

JAMES

Presenting Situation

James is a 13-year-old Caucasian (fourth generation Irish- and German American) boy from a blue-collar neighborhood outside Boston.

His maternal uncle brought James to a county mental health clinic for evaluation one week after he reported to one of his 7th grade teachers that he had been assaulted by his father. James told his teacher that his father had beaten him with a miniature baseball bat. He pulled up his pant legs to reveal deep bruises on his legs while stating emphatically, “I’ve had it. I don’t want to go home anymore.”

As mandated by law, the teacher then filed a report with Child Protective Services (CPS), which quickly led to the removal of James and his two younger sisters (ages four and six) from the family home. The state is now the legal guardian of all three children. The maternal uncle was given physical custody of James; his sisters have been placed with a foster family.

Presenting Situation (continued)

James' uncle brought school records (obtained by CPS) to provide some history. The mental health assessment was mandated by CPS, which gave authorization for James to be interviewed alone. According to school records, James' only prior contact with mental health services occurred when he was six years old, after his teachers reported that he had demonstrated difficulties with impulsive behaviors and concentration.

The psychiatrist at the mental health clinic diagnosed James with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). At the suggestion of the psychiatrist, his pediatrician treated him with “a stimulant medication” (drug unknown) for a few months. When the teachers did not see any improvement in James' behavior, the medication was discontinued.

There is no evidence that James' parents followed through on the psychiatrist's recommendation that James receive psychotherapy. James did not receive any special school placement or further testing, although one of his teachers suggested to his parents that James be assessed for a learning disability.

Family History

Dr. Jane Andrews, a psychologist from the county social services mental health clinic, is assigned to evaluate James. She reviews documentation from CPS and then meets with James' maternal uncle, Patrick, to learn more about James' home environment and family history. James' parents are invited to take part in the evaluation process, but refuse contact on the advice of their attorney. Patrick works in an accounting firm and lives in a townhouse in a middle-class suburb about 20 miles away from where James had been living with his family.

Karen, James' mother is Patrick's sister, and is two years younger than Patrick. As the interview begins, Patrick immediately asks Dr. Andrews how James' sisters are doing, stating that he wishes he had the space in his home to care for all three children. He says that he was a "doting uncle" for Karen's children, until three years ago when he and his sister had a "falling out." Since then, he has had very little contact with Karen and her family.

Family History (continued)

Patrick states that he and his sister were verbally and physically abused while growing up. Their father (James' maternal grandfather) worked as a bartender in a neighborhood bar, and their mother took in ironing and mending. He described their father as an alcoholic who was prone to episodes of violence toward his wife as well as his children. Patrick described their mother as someone who often seemed "shut down" and unable to protect her children.

He said that one of his junior high school teachers once suspected that he was being abused and made a report to CPS. He describes the investigation as being pretty superficial because he was too frightened to admit that he was being abused. After that, he said, their father was careful not to leave any marks where they could be seen. "He mostly hit me, not Karen, because she was littler. But he would still humiliate her. And after she started physically developing, I couldn't stand the way he looked at her. She never said anything, but I have always wondered if he did something to her that he "shouldn't have."

Family History (continued)

Patrick recalls that his sister began experimenting with alcohol and drugs, primarily marijuana, while in middle school. Karen ran away from home frequently and was involved with multiple older boys. Patrick says she had an abortion at age 15 and he suspects she may have had several others during her adolescence. She was expelled from the local Catholic high school when she was 16.

Karen met James' father, Rick, when she was 17 and he was 24. Like Karen, Rick was from a working class family, and had grandparents who had moved to the United States from Ireland and Germany to escape poverty. Karen got her GED and married Rick when she was 18. James was born when she was 20. Patrick describes Rick as “unpredictable ... You never know when he's going to completely lose it.” At times, Rick could be funny and charming, but he was often irritable, “hot-tempered,” and moody.

Family History (continued)

Patrick says that Rick frequently drank heavily and also used marijuana and cocaine. “Drinking is part of the social life in this community, but Rick is an *ugly* drunk.” Patrick believes that the violence between Rick and Karen started shortly after their marriage. After James was born, Patrick began to notice frequent bruises, black eyes, and other signs of injury on his sister. When he confronted her about this, Karen denied any violence and gradually decreased her contact with Patrick, down to sending only a card or making a brief phone call on birthdays and major holidays.

