

Case Vignette

Julie is a playful and courteous four-year-old. She attends a preschool while her 23-year-old mother, Sandy, works at a local grocery. Sandy is somewhat short in stature and often appears either anxious or depressed. Sandy stated that she had trouble when she was in school and was told she has a learning disability. When asked what that was, she stated she didn't know much about it. Sandy and Julie's father grew up in the same neighborhood and started dating in high school. They were never married and separated when Julie was less than a year old. He still lives in the area and has frequent contact with them, although he provides little financial support. Sandy's parents still live in the neighborhood and Julie visits with them often.

Recently, when Sandy picked up her daughter at the preschool, the director met her at the door and told her that Julie was found in the bathroom taking pretend pictures with her toy camera of a three-year-old girl named Sara. Sara was undressed from the waist down and when a staff person asked Julie what they were playing, she said, "pictures." Neither Julie nor Sara appeared embarrassed or guilty when the staff person saw them, although they acted confused and upset when she said that what they were doing was a "no-no." Julie told the staff person that it was just a game and that she sometimes played the game with her grandpa. The director expressed strong concern about the behavior to Sandy and told her that Julie posed a liability to the program and strongly suggested that Sandy find another program for Julie. The director also advised her to call the police.

When Sandy got home, she became very angry with Julie for "causing a scene" at the preschool because it was going to be difficult to find another program in the neighborhood. She didn't discuss the incident with Julie and forgot the advice to call the police. The next day, she remembered what the director had told her and called the police. A police officer came to the apartment and asked Julie several questions. Julie appeared to the officer to be cooperative though shy. He drove Sandy and Julie to the children's center where Julie was questioned by a social worker who had expertise in the field of child sexual abuse. The social worker stated to Sandy that although she was unable to determine with certainty that something had actually happened to Julie, she felt there was reasonable cause to suspect that Julie may have been "abused" and would be calling child protection as a result. In addition, the social worker expressed concern about Julie and suggested it might be helpful to have her in counseling. When the child protection worker called Sandy the next day, he told her to bring her daughter back to the children's center for additional questioning. The questioning raised additional suspicions that something had happened and the police were able to obtain a warrant to search the grandfather's house. As a result, pictures were found of Julie undressed and the grandfather was arraigned.

Julie started seeing a social worker soon after the original recommendation. Last week, Sandy was told that she needs to bring her daughter back to the children's center to be questioned by the district attorney. The social worker was told to report any further information she obtains in sessions with Julie to child protection and the police. The police told the social worker that Julie would probably have to testify in the courtroom.

Sandy is angry that she has now lost her only babysitter and that her father is angry with her for calling the police. Sandy blames Julie for causing all the trouble. Julie is now quiet and withdrawn in sessions. She told the social worker that she is a bad girl and is scared of going to court and making her grandpa go to jail.