

# The Johnson Family

## Presenting Problem at Intake

The Johnson family was referred by the elementary school teacher because the Johnson's 11-year-old daughter, Anna, had collapsed on the school playground complaining of pains in her chest and upper abdomen. The teacher indicated there were three other Johnson children attending the school; Todd, age 10; Raymond, age seven; and Kayla, age six. The teacher indicated there had been multiple signs of problems during the past year, and that the children's situation had seemed to be worse during the past few months. The teacher provided the following information.

- Eleven-year-old Anna has had a chronic, low-grade fever, wheeze and bad cough. She told the school nurse she had not been to the doctor. The school nurse examined Anna when she complained of chest pains, and the nurse expressed concern about chronic bronchitis and possible pneumonia.
- The children were often absent from school, sometimes for days at a time. When the school called their mother, Patricia Johnson, she routinely said the children were "sick".
- The children were generally poorly clothed for the weather; they had no boots, wore lightweight sweaters in severe winter weather. Their clothing was often soiled.
- Seven-year-old Raymond was often observed playing alone on the school playground long after school was out, without supervision.
- Todd, the 10-year-old, had developed severe behavior problems, and referral to a self-contained classroom was being considered by the school. The school couldn't assess whether he had a learning disability or had ADHD, but he showed signs of both.
- Six-year-old Kayla cried with little provocation, sometimes sitting by herself in the corner. She was often withdrawn and appeared shy and fearful.
- The teacher had called Mrs. Johnson many times, and usually got no answer. The one time the teacher did reach Mrs. Johnson, she agreed to come to the school to meet with the teacher, but never did.
- The children often came to school hungry, indicating they hadn't had any breakfast.

## Investigation

The caseworker, Laura Douglas, called Mrs. Johnson on the phone and got no answer. She made an unannounced visit to the home and woke Mrs. Johnson at 2:30 p.m. Laura talked first to Mrs. Johnson and then to the four children when they returned home from school. Mrs. Johnson was subdued and withdrawn, but she answered the worker's questions. She claimed she was sorry the worker had to get involved, they usually handled their own problems just fine. She said they didn't have much money, but the family's income was usually enough to "get by". The food in the home was limited. Mrs. Johnson claimed she "hadn't gotten to the store" recently, and money was a little short the past month, so she hadn't gotten much other than the necessities. She claimed she knew Anna had a cold. When asked why she hadn't taken her daughter to the doctor, Ms. Johnson shrugged and said, "I was hoping it would go away by itself. It usually does, and I don't have the money for a doctor".

The home was marginally adequate. It consisted of three bedrooms, a living/dining room, a small kitchen and one bath. It was dirty and cluttered, and furnishings were sparse, but there were no obvious physical hazards. The children stated their mother slept a lot, and was "sick" very often. Anna said she often had to feed and dress the younger children for school. Anna also claimed she often cared for the younger children while their mother slept or went out. Ten-year-old Todd was restless and uncontrollable throughout the home visit, and he would not respond to any of his mother's requests to "sit down and be quiet". He periodically punched and teased seven-year-old Raymond when he thought nobody was looking.

During the home visit, the worker identified a fifth child, a baby girl. Mrs. Johnson said the baby, Lissa, was 10 months old. The worker noted the baby appeared listless and inactive. She was lying on her back in her playpen, barely moving, although she was awake. When the worker picked up the baby, her muscle tone was weak, her head wobbled, and she felt very slight for a child of her age. She had a bald spot on the back of her head, indicating a lot of time spent lying on her back on a flat surface such as a playpen or crib mattress. She did not make direct eye contact nor respond to the worker's attempts to engage her. The baby had on lightweight, dirty clothes, a soiled diaper and had an encrusted residue on her face from a chronic runny nose. The worker attempted to sit the child on her lap—the baby wobbled and could not maintain herself in a sitting position.

During the visit, the mother dutifully answered questions but offered little additional information. She was sullen and withdrawn, appeared to be easily distracted and seemed uneasy in the worker's presence. She displayed no overt hostility or anger, but did seem anxious. She occasionally appeared to lose focus and asked, "I'm sorry, what did you just say?"

## Safety Issues

Be prepared to discuss the following questions in a large group discussion.

1. Are any of the children currently unsafe—i.e., currently being abused or neglected, recently abused or neglected or at risk of imminent harm? Which children, and why?
2. Does this family need a safety plan to ensure the children's immediate protection while a further assessment is completed?
3. If a safety plan is needed, what activities and interventions should be included in the plan to protect the children with the least amount of trauma?
4. What additional information may be needed to complete a safety plan?
5. What information suggests issues that may need more in-depth exploration at a later time?