

## Home Was Not A Place of Safety or Love

Terrified to share what was going on behind closed doors, 11-year-old Brady, 9-year-old Cassie, and 8-year-old Kylee\* kept a vile secret until one day Brady broke down and told a trusted teacher what was happening to him and his sisters at home.

Their father was guilty of doing horrendous things in front of and to the children. They were forced to watch him kill family pets. They were forced to watch graphic and violent pornography. He forced them to participate as he sexually abused one of their siblings. Home was not a place of safety or love.

Immediately all 3 children were picked up from school and taken to Family Service of the Piedmont's Child Advocacy Center (CAC). A team of trained professionals with the CAC immediately went to work to make sure the frightened children felt safe and had their immediate needs met. They were hungry. They were scared and confused. Although Brady had told a teacher, he didn't understand all that would happen as a result of that confession. The unhealthy family dynamics complicated things. For instance, the family had a long history of distrust of law enforcement. The children did not understand what it 'felt' like to have law enforcement 'protect' them. They saw the police as the enemy and were distrustful. All of a sudden there were a lot of people around and it scared them. They didn't know what would happen next. Although, their parents were guilty of hurting them, the children wanted what comfort they would bring. It's not uncommon for children in these circumstances to blame the 'system', not the perpetrator. This was all they knew.

At 11, Brady had a lot on his shoulders. His role in this dysfunctional family was protector of his sisters and his mother. Much too much responsibility for a little boy.

One-by-one, the children talked to a trained forensic interviewer.

The forensic interview is a neutral fact finding, legally defensible, developmentally and culturally appropriate interview of a child or adolescent who is an alleged victim of sexual or physical abuse or who may have been a witness to violence. Family Service is dedicated to minimizing trauma to the child victim by ensuring quality forensic interviews take place by employing highly qualified forensic interviewers who are provided ongoing training consistent with current research and best practices on child forensic interviewing. For the child and the family, the forensic interview is often the first step in the healing process.

The interview rooms are child-centered, friendly locations for children to receive investigation and intervention services. The rooms are equipped with a video recorder to provide direct and reliable evidence needed to corroborate the allegations and prosecute the perpetrator. It also allows for representatives from the Department of Social Services, Children Victim Advocates, and law enforcement to watch from another room. The focus of this team approach is one interview of the child by one person in a safe, a child-friendly environment in which to share their story.

Another difficult element in cases like this, is why a child in these circumstances would not want the opportunity to finally share everything that was going on. Get it out in the open. After all, this is was a safe and friendly place. But these children had been desensitized for many years. The father held tremendous power and control over all three of them. He had groomed them to get what he wanted. In these situations, it's very likely for one sibling to be jealous of another for all the extra attention given to him or her.

Once the interviews were completed the totality of the abuse was disclosed. Not only was the father guilty of these horrendous crimes, but the mother had proven incapable of keeping her children safe. Department of Social Services immediately took over guardianship of the children and together with Family Service began a long road of therapy and support.

Very often in cases like these, where a parent isn't able to keep children safe, there is a history of abuse when they were a child. As a child victim, their boundaries were broken, they did not develop appropriately and as a result are incapable of protecting their own children.

Family Service also coordinated the community collaboration in response to helping these children. One of our Child Victim Advocates helped connect the children with counseling and other resources needed to aid in their recovery. The multi-disciplinary team included CAC staff, District Attorney's Office, DSS Child Protective Service Workers, law enforcement, medical and mental health providers. This team worked together throughout the investigation and prosecution, meeting on a regular basis to review the progress of each child to ensure their needs were being met sensitively and effectively.

Each week Family Service of the Piedmont averages 10-12 interviews with children victims. The CACs impact the community in two ways: by ensuring that child victims and their families receive the help and support they need, and by helping law enforcement build their case against the perpetrator.

But this story is not over. The father went to prison. The mother is unlikely to regain custody of her children. And although the abuse stopped, these children continue to live with the scars left from years of abuse. Depression, anxiety, and high-risk behaviors are a few of the long-term results these children may face.

The consequences of traumatic experiences such as Brady, Cassie and Kylee suffered include: Anxiety and depression, substance abuse, aggression, rebelliousness, withdrawal and social isolation, self-inflicted harm, delinquency, runaway behavior, criminal behavior, overly sexualized behavior, teen pregnancy and motherhood, guilt and self-blame, lack of self-worth and self-esteem....to name a few.

But no matter how difficult the road to full recovery, Family Service of the Piedmont will be there to help these 3 children and others like them, to restore hope, achieve stability, and begin to thrive.

\*Names have been changed to protect client confidentiality.