

Case Study 2: The story of Anna and her little sister Maria

Minor victim of sexual offences committed by her father

- **Reasons for opening the case**

Anna and her little sister Maria are two children, aged 5 and a half years and 2 years respectively. They are the daughters of Susanna, a very young woman with a slight cognitive impairment, and Pietro, an adult male, employee at a waste removal service. The family lives in an isolated village in Southern Italy and has a very low socio-cultural level.

The justice services came into contact with the family when the mother of the two girls filed a report against her husband, accusing him of having repeatedly abused her physically in the presence of her minor daughters.

The report is upheld and the Public Prosecutor's Office opens an investigation against Pietro.

At the same time, because these violent actions against Susanna were perpetrated in the presence of her minor daughters, the report was sent to the Public Prosecutor's Office at the Juvenile Court.

This was the beginning of the civil proceedings for the protection of Anna and Maria.

The civil proceedings lasted two years and led first to the fostering of the two girls by a foster family and the support of their mother Susanna by the Social Services, and then to the opening of the adoptability status of the two girls.

The criminal proceedings lasted three years and led to the conviction of the father Pietro for abuse and maltreatment of his wife and minor daughters.

- **What the Judge knows**

A report arrives at the Public Prosecutor's Office at the Juvenile Court for a case of family violence in the presence of minors. The Public Prosecutor sends me the file and I immediately notice that there is something in the report that is not clear/not right.

I contact the Public Prosecutor's office to make a first analysis of the case. A synergic work is considered necessary and we start some in-depth studies on the father figure.

I immediately summon the parents together with their daughters for a first preliminary investigation. The room where the meeting takes place is a dedicated space to welcome children and toys, paints for drawing and writing, etc. are provided. From the very first meeting, I notice that the family has a very low socio-cultural level. I start asking the parents questions to assess their ability to look after themselves and their children in everyday life. Through targeted questions, I try to gather information about their habits (e.g. what their meals consist of) and their contacts with the school. Given their low socio-cultural level, I investigate the parents' level of care and attention towards their daughters by asking what is the brand of the diaper that the youngest girl wears. Only the father responds, describing, in a theatrical manner, lavish meals of fish and lobster, while the mother appears disconnected and confused in her answers (she cannot answer clearly about the brand of the diaper). Throughout the interview, I perceive a strong discrepancy between what is being displayed and the state of neglect in which the two sisters find

themselves. I therefore think it is necessary to have a conversation with the girls without the parents, whom I ask to leave the room.

I use the game as a tool to start building a relationship of trust and to make the interview as less traumatizing as possible for the girls. It is immediately clear to me that the youngest girl has no muscular strength, she appears weak and weakened and does not maintain any eye contact with me. As soon as I approach her, she withdraws, avoiding any physical contact. When asked about their diet, the girls answer that they eat "brioche". The eldest girl, on the other hand, appears very upset, initially she throws objects around the room and when I hand her two dolls representing a boy and a girl, she nervously starts to play a game in which the male doll repeatedly hits the female doll and in which she brings in a toy car for which she imitates the sound of an ambulance. She expresses herself in a confused way, using a very poor dialectal language. When I ask her who takes care of changing her sister's diapers and who prepares her food, Anna says: "Many times we are alone and I am the one who takes care of Maria. I also have to clean the house, especially when mum and dad leave everything dirty." The little girl, in a confused way, also says, in dialect, "They scolded me because I finished all the bleach". When I ask her who she loves, she answers without hesitation and in a very serious and protective way that she loves her sister.

At the end of the interview, the testimonies, very precious elements for the identification of the characteristics of the family and of its internal dynamics, are transcribed and transferred in the file and, even if it is not possible to obtain any evidence yet, the Prosecutor's Office is informed of what has been learnt.

Particularly critical elements prompted me to take action. These included the state of neglect of the children, the violence the mother suffered at the hands of the child's father, as well as the discrepancies between what was reported and what was actually discovered by the investigative process. Considering the need and urgency to remove the mother and daughters from the danger of further violence, I decided to place them in a shelter, where they can be protected and at the same time it is possible to monitor in safety the parental skills of the mother and father. My decision is opposed by the municipal social services who are in charge of the two girls because, in their opinion, interviews with the parents have revealed a strong affection between the father and the two daughters. I am therefore forced to remind the social services that this is a decision by the judicial authorities that must be complied with, and so the girls enter the shelter. The mother, on the other hand, opposes the opportunity offered to her to enter the shelter with her daughters and chooses to remain in her home.

