

Case Vignette—Joshua

Child: Joshua

Age: 12

Point in Child Welfare System: Moved into family placement as part of foster care plan, is at risk of disruption

Culture/Ethnicity: Caucasian

Background/History

When Joshua was 18 months old, a neighbor became concerned that Joshua was often dirty, hungry and he did not seem to be thriving. There had also been several instances of poor supervision and the parents were considered “hostile” toward Joshua. Eventually, CPS became involved with the family, but there was never enough evidence to remove Joshua from his home. Joshua also had a younger sister, Lisa, who was six months old at this time. When initially interviewed by CPS the mother acknowledged that she was under tremendous stress due to an often violent relationship with her husband. She admitted that caring for Joshua was difficult because he was often irritable and rejecting of her attempts to console him. At other times, he was very restless and clingy toward the mother, especially when the father was present. She also said Joshua was “slow to develop.”

The mother admitted that she and her husband had a history of drug and alcohol abuse, although she denied any current problems with either. A service plan, including parenting classes, was put in place for the family and they were followed for about six months. Joshua and his family appeared more stable and services were terminated. Within a couple of years, a third child was born. Joshua’s parents continued to have a chaotic relationship and their drug use continued.

Although multiple reports had been made to protective services over the years, there had never been sufficient evidence to remove the children, partly because Joshua and his siblings consistently denied any abuse.

At the age of 11, when Joshua’s school guidance counselor noticed some bruises, Joshua disclosed that his father had hurt him and that he didn’t want to go home anymore. Joshua and his two siblings were removed that day.

Following their removal from the home, the children described: frequent fights in which their parents screamed and threw things; unpredictable violence by their father, including his hitting them with a miniature baseball bat; being isolated and denied food and water for over a day at a time; and ongoing substance use by both parents. All three children indicated that Joshua had been a target for abuse in the home, with each parent aligning with one

of the other siblings. Joshua reports that he purposefully made himself a target to protect his younger siblings from being hurt. From the age of 8, Joshua was not only locked in dark closets for hours at a time for being bad, he was also forced to watch his biological father fondle the youngest sibling. Based on the children's statements, their father was charged and criminally prosecuted for assault and battery against his children.

After their removal from the home, the three siblings were separated. After court proceedings terminated parental rights, the youngest was placed in a pre-adoptive foster home, and the two oldest were placed in different relatives' homes. Joshua was initially withdrawn and quiet after removal and placement with his maternal grandmother. He spent long periods alone in his room and created an inner world that he worked hard to hide from his grandmother. Although he was polite and cooperative with adults, he had difficulty with peers and was unable to stay interested in activities.

Despite testing which indicated that he had an above average IQ with no evidence of a learning disability, Joshua consistently received failing grades in his classes, due in large part to a refusal to complete homework assignments. Joshua also had repeated psychosomatic complaints but numerous tests ruled out a physical cause. At night, Joshua surrounded himself with stuffed animals, stating that they made him feel safer.

Presenting Situation

Joshua has been in placement with his grandmother for several months. His behavior has been on the decline since his middle sibling was recently placed in the home with him. He was strongly reactive to any signs that his sister was receiving more attention than he was. He becomes easily angered by his sister, stating in therapy that being around her is like "all this old stuff coming back again." His moods shift from constricted to volatile, with frequent angry outbursts, verbal and physical aggression toward family members, and multiple signs of arousal (e.g., difficulty sleeping, impaired concentration, edginess and irritability). He was recently diagnosed with oppositional defiant disorder and ADHD.

His grandmother, who has her own history of childhood trauma, has become more depressed and overwhelmed by his emotional outbursts and she has had difficulty providing consistent caretaking to either of the children. Child Protective Services (CPS) has become re-involved and a move to a more intensive level of care for Joshua is being considered.