

Children Left to Fend for Themselves: Danielle's case

What happens to a child when they are denied parenting, love, touch and basic care? That is the question Oprah wanted viewers to consider as they processed the story of one young girl.

Revealing a case in Honduras last year with a severely neglected 9 year old boy who only weighed 15 pounds, and a case in the US in 1997 where 9 year old Victoria was found in Texas surrounded by filth, unable to communicate and scared of the outside world. Today Victoria lives with her foster family and has learned basic skills.

Child Psychiatrist Dr. Bruce Perry: Oprah welcomed child psychiatrist Dr. Bruce Perry, author of the book *The Boy Who Was Raised as a Dog*. Dr. Perry explained that although the headline making cases capture the public's attention, there are 500,000 children neglected each year. The effects this neglect has on children can vary, but the lack of brain stimulation in the early years can cause developmental delays and even permanent damage. Neglected children may struggle with basic skills, education and building relationships.

Finding Danielle: Responding to a call from a neighbor who saw a young girl peak out the window - a girl who no one knew lived there - Detective Mark Holste was stunned by the living conditions in the decaying home. Going back to the crime scene with cameras and showing photo evidence, the home was filled with spider webs, cigarette butts, cockroaches, spoiled and chewed up food, and animal waste. The officers found Danielle in a bedroom wearing nothing but a soiled diaper - unable to speak and scared, cowering in the corner. The detective carried Danielle out of the house, asking her mother, "How could you let this happen?"

Danielle Exam by Dr. Rodriguez: Detectives took Danielle to the emergency room where she was given an exam by Dr. Rodriguez. The doctor expressed that Danielle had the behaviors and skill level of a 6 month-old baby, while she was almost 7 years old. Able to eat from a bottle, dirty and covered with bug bits, Danielle's biggest challenge was the way she would interact with other people. Dr. Rodriguez compared Danielle's reaction to people to that of an injured animal - kicking, snarling, and scared.

Danielle's Voice in the Courtroom: Oprah spoke with Judge Tracy Sheehan via satellite who was appointed Danielle's legal advocate before becoming a judge. Judge Sheehan had never seen a neglect case as bad as Danielle's, saying "It was really mind boggling that a child was so devoid of social skills. She couldn't grab her sippy cup. She couldn't do positive or negative reinforcement regarding potty training...she was being raised like a potted plant, literally."

Reports had surfaced of Florida's Child & Family Services getting complaints about Danielle's mother, but none of them had resulted in having the child removed from the home.

Offered child care assistance, Danielle's mother refused saying that she didn't need help and was doing the best she could. Judge Sheehan said the department should have removed Danielle, as hindsight is 20/20, but they are focusing on her care now.

The DCFS released a statement saying, "It is sad to realize the DCFS was in a position to help Danielle years before her suffering became widely known. We understand that speaking to Danielle during the first investigation would have allowed us more insight into the environment she was forced to endure. We have worked tirelessly to improve our child protective system.

Parenting in the Modern Age: Dr. Perry spoke on how parenting in this modern age is very different to how children were raised in centuries and generations past. The development of a child's brain benefited from the multiple number of caretakers and close relationships in the past - aunts, grandmothers and others were a regular part of a child's life. Now, children are sent to daycare where 1 adult can care for up to 10 children at a time combined with isolated parents who struggle to cope with the day. Dr. Perry didn't call this neglect, but underdevelopment of a child's potential.

The Response of Danielle's Mother: Danielle's mother - a single mom of 2 older sons who is in her 50s - was arrested

after Danielle was taken to be treated. After being released, she agreed to an interview with a Florida reporter. In the interview, Danielle's mother stated, "They accused me of making her autistic - environmental...and that's a crock. You cannot make a child autistic. You cannot make a child retarded. They just made me sound like I was some kind of a monster and I'm not a monster. I love my baby. The only thing I was guilty of was a dirty house and it cost me my child. I'm sorry, I love that baby, she's my life."

Oprah spoke to Lane DeGregory, a reporter with the *St. Petersburg Times* who broke the story of Danielle. Lane expressed her shock by Danielle's mother's responses to the questions - believing that she hadn't done anything wrong, did her best for her child, and was a victim of the system. Saying she was in denial, Lane couldn't believe that Danielle's mother didn't take responsibility, didn't think anything was wrong with her child and made excuses for her actions despite the response from authorities.

Danielle's mother was arrested, but released back to live her life without consequence besides losing her parental rights. Danielle's mother fought to retain her parental rights, but was refused and forced to serve 2 years of house arrest and 3 years of probation - a minor punishment for the lifetime of challenges she gave her daughter.

Finding Danielle A Home: Danielle's case worker, Garett White, worked hard to make sure that Danielle would not be failed by the system and be moved from house to house - she was searching for a forever family for Danielle. Bernie and Diane Lierow attended an event put on by Heart Gallery where children available for adoption were gathered to meet potential parents. Pictures of children who couldn't make the event were hanging, including a photo of Danielle that caught the eye of Bernie and Diane.

Bringing Danielle Home: Bernie and Diane realized Danielle's needs when they brought her to their home - almost 8, Danielle's skill age varied between 6 months and 2 years old. The first days in the home were challenging with Danielle throwing regular elaborate tantrums, eating until she would throw up, and having nightmares. Danielle also would entertain herself with random items instead of the toys provided - Bernie and Diane were the special family Danielle needed to dedicate the love and time to help her grow and develop.

Viewers were able to hear from Dr. Kathi Armstrong - the first psychologist to evaluate Danielle. Dr. Armstrong confirmed Danielle's inability to play or relate to other people - saying her big brown eyes were vacant. Not knowing if any of Danielle's delays stem from birth or just environment, Dr. Perry showed examples of MRI brain scans that displayed how the brain can change with neglect. Comparing the brain to a sponge, Dr. Perry explained that for a brain to develop properly it needs to make multiple connections that start at birth by a variety of interactions, love and stimulation from care takers. If this stimulation never occurs, the connections are never made, and children can actually die.

Danielle Now:

In the last year and a half, Danielle has made great progress with her new parents, 10 year old brother William and adult siblings. Danielle can use the bathroom on her own, use a fork, smile, laugh, play and loves to swim. Danielle biggest struggle is learning to speak - she has said a few words, but rarely repeats them. Bernie and Diane see great potential in their daughter's progress.