

# Getting Kicked Out of the “Bubble”

## Rupture and Repair in the Consultative Relationship

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### Abstract

An Early Head Start teacher and an infant and early childhood mental health consultant share the story of how their consultative relationship was shaped by a significant rupture and subsequent repair. From their individual perspectives, they reflect on how racial differences, past traumas, relational histories, and not maintaining the consultative stance contributed to the rupture. The authors highlight the power of honesty and vulnerability in professional relationships to heal relational ruptures and how that can deepen infant and early childhood consultation work.

This story takes place between a White infant and early childhood mental health consultant (Janna) and a Black Early Head Start center-based teacher (Aisha) at Reach Dane, a nonprofit organization that provides comprehensive services to low-income families with children from birth to 5 years old in center-based and home-based settings. Infant and early childhood mental health consultation (IECMH-C) has a unique role distinct from treatment and other related services within infant, young children, and family serving systems (Center of Excellence, n.d.). In an early care and education setting, a mental health consultant works in partnership with educators, supporting their connection to children and families. In addition to child- and family-focused IECMH-C responsibilities (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, n.d.), Reach Dane consultants and administrators worked to offer a consistent time for teachers to reflect with the consultants upon their work. This time allowed teachers uninterrupted space to think about the complex interplay between their personal histories, caregiving relationships,

and experiences and the impact of these on their work. Furthermore, the consultant was asked to integrate coaching into the services, whereby she would use observation tools to collaboratively set goals and measure progress and provide in-classroom direct guidance and feedback.

### The Beginnings: Safety of the “Bubble”

**Janna:** My approach to IECMH-C has been informed by a reflective model. Integrating a directive coaching model felt new and unfamiliar. I was nervous and unsure whether this was a role or way of being that I felt comfortable in or even wanted to have. Aisha was a teacher I had not yet worked with, as she was newer to this program. I introduced myself and my services to her in an email and arranged for a time that I would come to her classroom.

When I walked into the classroom for the first time, I immediately felt uneasy. Aisha’s body language and facial expressions seemed to indicate she did not want to meet with me. I found myself wondering how our racial differences were impacting her openness to our working together. I introduced myself, reminding her of the email, and asked if she was ready to meet. She appeared reluctant but agreed. I felt like I fumbled through the explanation of my newly integrated IECMH-C role and my attempts to get to know her. It was clear that she was

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In an early care and education setting, a mental health consultant works in partnership with educators, supporting their connection to children and families.

skeptical—her first question was whether my services were mandatory. I explained that although all teaching staff were being asked to participate, we would decide together how our time would look and what would be most meaningful and supportive for her. Aisha emphasized that her classroom is her “bubble of safety” and that she didn’t like people in her classroom. I wondered how I would navigate this, as IECMH-C required me to be in the classroom. It was clear that I needed to move slowly and carefully. Yet, I felt the pressure of this new role.

I previously had some brief observations of Aisha while providing consultative services to nearby classrooms. My initial reactions were that she was academically structured and had high and firm expectations for the children, who were 2–3 years old. I worried that academics were a focus rather than play, relationships, and social–emotional needs. I was aware that I was making assumptions about her teaching style and the meaning of my observations, some of which were likely related to my implicit biases. I reminded myself of the core principles of remaining open and curious to understanding her perspective and experience (Gilkerson, 2015).

**Aisha:** My first thought when I received the email from Janna was that somebody sent her to “fix” me because they didn’t like the way I was teaching in my classroom (I was already hearing concerns about my teaching). I thought, “Why do I have to work with her? I don’t need anyone’s help.”

When she walked in the classroom for the first time, I didn’t want to meet with her, but I also didn’t want her to tell others I was unwilling to work with her. I decided I was going to be nice and act like I was receiving what she was saying. As I look back on that moment, I realize I wasn’t taking in what she was saying because I was so focused on managing my expressions so that I wouldn’t be perceived as the stereotypical hostile Black woman. I was talking to myself in my head the whole time, “Don’t frown your face, talk lower than your normal tone so she won’t think you’re being loud, and don’t roll your eyes.”

After the meeting I was upset. I didn’t understand why I had to work with her. I did not think she could help me because we come from two different worlds, and I assumed she wouldn’t understand me or the kids in my classroom. I saw Janna as another White lady who would write down what I did wrong to share with others and tell me how to run my classroom.

## Slowly Opening up the Bubble

**Aisha:** I decided to try and be more open, because I heard from a trusted person that Janna was nice. I started feeling more accepting when I noticed her taking the time to try and see me and understand why I was doing things in a certain way. I remember her setting aside her notebook, saying “Let’s start over,” and we talked about building a relationship first. Through our conversations, I started seeing her as someone who helps people and cares. I attended one of her trainings and realized she was smart and could be a resource. I was defensive at first when she would offer her perspective, but later when I reflected, I realized that she helped me look at some things differently.