Patrick tried to maintain some contact with James, his only nephew, but it was mostly through email. He continued to send cards and gifts to his two nieces, who sent thank you notes. Patrick had had no other contact with the children (until the call from CPS).

History from James

James meets on four occasions with Dr. Andrews, the psychologist in the county mental health clinic. He is cooperative throughout each session of the evaluation but appears reserved and vigilant, carefully watching her facial expressions as he speaks.

When James talks about his father he appears angry and describes multiple incidents of abuse extending back over a period of years. “Usually he would hit me with a belt on my legs or back, where it wouldn’t show. Sometimes he would push me hard and knock me down. Sometimes he would just yell and curse at my sisters and me.

I would try to hide my sisters when he was getting mean like that. A few weeks before I told the teacher, Dad started to go after the girls with the belt too. I knew we had to get out.” When asked about his mother, James gets a sad look on his face. “I don’t know if she could have stopped my dad from hitting us, but she never even tried. It made me so mad. But he hit her too, and she never could protect herself either. Sometimes I would try to help her – she would get so small and scared when he came after her.” He describes his mother as “sometimes nice to us, like on our birthdays, but she has a bad temper too, and yells.

History from James

When she is drinking or smoking pot she sometimes says mean things. Once she told me, 'I wish you were never born.' That really hurt."

James reports that his dad works as a security guard and his mother works "some of the time" as a waitress at a bar. He says that both his parents use marijuana and cocaine. "I tried to figure out where they kept the drugs, so I could know when they had been using. I used to think that Dad was worst when he'd been using coke, or when he ran out of pot."

He reports that his parents "mostly didn't notice or care" about what was going on in his life. "Like, I showed them this history exam once, when I got a perfect score. I was so proud -- I really worked for that. They didn't even care!"

History from James

My sister, sure, she got A's, so they were always happy with her report card. But me, they just expected I was going to mess up. I used to feel really bad about how they didn't love me, and would cry and stuff. But then I decided, screw them. School is a waste of time anyway. I will just do what I want, and what they think doesn't matter. It's like, if they don't notice me, maybe they won't yell at me or hit me."

James describes trying to keep himself and his sisters as "invisible" as possible. When asked if he wanted to go back home, he says, bitterly, "I'm fine if I never go back, as long as they keep my sisters away from that bastard." Wistfully, and with sadness in his voice, he adds, "I just wish my sisters and I could all be together. Their foster family seems okay from what they told me on the phone, but I just don't know. I wish my uncle could take us all."

Current Functioning at School and Home

A month after James was removed from his parents' home, CPS obtains a court order for Dr. Andrews (who conducted the initial assessment) to evaluate James' current placement. Currently, CPS has enlarged the scope of its investigation of James' parents to examine allegations of abuse of all three children. CPS has determined that it is not safe at this time for the three children to be returned to their parents' home. No communication or contact has been allowed between the children and their parents since they were removed. The CPS legal department is also investigating its obligations to possibly involve law enforcement regarding the parents' alleged illicit substance use.

Dr. Andrews sets up a meeting with Ms. Jones, the guidance counselor at James' new school. When he lived with his parents, James attended a large public middle school where he received "C" grades in most of his classes and was seen as disruptive by his teachers. Patrick decided to give James a new start by placing him in a small Catholic school that is located in his middle class neighborhood and affiliated with his local parish. Patrick states that he thinks James will get more personal attention and support at this school.

Current Functioning at School and Home

Ms. Jones reports that James has had “ongoing trouble with concentration“ in his first month at the school. He makes careless errors, appears to be daydreaming in class, and does not complete his homework. He seems disorganized and unprepared for class discussions and quizzes. James has already been sent to the principal’s office twice for arguing with his male teachers and “being oppositional.”

For example, James got upset that the written instructions for a lab report were different from the teacher’s verbal instructions, and argued that he should not be marked down for doing it wrong. He stood up and yelled at the teacher about it in front of the class. Ms. Jones notes, however, that James is quite likable in one-on-one situations, particularly with female school staff members who are in less overt positions of authority (i.e., Ms. Jones his counselor, the school nurse, and a cafeteria worker).

Although James struggles academically, she says, “he appears to have more potential than we’re seeing,” judging from what he is able to do when he is focused and working directly one-on-one with a teacher. Regarding his social interactions, his teachers describe James as a “loner” who stays by himself during lunchtime.

