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Foreword

I write as Samaria Rice, mother of Tamir, founder and chief executive officer of the Tamir Rice Foundation—serving inner-city children in Cleveland, Ohio through after-school programs and advocating for police reform and accountability. At the time of this writing, Tamir should be 23 years old. For those evaluating children for psychological injuries in civil litigation, I want to share the significance of their work from our side of the table.

When Cleveland police officer-in-training, Timothy Loehmann, shot my son, while training officer, Frank Garmback, was present, the effects rippled through my entire family, including my teenage and young adult children at the time. I recount these events from my own experience and perspective, based on what I witnessed and understood in those moments. Through my Foundation work and my own experience, I have seen children injured in disputed or traumatic circumstances develop sleep problems, eating difficulties, and anger with nowhere to go. Some make dangerous decisions with money and relationships or find themselves in legal trouble. Some are unable to eat foods they once shared with their injured sibling because of the emotional pain. Some see their weight drop dramatically, and many become defiant or withdraw completely from their family.

I ran to the scene after two adolescents knocked on my door to tell me the police shot my son. When I got there, my teenage son was surrounded by about eight police officers. Tamir was on the ground surrounded by approximately ten police officers. My daughter was in the back of a police car.

The police told me my son was “evidence,” so I was not permitted to touch him. They told me to stop, be quiet, relax, and calm down or they would put me in the back of a police car too. I share this to illustrate the profound disempowerment families can feel in moments of crisis. No child participating in a psychological evaluation for civil litigation, or their family members, should leave feeling like evidence rather than people. Neither children nor family members presenting for these evaluations should be disempowered, controlled, silenced, or threatened by evaluators.

I came to understand that my son was perceived as a 20-year-old male because of what I believe to be racism. I do not know why our children are perceived to be a threat, outside of what I believe is rooted in more than 500 years of genocide. Historical and systemic biases, as documented extensively by researchers, have long shaped perceptions of Black youth, and these perceptions can directly influence the interpretation of their behavior. No child before an evaluator should suffer the effects of racism and bias at the keystroke or testimony of an expert that misperceives our children to be older (in presentation or capability) or more threatening than they are.

Evaluators help determine credibility, services, compensation, and justice. Families feel that weight. We retell our worst moments to typing strangers, hoping the process will help our children heal or at least be believed. Harm comes when evaluators ignore context. Evaluators who treat overpolicing, racial bias, vicarious trauma, collective grief, and neighborhood disadvantage as footnotes miss the truth. These are not background details—they are what make our children vulnerable to harm and determine whether, and under what conditions, they can heal. Our children’s symptoms and recovery cannot be understood apart from these burdens they carry.

Some parents may easily find therapists and other professionals in the community of the same race, ethnicity, and culture as their child to facilitate recovery. This is not the case for many Black children. I still struggle to find Black doctors. When evaluators are blind to these inequities and many others in our day-to-day lives in the US, they make incorrect assumptions about how our children are likely to fare. Practically speaking, if evaluating a Black child, be familiar with Black psychologists, and if you are not, that needs to be considered when discussing damages. Document systemic barriers to recovery from harm, not just symptoms. Neutrality that is blind to culture, White supremacy, racism, and inequity is taking a side and is not impartial. Offer families the option to be evaluated by people they feel comfortable with (e.g., of the same race), especially in cases of racialized trauma. Be gentle and trauma-informed. Let parents know your approach will be delicate and will create a safe space to ease the parents’ mind. Have a soft approach, a friendly approach, because some kids will not open up if

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you look too “doctorly.” Your appearance matters. If you show up in a suit, the child may think, “What are you?” Be approachable and come down to their level. Presentation and appearance—these help the child feel safe enough to open up. Provide true informed consent. Make sure the child is willing to have a conversation. Develop techniques in accordance with the child’s age. Be a buddy before asking difficult questions. Let them know it is a safe place. In evaluations, structure is helpful for children; create achievable milestones they can be proud of enroute to completing the evaluation process.

As professionals entrusted with assessing the psychological impact of harm on children, you hold a responsibility that extends beyond data points. When you integrate cultural awareness, historical context, and a trauma-informed approach into your evaluations, you create not just a record for the court but a space for dignity and humanity. The work is not only about accuracy, it is about ensuring that each child’s story is heard in full, without distortion or erasure. That is the kind of practice that honors the truth, serves justice, and, ultimately, helps bring peace to the children and families who come before you.

—Samaria Rice