**Janna:** Eventually, I let go of learning my new role and leaned into being myself. When I focused on building our relationship, I noticed our conversations were more relaxed. I started to shift my perspective of Aisha after observing more in her classroom. While observing a circle time focused on academics, I noticed judgments arising within myself and focused on my own regulation. Only then could I see the beautiful interaction. She individualized to each child’s developmental level, so they were successful and experiencing new learning. She connected individually to each child and implemented a short ritual with each of them. The children were so proud and having fun. I remember her saying, “The children are capable of doing anything they are taught, and I know what each of them are capable of.” Over time, I realized that she did know each of those children very well and had informed reasons for every decision she made in her classroom. While I still found myself wishing there was less focus on academics, I wondered if this might be important because of the educational disparities that occur in the Black community and what this might mean to Aisha.

One day I was providing a training for teachers and Aisha was there. She came up to me after the training and told me I was “smart” and “I could come back in her bubble.” I didn’t know I was out of the bubble! I was shocked and simply said “Thank you.” She said, “You’re welcome,” and walked away. I felt more confused and unsure how to move in my relationship with her. She didn’t want me to come and tell her what to do, yet she clearly values my knowledge? I used my own reflective supervision to help me maintain patience, curiosity, and hope that we would find our way.

## Getting Kicked out of the “Bubble”

**Janna:** While collaborating with another intervention provider, I learned that Aisha physically resembled the person who caused

the trauma of a child who was currently in Aisha's classroom. I was under the impression the provider had also shared this information with Aisha. I sent an email to her to follow up and reflect together on how this might be impacting the child's behaviors.

**Aisha:** It was the end of my workday and I saw the email from Janna. That was the first time that I learned this information and was so upset that I started crying. I just thought, "I'm going to talk to Janna, and she is going to make everything okay." I found peace in that. I left her a message to call me back right away. I was shopping with my wife when Janna called back. I said, "This is Janna. I got to talk to her now. She is going to fix this." I viewed her as someone who would advocate for what was right and help with what I needed.

**Janna:** When I received Aisha's message, I called her back right away. She had never called me and asked for help before, and it sounded urgent. She immediately said the child needed to leave her room. I tried to ask questions to understand her perspective, but she was clearly frustrated and kept repeating: "You don't understand. She needs to leave the classroom!" I agreed that I didn't understand, but I wanted to. I found myself pulled to hold the child in mind, and I wanted Aisha to slow down and think more about it together. I didn't understand the extent of her emotions and what she was experiencing, and I was worried about the impact of the child moving to a new classroom. We discussed that together and decided to end the call and talk more later.

**Aisha:** When Janna kept focusing on what the child needed and asking me why I needed the child to move, I felt Janna didn't hear me. She wasn't understanding what it feels like to have someone look at you and think, "You are the person who hurt us;" or for this child to look at me and see pain. Who wants to be a monster to somebody? Am I the reason this child is not progressing in their development? Is this child afraid every time I talk to them? I would have constantly been afraid to interact with the child or their family. My safe place of my classroom was gone. I wanted them to move one of us so that the child would be okay. Why keep traumatizing a child or their family?

Before this happened, I felt Janna was different because she cared about the staff and valued us. She saw us and wanted to help so that we could help our kids and parents. She understood that we need to be okay for the parents and children that we are working with to be okay. In my brain Janna advocated for what is right, and I trusted that she would advocate for me. But then, when this happened, I felt like, "Janna is just like the rest of the people that don't care about the staff and only care about the kids. Janna is not my people." When she was focused on the child, I thought, "Do you hear what I am saying at all?" She forgot me. This brought me back to the same feelings of not being seen and heard as a child within my extended family.

I had to sit down in the store because I was crying after ending the call. I was shocked that I felt so hurt. I didn't realize I had let Janna in that much. This hurt me to my core because I felt like she knew me as a person, and now I realized she didn't. I



Photo: Stephen Bobb

Aisha emphasized that her classroom is her "bubble of safety" and that she didn't like people in her classroom.

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trusted she would handle me with care, and she didn't. I was feeling like if she knew me, she would have understood what I was saying. In my life, when I let someone in, I put expectations on them and then I end up getting hurt. If I can't trust you to meet my expectations, then I don't want you in my space. I didn't want to work with Janna anymore or see her. I was done.

## Beginning the Repair

**Aisha:** The next day I came into the building and met with the assistant site director. I cried over a combination of being a scary person for this child, being hurt by Janna, and reminders of some dark stuff in my history. I wanted to leave. I didn't want to see anyone.

