Case Vignette—Tamika

Tamika Parker began her child welfare employment after receiving her bachelor's degree in human services. She applied for the position because she had always loved working with children. She entered her work with great idealism and energy. She wanted to do a good job. She cared about what she did and believed in the importance of her work. During the first six months on the job, she was brought along slowly. She did not immediately receive a full caseload. Following training, she received three family cases. She served these families well. She was always available to them. She sought out her supervisor and coworkers when she had questions.

During the next six months on the job, Tamika was given an additional ten cases. Some of her foster care placements were not working out. Her report writing and paperwork tripled. Tamika felt frustrated that she could not accomplish what she wanted to do in her cases. She would make plans with her families, but some crisis always seemed to get in the way. Her supervisor began to complain to her about her paperwork being tardy. She began to feel "taken advantage of" by some of her families and "manipulated" by some of the children on her caseload.

Then one Sunday morning, Tamika received a call from her supervisor. She told Tamika that one of the children she had worked with for six months in foster care had been shot to death in a neighborhood disturbance. The supervisor asked Tamika to visit the child's foster home and biological family to bring them this news.

Tamika spent the next 48 hours with the two families. She had never seen such grief or anguish. The biological family blamed the foster family for not taking care of the child and blamed Tamika for removing the child. Tamika attended the child's funeral with the foster family. She wept when she saw the child's body in the coffin. The child was so small and frail. "How could this happen?" she wondered. She held one of the child's younger siblings on her lap during the funeral.

For the next several months, Tamika did not sleep well. She wondered constantly what she could have done to prevent the child's death. What had she missed? She had nightmares where she saw the child shot over and over again. Sometimes Tamika herself was doing the shooting. Tamika began to arrive at the office later and later. She would not answer her phone during the day and stayed at her desk most of the time completing reports. She began to feel herself more emotionally distant from her colleagues and also from the children and families she served. She made fewer and fewer home visits and she avoided, whenever possible, talking to families about painful issues.

Tamika also moved to a new apartment and had two more locks put on her apartment door. She got an unlisted phone number. She found it more and more difficult to get out of bed in the morning and go to work. She began to ask her supervisor if she could just do her paperwork from home.

Adapted with permission from the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (2008).