



E24 Case Study: How the Murder of a 4-Year-Old Girl Changed the System

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After attending this presentation, attendees will have an understanding of how, after police found a four-year-old girl dead in her home from a head injury and blunt force trauma and learned that she had been tortured at the hands of her stepmother for at least six months prior to her death while her biological father did nothing to stop the abuse, multiple changes occurred within the Child Protective Services Department, Law Enforcement response, and resulted in new legislation.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by not only examining the crime scene itself, but by also showing how an abusive stepmother intimidated police, child case workers, court-appointed advocates, family members, and neighbors into not recognizing and/or ignoring the horrific torture her 4-year-old stepdaughter endured. In addition, this presentation will show how the traditional gender roles in domestic violence cases can change, with the female (wife) being the abuser while the male (husband) takes on a more traditional victim role, resulting in his failure to protect his biological daughter. Finally, it will discuss how a sheriff's deputy lied about a well-being check on the victim, resulting in the deputy pleading guilty to charges of perjury.

On the morning of March 16, 2005, shortly after 6:00 a.m., a 911 call came into the Tippecanoe County Sheriff's Department reporting that a child had been choking and was possibly dead. Through the sheriff's and the coroner's investigation, it was learned that the night prior to the 911 call, the victim had her hands bound and her mouth duct taped shut. The torture this child endured included, but was not limited to, being beaten with a broken wooden cutting board, zip-tied to a highchair, forced to sleep on plywood in a make-shift room in the unheated garage, tied to a plastic playpen, and forced to eat a type of gruel her stepmother concocted, all in the name of discipline to correct unwanted behavior. The victim also had to endure cold baths, as she was secured to the faucet as punishment for wetting her pants and bed.

This presentation demonstrates how a happy, healthy, go-lucky child who thrived in a good environment turned into a child who rarely laughed and played, causing a learned-helplessness behavioral response.

There were multiple contacts with various agencies and missed opportunities for the system to protect this 4-year-old murder victim. From the age of two, the child was appointed a ward of the court, assigned a Court-Appointed Child Advocate and a Child Protective Services (CPS) case worker. The victim's biological mother was addicted to prescription drugs and had five child neglect cases against her. There are over 1,000 pages of court records related to the victim's status as a child in need of services. The victim's father had a previous conviction of battering a 13-year-old boy.

In the five years prior to her death, there were more than 40 calls/complaints to police about the stepmother's abusive behavior, including her alleged attempt to run over a neighborhood child with her vehicle. The maternal grandparents, who had temporary custody of the victim, obtained a lawyer and filed for visitation rights due to the victim's stepmother's refusal to allow the victim to interact with her extended family. This case dragged on and never received a hearing in court. Finally, court records show that one complaint filed with CPS was not investigated because, a case manager, noted "inappropriate discipline does not meet legal sufficiency for CPS to investigate."

The end result was how all of these different agencies came together to support the prosecution of the stepmother for murder and neglect and the father for neglect.

Homicide, Child Abuse/Torture, Domestic Violence