**Janna:** I knew I needed to talk to Aisha because I had messed up. I knew I was not attuned to her and was pulled to consider the child's needs more than hers. I also knew there was more that I didn't understand. Aisha always put the kids' needs ahead of her own. I asked to have a meeting with Aisha, and the assistant site director brought us all in the room together. Aisha sat down on the couch with her arms crossed and refused to talk to me. I asked if she was willing to listen. She angrily agreed but said she would not be talking and wanted the assistant site director to stay because she didn't trust me. At that moment I realized the rupture was more severe than I thought. I was devastated and anxious. I knew she was angry, hurt, and not feeling safe. She wouldn't look at me or talk to me. But would she listen? Was it the right time? Would I say the right thing? I took a deep breath and calmed myself, remembering mindful self-regulation as a first step in becoming attuned (Gilkerson, 2015). The moment reminds me of a quote from Keyes, Cavanaugh, and Scott Heller (2009) "As a rock bears witness to rushing waters, allow yourself to observe your emotions as they rise in you" (p. 115).





Photo: Stephen Bobb

Just like children, adults need to feel safe and connected in order to share ideas, thoughts, and emotional space with another.

My goal was to offer an apology and an explanation; not an excuse for why I wasn't attuned to her needs at that time. I wanted her to hear that I really did want to understand and, when she was ready, I was ready to listen. She informed me it was the first time she heard this information about the child. I apologized for moving too quickly when sending that email, in a way that didn't hold Aisha in mind. I shared that I was not aware that she didn't know that information and was taken aback by the strong reaction. I apologized for not being able to listen and hear her perspective.

**Aisha:** When we talked, Janna asked me, "What do you need? If we can do something to help, what would you want us to do?" I thought, "There is Janna. She is back." That made me relax and be more open again. After listening to her, I understood that she was a person with her own stuff going on and that she wasn't in the space to hear me. But in this moment, she was in a calmer, clearer state and was able to hear my perspective. That allowed me to share more of my story. I shared my experience of being in an abusive relationship and my kids witnessing the abuse. The idea of me representing that scary person to a child was too difficult. After our conversation I wasn't hurt anymore because I understood her reaction, but trust was lost. I didn't feel like she would be able to handle me with care if I needed her again.

**Janna:** I saw Aisha relax and start to share more about why this was so hard for her, and I found myself able to understand her perspective on a much deeper level. This time, I could clearly see she was feeling a lot of pain. After the conversation, I was hopeful we would repair our relationship, but Aisha refused to continue working with me. I agreed to give her some space but told her that I would follow up with her. In collaboration with the site director, we agreed to work on a plan to transition the child to a different classroom.

**Aisha:** They gave me time to be out of the classroom for a few days to collect myself. After having time to think, I decided the child shouldn't move because they were slow to warm, and

the transition would be difficult. While it was a painful time and I felt like I was drowning on the inside, I did my best until the child had a natural transition out of my classroom.

**Janna:** The fact that I was "kicked out of Aisha's bubble" during that painful time still hurts. But I knew I needed to respect her wishes. I felt unsure and unstable in our relationship. Our bubbles were floating alone, and I wondered if she would feel safe with me ever again. I didn't know Aisha enough to trust that she would be able to understand and hold the child's perspective once Aisha herself felt held by me. I struggled to hold on to the parallel process as an organizing principle (Johnston & Brinamen, 2006).

**Aisha:** Later, I realized I shouldn't have put that much on Janna as a consultant. It wasn't fair to expect her to fix everything. I realized she is human. She has feelings and makes mistakes like everyone else. The assistant site director kept encouraging me to work with Janna and thought we could move past it. But I couldn't say yes—I no longer trusted Janna. Later, something upsetting happened, and Janna was the first person I wanted to tell. That was an "ah-ha" moment for me. I realized she must still be in my heart for me to want to get in touch. But I still didn't reach out.

**Janna:** After several months, I began to gently and briefly engage with Aisha, with no expectations to meet. This way of connecting lasted several more months. One day she said, "I kicked you out of my bubble all the way to Texas and I couldn't see you. But now, I see you. You are pressed up against the bubble trying to get in, but you are not in yet." We were lighthearted and laughed and named this as progress. I felt the humor and honest sharing we had together would eventually get us back on track. I had hope. Then one day, I was walking near her classroom and heard a child crying during nap. Our eyes met and I could see she was clearly frustrated. Casually we began to chat, a half door between us. I listened as she described this child's constant crying and her strategy to leave them alone to work it out. She said she didn't understand what the child needed. After mirroring feelings of helplessness and empathizing, I gently, using humor, asked her to think about what she needed and wished she had from me that day she called me upset. She leaned her head back and vocalized an "ah-ha" moment. She smiled and said, "Okay Janna, that was good." I smiled and knew then that we were finding our way back.

