions. Every month, before Cindy took home her copy of the school newsletter, I always circled all the listings of community enrichment activities. I also made a point of discussing afterschool activities with Marla in the parent-teacher conference. I'm just not sure how to get Cindy involved, and here she is on her own in the parking lot.

Marla: More than anything, I hope for a job with hours that will let me be home with Cindy in the afternoons.

Cindy's teacher, Nikki, has mentioned afterschool programs to me, but it's more than I can manage to even think about. The programs probably cost more than family daycare. And how can I ever pick up Cindy from some program way over on the other side of town without a car? The bus system is slow, practically nonexistent. I've tried to save money to get my car going again. I've disconnected my phone to avoid the long distance phone bills from calling my family, but then it always seems like Cindy is growing so fast that the money is needed for new clothes and sneakers.

Narrator: Cindy went from a trot to a gallop around the parking lot, hugging the neck of her horse. Of course, it wasn't a real horse. But she imagined she was on the horse she learned to ride on at camp last summer. That was so much fun then.

Cindy: Today everyone was telling me "No." When I went to get another breakfast donut, Mom screamed, "No more going inside the cupboards by yourself and making a big mess!"

Then, when I got bored of being in class at school I went on the playground, the principal found me. He said "No outside wandering!"

Now I have to be at Mom's work. I hate it that my mom has to work and can't spend time with me.

I really love being with Mom. Being here is as boring as hanging out at home inside. No other kids, and no other horses here.

Narrator: Back at school, Shellie the school counselor had hung a "Do Not Disturb" sign on her door. The school administered a scholarship fund that allowed some students to attend summer camp, and paperwork deadlines were fast approaching for the camp season. Shellie knew she had a long afternoon of deskwork ahead of her.

Shellie: I've helped students and their families get connected to social services in the community as a part of my job. I've had many discussions with Nikki and Ed, our principal, about Cindy. I also run a couple of groups for students at school. Cindy is a member of my Social Skills Group and seems to be enjoying it.

Cindy attended Friendship Day Camp twice on scholarship. The camp for young boys and girls has a strong one-on-one mentoring component with a focus on social skills development. I know that the camp counselors work on appropriate social overtures with Cindy, and I'm happy for the reinforcement this provides Cindy over the summers. Her teachers noticed that there was no backsliding in the fall, as they might have otherwise expected with Cindy. And I know Cindy enjoyed herself tremendously, learning to ride a horse and taking outings to recreational sites in the surrounding countryside. It was certainly a quality out-of-school experience for Cindy.

Narrator: Cindy's principal, Mr. Wilson, believed that if a student has a problem, you deal with it. This morning, for example, he had to cut short a fairly important phone call to address an immediate concern in the building. Cindy had wandered out of her classroom again, and her teacher couldn't locate her. Mr. Wilson had found her outside on the playground and spent time with her going over some of the Willow School Social Curriculum rules for appropriate behavior.

Principal: Sometimes, dealing with a student's problem means working on the community level. Then the school reaches out into the community to find the right kind of help for the child. I serve on the Board of a local youth organization and enjoy the connection this provides to the larger community. But I'm concerned about the lack of collaboration across the many community social service agencies, the fighting over turf, and the way the school has to pick up the pieces and coordinate services for a student or their family. Willow School's biggest challenge now is being expected to do more and more with less and less. Not just academics – but support to children and families – are expected despite diminished resources at the school's disposal. I'd like more help from the parents and the community. The school can't do it alone.

Shellie, with her "Do Not Disturb" sign on her door this afternoon was stressed out trying to do it alone. She works hard on making out-of-school time connections for some of our students. I despair at the level of parents' involvement in out-of-school activities with their kids. Although some families will take trips or do educational things with their kids, others simply don't have a clue what enrichment activities would help their kids excel academically.

Shellie: Despite Cindy's good experiences at Friendship Day Camp, it is like pulling teeth to get Marla, her mother, to complete the application process. Although Cindy qualifies for a scholarship, there is a small sum for Marla to pay, and it took ages before Cindy came in with the money. Now Marla still hasn't sent any of the required information to the camp, nor returned my three phone messages for her at the photo-processing store. I've drafted a letter

to Marla to remind her to complete her part of the paperwork. Marla doesn't seem to know how to advocate for her child or what daily practices will support the education of her second grader. I really hope Marla comes through on the paperwork.

This summer camp scholarship is a unique thing; many of the regular community afterschool activities are simply not affordable for families like Cindy's. What's more, there aren't even any afterschool activities right here in the school building. Cindy will continue to need the right kind of attention and support throughout the school year to do her best in school.

Principal: I also believe out-of-school activities don't necessarily have to be trips to museums or things like that. Not all families have access to such resources. There were many things to do in town that don't cost anything. A walk in the woods bordering town, or parents spending time talking with the child about life experiences are valuable and necessary lessons. Parents need to provide the opportunities for children to learn, whether in formal programs or informal family time together. In fact, I actually worry that some of the kids are over-scheduled in afternoon activities – in effect, neglected by their parents. Nothing out-of-school is as important as the time parents spend engaged with their children.

Narrator: Marla was very excited. She had just this moment received a wonderful phone call at the photo-processing store. She had gotten the new job she had applied for: working at the cafeteria at the local hospital. She wanted this job because the hours were perfect, allowing Cindy to spend all her afterschool time with Marla now. Marla looked across the parking lot and saw Nikki approaching the store. She knew Nikki had a roll of film ready to be picked up. Whenever Nikki came into the store, Marla liked to ask her how Cindy was doing in school. Now she couldn't wait to tell her about this new job.

For herself, Nikki entered the store with some trepidation. All throughout her errands she had worried about Cindy's lack of supervision. Nikki wondered whether she should try to say anything briefly to Marla about Cindy's afterschool time.

Narrator: Although she felt uncomfortable talking about Cindy's issues right there in the store, Nikki thought about more forcefully suggesting a formal afterschool program for Cindy. She could explain that parents could sign up their kids at the Recreation Department at any point during the year. Marla could even sign up tomorrow.