

Handout: Case Scenario – Billy Campbell

Billy and his sister were removed from his birth family at age 4 after an incident of abuse by his father, who had locked him in a closet for over a day. Billy eventually had a violent reaction, banging his head on the door, screaming, and hurting himself. He was taken to the hospital, but first his father threatened Billy that if Billy told anyone what he had done to him, he would kill Billy, as well as himself. Billy's father did indeed commit suicide while Billy was in the hospital. He left the hospital to attend his dad's funeral, and was placed into foster care around this time. He had endured years of physical abuse, including having cigarettes put out on his body, beatings, being slashed across his chest with a knife, and also witnessed his father's violence toward his mother. When Billy was 9, he told a social worker, "I look at that portrait of my mom and dad (in his Lifebook), and I wonder, why did you kill yourself, why, just why? And I can never come up with a reason, and I still can't."

Both of Billy's birthparents were heavily involved with drugs and had many drug parties at their home. After placement, Billy had several moves in foster care and was separated from his sister. He continued to see his mother up until termination of her parental rights. After he was placed for adoption with a couple who had no other children, his adoptive mother became concerned about a number of odd behaviors. For example, he only wanted to eat white food and was extremely afraid of policemen. Billy had severe nightmares and dreamed of being beaten, locked in a closet, and being cut. He reported having a nightmare of being in a party setting, being stabbed by his father, and rushed onto a bus with his mother to get to a hospital. The next time he saw his mother, he asked her about this dream, and she said it was true. After he had been in his adoptive home for several years, Billy told a social worker, "I feel sorta' like I'm a tennis ball or a ping pong ball, going back and forth, bouncing from house to house – that's what I feel like." He also demonstrated typical externalizing behavior problems – rages, aggression, destruction of property, and hyperactivity. In addition, he demonstrated serious risk-taking behaviors, such as riding his bike off the roof of his house.

Mrs. Campbell went back to the child welfare agency and began to piece together the story that led to Billy's original removal. After talking further with Billy, she learned that he thought he was responsible for his father's death, and that his father was going to come back from the dead and poison him, but if he only ate white food, he could tell whether it had poison in it. He also feared that the police were going to arrest him for his father's death and put him in jail.

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Billy missed his birth mother very much, and, after being in his adoptive home for over 2 years, he told a social worker, “I love my new mom; and I love my old mom; but sometimes I still wish I was with my old mom.” Mrs. Campbell decided that he needed to see his birth mother, and she was able to locate her and took Billy to visit her once or twice a year. Billy still struggled with grief and anger at what he perceived as rejection from his birthmother. He fantasized about going to see her when he was 18, and saying, “I reject you, like you rejected me!” When Billy was 14, his birth mother died of a drug overdose. He felt very guilty, as if his anger had killed her. He did go to her funeral, and received many old pictures and mementos from his maternal grandmother that he integrated into his Lifebook. Billy also experienced another loss as a teen, when his parents divorced. He continued a relationship with his adoptive father, but never lived with him again.

Billy’s Lifebook was a therapeutic tool for him throughout his childhood and into adulthood. Many items that were in there had special meaning to him, even into his 20s. For example, he had a letter from his birth mother explaining why she couldn’t keep him. After reading this letter when he was older, Billy expressed how valuable the letter, and his memory of their conversation during that visit, were to him, saying, “It wasn’t just my Dad who abused me. The things she did to me are still in my mind. This letter helped me to recognize later that my adoptive mom was indeed my mom, and we were going to be together.” In his Lifebook, he had a doctor’s report from when he was still living with his birth parents, and said, “My mom and dad at some point in time had to have cared, or they wouldn’t have bothered taking me!” Also, a teacher’s report from fifth grade in his Lifebook reported that Billy’s greatest achievement that year was his behavior: He was able to follow the teacher’s directions and was seldom non-compliant; he worked with enthusiasm and took pride in his work. Bill said, “I never thought I really was good in school. I thought I was just getting in fights all the time.”

Billy continued to have emotional struggles through most of his childhood, and was involved with many counselors and psychiatrists, receiving a broad range of diagnoses, including ADHD, ODD, CD, and others. As a young adult, his life became more stable. Despite his profound early abuse, Billy demonstrated resilience and the ability to build on his and his family’s strengths. At the worker’s last contact when Bill was 26, he was married with two young children, to whom he was very attached and affectionate. He shared his Lifebook with her, to which he had continued adding new events. He had stayed very close to his mother, and was also able to have a steady job. He took medication for bipolar disorder. Bill stated, “As for now, I take a look at everything’s that’s happened in my past and the stuff in my Lifebook, and I realize that now that I’ve got two of my own, I’m going to be able to do something for them that wasn’t done for me!”

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