## Reflections on the Repair

*"You see me and because of that I see myself. By me seeing myself, I am able to be more present in my room. By me being present, I'm able to connect to parents and children by meeting them where they are." —Aisha Bennett*

**Aisha:** My family was shocked and proud of me because I kicked Janna out and then let her back in. That is something I never do. When she apologized and shared what was happening for her, that softened me and helped me see that she also had feelings. When she took the time to listen, hear me, and then

have my back, I felt heard and validated. Once I felt heard, I was able to reflect on my own and think about what the child really needed. It was also important that Janna respected my need for space rather than to keep pushing to fix it, but she also showed she cared about me by not giving up. At that time, I was so full of emotions that all I could see was that I needed her, and she wasn't there. Once I was able to re-center and work through my emotions, I was able to have more perspective. I also appreciate her consistent calmness and ability to find the positives in things, which is hard to do. While I don't always want to see the positive and sometimes wish she would join in my upset, I usually appreciate that she didn't because I always take something away from our conversation in the end.

This experience has been healing for me because it has woken up a piece of me that I was afraid to show. I felt like I always had to be guarded and was anxious of others being in my classroom. In my experience people often see me as a Black aggressive woman who is too strict and loud, with a bad attitude. So, I keep my distance so they can't judge me. But in this relationship, I felt seen and accepted for who I am. I am more confident in myself as a teacher. I can work through my mistrust to let people in my classroom, and I no longer feel the need to prove myself.

**Janna:** Aisha's willingness to be a partner in this relationship and have honest conversations has been a gift. She observes her own response, holds in mind and reflects upon multiple perspectives, and uses insights to make changes in her work and her life. She is willing to be vulnerable and share her feelings, thoughts, perspectives, and history. She is motivated to continue to grow and is passionate about her work. She allowed me to make mistakes and joined me in repairing them. Her willingness to let me back in and to be honest with me has allowed us to deepen our relationship and our work together in ways neither of us saw as possible. This experience has also been healing for me. It allowed me to witness the power of leaning into my own vulnerability and being my true genuine self.

## Key Points

Just like children, adults need to feel safe and connected in order to share ideas, thoughts, and emotional space with another. Being genuine while still moving slowly and being attuned is important in building a relationship (Gilkerson, 2015). In the beginning of this consultative relationship, we both struggled to regulate and be our genuine selves. As a result, our relationship suffered, and mistrust grew. Leaning into our abilities to be honest, genuine, vulnerable, and forgiving has allowed for depth and growth in our work. Our willingness to discuss cultural differences and how they shape our views was important groundwork that allowed for our repair (Keyes et al., 2009). Consultants need to engage in their own reflective supervision in order to identify any biases, increase patience, and offer hope when there are difficulties in the consultative relationship (Johnston & Brinamen, 2006; Keyes et al., 2009).



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When IECMH-C is an integrated part of an early childhood program, it allows for the development of relationships that meet the individual needs of staff so they can better meet the needs of the children in their classrooms.

There is a dance between our past experiences and our work. Consultation isn't therapy; however, it allows teachers to explore their caregiving histories and offers a safe space to reflect on how the past influences their ability to access knowledge in the present (Johnston & Brinamen, 2006). This reflection allows professionals to do their best work and integrate change.

IECMH-C is not a short-term investment. Relationships are essential, and it takes time to develop trusting, consistent relationships that support change (Johnston & Brinamen, 2006). When IECMH-C is an integrated part of an early childhood program, it allows for the development of relationships that meet the individual needs of staff so they can better meet the needs of the children in their classrooms. Although child- and family-focused services are primary objectives of IECMH-C, it is critical that administrators, policymakers, and consultants do not lose sight of the value of supporting early childhood professionals.

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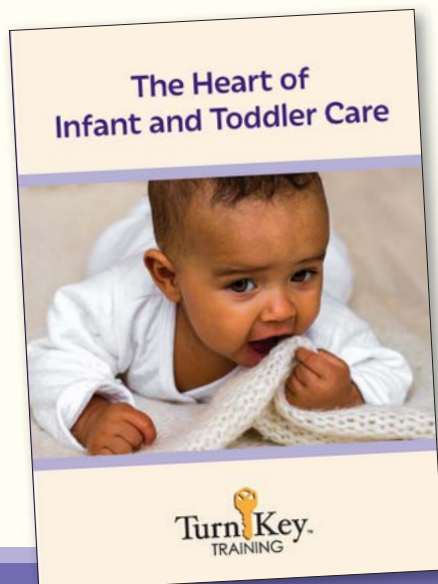
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