I remain in daily contact with the operators of the shelter and with the Prosecutor and I receive detailed reports and minutes from both of them. The operators report that Anna has often difficulties falling asleep and wakes up during the night, screaming and crying, saying that she had 'a bad dream'. In addition, it seems that Anna is easily frightened when she hears specific noises, such as a doorbell or an alarm, and reacts to these noises by suddenly jumping up and looking visibly worried. On one occasion, one of the workers asked Anna to pick up toys from the ground and put them in their place. The girl started shouting, saying "don't tell me what to do!" and broke a toy by throwing it against the wall. The little sister, on the other hand, seems distant, often plays alone and when someone approaches her, she becomes agitated and pulls back.

In the meantime, a reading of the father's criminal record shows that there is a pending charge for a sexual offence against other daughters from the first of three previous marriages. So I decided to call the daughters, now an adult, to testify about their father and the crime he was accused of. Their testimony,

at first reticent and a bit forced, turns out to be very important to better define the family context of the two girls and brings to light elements that help clarifying some initial and to gather information about the father figure and the extended family unit.

At this point, I have sufficient elements to declare that the parental authority of both parents has lapsed. The father had his daughters taken away from him. This decision led to a lengthy criminal battle in the Court of Appeal.

The criminal proceedings initiated following the report also continued. It was deemed necessary to take the testimony of Anna, the eldest child - even though she was less than fourteen years old - whose testimony I considered reliable on the basis of the information at my disposal. In order to avoid further traumatizing the child and incurring a second victimisation, her testimony is collected jointly with the Prosecutor, during the probationary incident, in a suitable space at the Juvenile Court and in the presence of a psychologist.

Anna's testimony is confused, she says many things but in a disordered way, confusing herself in remembering, but at the same time a feeling is clear, common to all her broken stories, which allows to reconstruct the picture of what happened, to have confirmation of the (sexual) abuse and maltreatment caused by her father.

The evidence gathered thanks to Anna's testimony, the evidences detected by the Prosecutor during the continuation of the investigation and the thorough reports of the operators of the shelter, lead to the shared decision to activate a foster care procedure for the two sisters.

The search for a foster family was very complex, since, when it comes to cases of abuse and maltreatment, it is very difficult to find a couple that is willing to take in the child (in this case, two very young sisters) and accompany him/her throughout the criminal proceedings, giving support in a very delicate emotional moment. In this particular case, we manage to find a family in a very short time and the girls go into foster care. The girls quickly establish a very close bond with the foster family.

- **What the Prosecutor knows**

A report of domestic violence reaches the Public Prosecutor's office for minors. Since it is a matter of intra-family violence, I contact the judge of the Juvenile Court and send him the file with the report.

The case seems suspicious. In the complaint it can be deduced that the violence against his wife was committed in the presence of their two (very young) daughters. I therefore consider it appropriate, after discussion with the judge, to arrange for investigations to be initiated. The first results of the investigations bring to light the father's criminal record. I consider it necessary to look at the case in depth and activate environmental investigations. The police hidden microphones inside the house and discovered that the wife and mother of the two girls was receiving other men, even in their presence. What is not known for sure is whether the husband was aware of these meetings or not. What is clear evidence of, however, is that the husband beats his wife habitually. When the husband and father of the girls realized he was being spied on, he removed the bugs and the direct information between the house where the violence allegedly took place and the Public Prosecutor's Office stopped.

I gather all the information from the investigations and complete the file, continuing to have direct contact with the judge who is following the two girls more closely.

While the criminal trial based on the complaint continues, the Judge and I called the older girl to testify. Fragmented stories of abuse and violence suffered by the minors emerged, leading the Judge to declare that the parental rights of both parents had terminated and to remove the father from the two daughters.

Once the two girls had been assigned to a foster family, I considered it essential to include in the records, as a useful element in the criminal proceedings, any element observed and collected in the context of the girls' placement (the drawings produced by the older girl, the messages she wrote to her foster mother when she was still in the family home).

In this way, even a single interview with the child, supported by all these elements, made it possible to pursue the criminal proceedings that led to the conviction for sexual abuse and domestic violence of her father Pietro.

- **What the community staff knows (social workers, psychiatrists, educators)**

We receive a request from the Social Services and the Juvenile Court Judge to admit a mother with her two small daughters. However, only the two daughters are taken into the shelter, as the mother refuses to leave her home.

What we immediately notice is that for the two sisters is really hard to stay in the shelter. Anna misses her father, cries often, and wanted to put a picture of him next to her bed that he gave her one during one of the protected meetings.

Within the protected space of the shelter we observe that the older sister is extremely protective and caring towards her younger sister. The girl does not like to apply herself to creative or learning activities and does not like to play, but she repeatedly asks to be allowed to do the cleaning and always stays near the trash bins.