Current Functioning at School and Home

Dr. Andrews meets with Patrick, who says that it has been challenging to have James living with him. Patrick never married and has no children. “I never saw any happy marriages, and so I decided I was better off alone. But I feel really unprepared to suddenly be a parent,” he says. There have been no major problems since James came to live with him, but Patrick says, “I wish I knew how to get him to talk to me more.”

James spends most of his time in his room on the computer or listening to music. When Patrick tries to engage him, James is polite but does not appear to be interested in extended conversations. Patrick thinks James is uncomfortable with positive attention. “I tell him how impressed I am with how nice he looks or compliment him when he does well on a quiz. He just looks embarrassed and shrugs. It bothers me how negative he is about himself. He keeps talking about how dumb he is, how bad he is at sports. When I try to help him do his homework, he quickly gets frustrated and says it is no use, he can’t do it.” Patrick encourages James to invite new friends over to the house, as they live only a few blocks from the new school. “But I’m not sure he has any friends. He never talks about anyone and he never asks to go out or bring anyone over. He just comes home from school, goes into his room, closes the door, and doesn’t come out until I call him for dinner.”

Current Functioning at School and Home

And at night, James doesn't seem to get a good night's sleep.

When Dr. Andrews asks James about how things are going at home and school, he acknowledges that he feels “jumpy” and worries “about a lot of things.” He is concerned about his sisters, with whom he has had minimal contact since their removal from their parents' house. Their foster care home is on the other side of town, and he talks with them by phone just once or twice a week. James describes being tired a lot during the day because he cannot get a good night's sleep. “I just start thinking and get nervous sometimes after I go to bed and have trouble getting to sleep.

Uncle Patrick says I yell sometimes in the night and thrash around, but I don't remember that. What I remember is waking up sometimes in the middle of the night, all sweaty and shaky. Uncle Patrick says I must be having nightmares, but I don't remember anything except just feeling scared. If I can't get back to sleep, I chill on the computer for a while, maybe even a couple hours.” When asked about school, James becomes quiet and appears angry, stating, “It's kind of a waste of my time anyway. I'm not really a school person.”

Interpersonal Relationships

Four months after James was removed from his home, the court again requests an in-depth assessment of how James is doing. The CPS case has been complicated by a criminal case against Rick for possession and selling of cocaine and marijuana. Rick is now in jail awaiting trial. Karen seems to have disappeared.

James has been able to visit his sisters more often, and feels more comfortable about their foster family. Dr. Andrews meets with James for several interviews. During these sessions, James is more verbal than he had been during earlier interviews. He appears quite relaxed and comfortable when talking about topics that are not emotionally charged. However, when the psychologist brings up any topic relating to his parents or his sisters, James becomes restless. He walks around the room, picking up toys and stuffed animals, and sometimes sits with a stuffed animal in his lap while seeming unaware of its presence. James is attentive to the responses of the psychologist and seems to want to please her.

Interpersonal Relationships

James chuckles affectionately when asked about his uncle. “He sure is set in his ways! He always eats the same things at the same time and watches the same things on TV. But he’s OK, I guess. He really tries. He buys me all this stuff because he thinks it will make me happy or help me fit in better at school. And he has helped me get to see my sisters.”

When asked about school, James scowls and tries to change the subject. “School is not my thing.” He can name people who are in classes with him, but does not describe anyone as a “friend.” “There are some guys I can talk with about computer games, but no one I would really want to hang with after school. The boys are all pretty annoying, and the girls are just silly.” He describes school as “not a dump like my other school but still really loud. When I have any free time I like to put on headphones in the computer lab and listen to music. By the end of the day I am ready to get away from it and be on my own.”

Interpersonal Relationships

Dr. Andrews probes, trying to identify the types of situations that lead to his conflicts with teachers. In an exasperated voice, James says, “They have so many rules there! I never know what they want, I never get it right. It always seems like the teachers are judging me. No matter what I do, I am not good enough. It’s not fair. I can never win. I just feel like I’m gonna explode sometimes!”

