

One of Our Kids

Kids n' Kin Program Can Be Early Intervention that Prevents Child Abuse

Tracy and Katy* are twelve- and seven-year-old sisters who have been cared for from birth by Susan, a family friend. They were each placed with Susan by the Department of Human Services (DHS) because of their mother's inability to care for them. Their mother has a dual diagnosis of substance abuse and schizophrenia and has been receiving Supplemental Security Insurance payments since she was a teenager due to severe mental health problems. Mom has been in jail on several occasions and also has three other children who are being raised by family members.

There are over 60,000 children in Philadelphia who are not living with parents. Many of these children live with extended family members, godparents or close family friends. This arrangement is referred to informally as kinship care.

After being released from jail about two years ago, Mom filed for custody of her five children and although she did not win custody, she was granted unsupervised weekend visits with Tracy and Katy. These visits did not go well. The girls had seen little of their mother over the years and were intimidated by her large size and her loud and volatile personality. Katy, the younger child, cried the entire time and her mother, in frustration, simply returned her to the caregiver after one hour of their first visit. However, the unsupervised weekend visits continued for Tracy who was often locked in the apartment for hours by her mother, left alone to care for a new baby sister, while her mother went out. Tracy became depressed and even attempted suicide by cutting her wrists.

After Mom became pregnant with her seventh child she filed a petition in Family Court to regain custody of her five older children. Out of concern for the well-being of the two girls, Susan contacted *Child Advocates* for representation for the children.

The day of the hearing Mom was extremely volatile in the courtroom waiting area and threatened to harm both the Child Advocate attorney and the caregiver. She was escorted out of the building by security personnel before the case was called into the courtroom. The mother filed another petition. While waiting for the hearing before the judge, the Child Advocate arranged for the daughters to receive mental health services and Tracy was treated and put on antidepressant medication.

Negotiations with the mother in this difficult situation were extremely delicate because of the mother's mental illness. Though not represented by counsel, the mother refused to speak to the Child Advocate. However, the caregiver, Susan, also sometimes cared for the mother when she was a child. Susan worked with the Child Advocate to negotiate with the mother. Mom agreed to end the unsupervised visits

and to see her daughters in Susan's home and only when the girls want to see their mother. This was the agreement put in place when they appeared before the judge.

Life for Tracy and Katy has been difficult with a mother with mental illness and fathers who have not been involved in their lives. Most recently the mother encountered Tracy in a public place and made threats against the youth. The caregiver may be filing for a Protection Order against the mother. Our work on this case continues.

We don't know how much more difficult or dangerous it might have been for Tracy and Katy if they had been left to grow up with only the care of a very ill mother. For them and several of their siblings, there has been a family member or family friend who has stepped forward to give them a safe and loving environment in which to grow. As part of its Core Program on Kinship Care, *Child Advocates* features Kids n' Kin, a joint venture with Philadelphia Society for Services to Children (PSSC), to provide in-home legal and social services as a safe alternative to foster care placements for children. Cases are referred to PSSC from DHS, or by churches, prisons and individuals who can call PSSC and ask for help. The Kids n' Kin Program has received national recognition as an effective model for stabilizing kinship families.

*All names have been changed to protect the privacy of the child clients.