Emotional and physical neglect and signs of multiple traumatization are noted in both children. The staff of the family home reported an episode during which a child pushed a girl and Anna - in front of this scene - remained frozen, looking into the void, rocking her body back and forth. She remained in this state for several minutes and when asked by the staff what had happened to her, she replied: "I don't remember anything". The child changes mood easily and cries a lot, especially when she does not get what she wants. At times, she is particularly open and willing to play with others and to interact with the educators, but it often happens that her attitude changes abruptly, becoming particularly angry and agitated and, rejecting everyone, she shouts "I hate everyone, I don't want to be here!" At such times, when someone approaches her younger sister, Anna becomes overprotective.

In addition, both girls have difficulties in learning new information and skills, they cannot pay attention during creative and learning activities and therefore we consider it necessary to request a placement in a learning centre. Meetings with experienced child professionals reveal gaps in some motor and intellectual skills, difficulties in expressing and regulating emotions, and for Anna difficulties in memorizing, together with an oppositional-defiant disorder.

During playing activities, Anna often draws sexualized pictures.

When the father visits, Anna sits on his lap, in close contact with her private parts, and kisses him on the neck. She seems very close to her father.

The mother Susanna, on the other hand, appears distracted, delegating, emotionally unstable. She has a psychiatric condition. Even the communication with the daughters consists of poor contents. During the separation from her daughters at the end of the meetings, Susanna expresses the discomfort of having to leave her daughters and of having lost her maternal role. On more than one occasion, the youngest child jumped into her mother's arms when she was separated from her mother, clinging to her to prevent her from leaving. On several occasions, after seeing her mother, Maria refused to go to bed alone that evening. Anna, on the other hand, is very nervous and worried after being separated from her mother, and once she said that she had the image of her mother lying on the floor bleeding and that there was no one there to help her.

Each of this information is reported in detail in the in-depth reports of the meetings that converge in the case report. Above all, the relationship with her father is carefully observed and described to the court. The produced reports lead the judge to believe that he has sufficient elements to interrupt the protected father-daughter meetings to protect the girls.

When the foster family was assigned, we followed the whole process of building a relationship of trust between the foster parents and the two sisters: the girls showed substantial improvements in their relationships with adults, they gradually abandoned the oppositional dynamics that especially the older sister used to put in place with figures outside the family, they showed significant progress at a cognitive level, and began to assume attitudes more in line with their age.

When we felt that a bond of trust and affection had been established between the foster family and the two sisters, we wrote a report to the judge on the progress made, which allowed the girls to leave the shelter and move in with the foster family.

- **What Social Worker knows (to be further investigated: what was the basis for the social worker's assessment?)**

A case of alleged abuse and maltreatment of two younger sisters arrives from the Juvenile Court.

The tutelary judge requests the start of a psycho-social investigation to find out about the conditions in which the two minors live and to assess the existence of risks or damage to their psycho-physical development.

Through home visits and interviews with both the minors and their parents, I found a strong emotional bond between the older girl and her father.

In the social report for the Court I express that what has been gathered during the meetings with the family unit is not sufficient to activate a procedure to suspend the father's parental authority and to proceed with the placement of mother and daughters in a family home.

The Judge, however, considers that the elements are sufficient to proceed and I work in synergy with the services of the territory to identify which family home is more suitable and available to host mother and daughters.

To date, we continue to monitor the care of the two sisters, maintaining direct contact both with the foster family and with the Social Services of Justice who are in charge of the father, Pietro, and we have activated services to support the mother who appears to be in a vulnerable condition.

- **What the foster family knows**

The two girls were transferred to a foster family consisting of a couple in their sixties. The husband Francesco and the wife Silvia have never had children and decided to become a foster family to help children through difficult times. One day, Anna, while playing in the living room, went to Francesco who was sitting in the kitchen watching television. She sat on his lap and started rubbing herself against his crotch. Francesco, shocked by this behaviour got up suddenly, pushed the little girl back and yelled at her: "What are you doing, aren't you ashamed?" The girl got up, with tears in her eyes, and locked herself in her room crying. The next day, after discussing the matter with his wife Silvia, the couple called the social worker and asked for the girls to be transferred.

What are the traumas and experiences of loss for the two girls?	What are their traumatic reactions?	What are the causes of these behaviours?	What are the resilience factors?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Witnessed violence; • Sexual abuse by the father; • separation from parents; • stay in a family home; • mother receiving other men; • etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The little girl who sits on her father's lap • Anna feels obliged to take care of her little sister; • oppositional and aggressive behaviour; • dissociation; • hyperactivity; • etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sexual abuse by the father provokes sexualised behaviour in one of the girls; • the emotional absence of the mother and the neglect makes the girls seem to be absent and dissociated; • etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anna is a very responsible child who knows how to take care of others; • There is an improvement in cognitive, social and emotional development when they are moved to a safe environment; • etc.