In response to follow-up questions, James says that those frustrated or angry feelings can stay with him for hours, making it hard for him to study or fall asleep. James seems embarrassed when he talks about his sleep habits. He says quietly, “At night, when it’s quiet, that’s when I get sad. I miss my sisters, and wonder what they are doing, and if they are OK. I remember the good times with my mom, and miss how she would smile when she was happy. Sometimes I cry, but then I mostly start thinking about how my father ruined it all for us and I get really mad. Sometimes I break things in my room; rip up comics, that kind of thing. My uncle doesn’t get why I do that. I guess it doesn’t make much sense.”

History of James' s Response to the Abuse

After several more sessions with Dr. Andrews, James is able to describe how his response to his father' s abuse changed over time. “At first, I was just scared all the time. I never knew if he was going to be in a good mood when I got home from school, or if this was going to be one of the bad days. I couldn't even tell for sure after I first saw him. Sometimes he would seem mellow, and then he would just ' go off.' He would get this look on his face and he would just take a swing at me. But he never hit my face. He did break one of my fingers once, but my mom just told the school I punched a wall, and they believed her. Sometimes when he beat me with the belt he got wild, and I thought he might kill me. It would hurt so much I would get dizzy and throw up. He would usually stop then. I knew he would never let me go to a doctor, and I was afraid he might break something inside me that couldn't be fixed.

For a while I thought that he was beating me because I had done something wrong, and so I tried to do everything perfect. I would clean up the house before he got home and bring him the sports section of the paper and a beer when he got home. If he went off on me anyway, I thought I had still messed up and just needed to be better.”

History of James' s Response to the Abuse

James said that this pattern of abuse continued from “when I was little“ to about third grade. “I started to learn how to just turn off, to go away somewhere in my head, like I wasn't there while he was hitting me. Then it didn't really hurt until afterward. It would still sting or ache for days, but it didn't scare me anymore. I didn't worry about if he would beat me. It would just happen. It was part of the routine, like school, familiar.”

James did not consider reporting the abuse until his father started hitting his sisters. “I knew they didn't do anything wrong, that they didn't deserve it. I started to try to figure out when he was in a bad mood so I could get them out of there, have them lay low. I got pretty good at reading him. Like, when he was cracking jokes and laughing a lot that was usually a bad sign. My mom never figured that out, and she would try to joke with him. I warned her, but she would tell me to “mind my own damn business.” It almost never ended well. And he didn't care if it showed on her. She got a lot of black eyes.”

Aftermath of Abuse for James

When James is asked how he feels about his father now, he says, “I never want to see or talk with him again. He is evil. You never could tell when he was going to blow. He would get all “I’ m sorry, it will never happen again,” and my mother would always believe him. She was pathetic. He could be all relaxed and mellow, and then, bang! out of nowhere. I had to always be on guard. My sisters would do the simplest thing and he would explode. Sometimes he would even attack us after we were already in bed!”

“When I was little I would have these dreams. Some superhero, like Batman or something, would come swooping in and catch my dad when he was beating me up. The hero-guy would punch my dad out and then carry him, unconscious, to prison. My mother would come up and hug me and my sisters would cheer, because we were finally safe. But that was just a dream. When I got to be about 10, I guess, I started to think that I was going to have to do it myself. No superheroes were going to come.

Aftermath of Abuse for James

I used to try to figure out how I could knock him out, or poison him, or kill him, and we could get away. But I had to realize that my mom would never help me, and he was a lot bigger than me. I didn't want to have to wait until I got big enough to punch him out.

So I started saving money for us to escape. I figured it would take about a thousand dollars to get us all tickets somewhere and a hotel room. But I only had \$300 saved up when he started with the belt on my sisters. I just couldn't stand hearing them cry. I knew we had to get out of there, even if it meant leaving my mom behind. One day they were just shaking and whimpering, and I decided I had to tell someone. I knew my teacher would have to do something if I showed her the marks.”

Aftermath of Abuse for James

James sat silently for a while. “You know, bad as they were, the beatings weren't the worst part of being at home with them. Yeah, my dad is evil, and it makes me so angry and afraid every time I think of Him. But my mom ... I mean, even when I tried to help her and my sisters, she never thanked me.

She never seemed happy to see me. I keep hearing her saying ‘I wish you were never born.’ If your own mother doesn't love you, maybe no one can love you. Sometimes I think about that at night when I can't fall asleep and I can't stop crying. I hide my head under the pillow so my uncle won't hear what a wimp I am.”