

Linda Wilson and Tara: The Investigation

The intake caseworker went to the Wilson home to conduct an assessment to determine whether Tara had been abused, and to calculate the risk of leaving Tara in Linda's care.

The caseworker talked to Linda about Tara's bruises, and why it was believed they were inflicted rather than accidental. The caseworker also provided considerable support and encouragement to talk. Linda began to cry and said the past three months had been, "the worst of my life." She had become very ill, and because she was out of work so often, she was fired from her minimum wage job. She went on public assistance and entered a job training program. She said she hated being on assistance, that she was accustomed to taking care of herself. Her illness had been diagnosed as a serious, but treatable blood disorder. The medication made her agitated, and she feared, depressed.

She expressed her extreme level of frustration in toilet training her daughter. She said she had been under a lot of pressure to toilet train Tara, since she had to get another job, and Tara could only stay at the day care home until she was finished with job training. The other day care centers she had contacted required that children be toilet trained. She was afraid if Tara wasn't trained, she would not be able to accept a job placement. She said that would be the worst thing that could happen to her.

Linda said that she always spanked Tara for misbehavior, but never as hard as she'd spanked her during the past month. She said the day Tara was burned, she had put Tara on the potty for an hour unsuccessfully. The minute Tara got off the potty, she hid in the corner of the living room and wet and soiled her pants. Linda said she grabbed a screaming, fighting Tara, and put her into the bathtub. Tara struggled, but Linda made her stay there. She said she didn't check the temperature of the water. It was only after Tara had gotten out that she'd realized Tara had been burned. When the caseworker asked why she hadn't gotten medical attention for Tara, Linda replied she didn't think the burn was that bad; she had been treating it with zinc ointment and it looked as if it was getting better. She then admitted she had been afraid the authorities would take Tara away from her if they knew about the burn.

The caseworker explored Linda's relationship with Tara. Linda said Tara was, "too much like me for her own good." Linda said as a child, she had been willful and demanding, and had received repeated "whippings" from her own mother for her noncompliant behavior. She believed that Tara was being purposefully belligerent, and she said Tara's behavior hurt her, because she tried so hard to be a good mother and she really loved Tara. She claimed, "I've never felt more angry or more frustrated in my life."

The caseworker explained that sometimes parents do hurt their children when they're very angry and under a lot of stress, and it was the caseworker's job to help her so it wouldn't happen again. Linda responded, "Well, I'm not sure you can change anything, but I'll do anything; just don't take Tara from me."

The caseworker then asked Linda to bring Tara into the living room. Linda went into the bedroom and returned with Tara in her arms. Tara, who had just awakened from a nap, had her head on her mother's shoulder and was sucking her thumb. She looked suspiciously at the caseworker. Linda sat back down and then slid off her mother's lap and wandered over to the toy box, pulled out a doll, and brought it to her mother; laying it in Linda's lap.

Source: *Field Guide to Child Welfare* by Judith S. Rycus and Ronald C. Hughes