

11-year old foster child burns down foster family's barn, business

Tragic fire underlines the risks of being a foster parent

By Cathleen Thomlinson

Thursday, April 19, 2007

Cobourg, Ontario - Being a foster parent and bringing a child from the Children's Aid Society into a family home does bring with it some risks.

Henry and Joanna Wiersma who live on Timlin Road near Upper Cold Springs in Northumberland, Ontario have tragically learned this lesson the hard way after a fire left their family devastated and the business they were developing in ruin.

Their family is reeling in shock and horror after an 11-year-old foster child described as having "issues" set the family's barn on their property ablaze during the early afternoon of April 6, Good Friday.

The foster child later admitted to setting the fire using matches which he and a friend had taken into the barn.

The foster child responsible for starting the blaze had been placed in the Wiersma's home by the Northumberland Children's Aid Society which operates in Cobourg, Ontario.

Shortly after the blaze had started, Mr. Weirsma ran into the barn but saw that that the fire was already beyond anything he could get under control.

At that point, he quickly ran into the house to alert family members of the emergency.

With the help of family, the small animals in the barn were saved before the flames had completely engulfed the building.

The family's own 15-year-old daughter, Oriah, was chased out by flames as she tried to save a few of the remaining chickens in the structure.

Ms. Weirsma jumped into the family's work truck and was able to get it out of the reach of the flames before the barn literally exploded into flames.

At that point, nothing else inside could be saved and the family could only stand back and watch the large wooden structure burn to the ground.

With dry hay in the loft to fuel the fire, it did not take long for the barn to turn into a raging inferno before the fire department could arrive at the scene.

According to Mr. Weirsma, the whole barn just exploded once the fire got out of control.

In addition to the few animals, the 4,000-square

foot storage barn housed farm machinery and hay.

While no one was hurt and most of the animals saved, equipment for Mr. Wiersma's new business, including block-making machinery, wood-working and carpentry tools, stacks of dried lumber and building materials, including scores of windows were all lost in the blaze.

The Wiersmas did not carry enough insurance on the barn to rebuild it or to replace the equipment and contents, including items they stored for friends.

The fire will result in a tragic loss for them financially.

Mrs. Wiersma said that the experience has certainly shaken her whole being.

While the Weirsmas did not want to chastise the boy for what he had done, it was obvious that the boy had issues which made the family feel insecure about having him stay longer in the family home.

What if it had been the family home that the child had set fire to?

The Northumberland CAS took the boy back into their care, likely to be placed into another foster home.

Foster parents often complain how they take foster children from the Children's Aid Society but are not allowed to know about the child's past history or psychological problems.

Many children in care of the CAS suffer psychological issues as a result of being in the foster system itself.

Some of the things which foster children in the CAS system are exposed to but which are seldom disclosed to potential foster parents include the following:

- **Denied access to family: Foster children are often denied access to their biological families without just cause. Some CAS workers have been known to have committed perjury in court just so that they can forcefully separate children from their biological families.**
- **Sexual and physical abuse: Many children report having been sexually or physically**

assaulted by other foster children in the system. In some cases, children have reported being sexually and physically abused by CAS workers themselves.

- **Forced over-medication:** Some children report being forced on drugs by CAS workers while in care with some of the children reporting violent reactions to the drugs.
- **Brain damage:** Some children in care suffer from the effects of foetal alcohol syndrome as a result of their biological mothers taking alcohol or drugs while they were pregnant.
- **Forced medical examinations and procedures:** Foster children are often made to go to doctors so that CAS can find something wrong with the child. One child from Toronto reported during a videotaped interview that the CAS was going to force him to be circumcised at 12 years of age and that he would have to follow the Jewish religion. The boy said he wanted to be Christian, not Jewish.
- **Victims of theft:** Children in care have reported that their personal belongings are searched and stolen from them. One supervisor with the York Region CAS in Newmarket, Ontario was recently arrested by police after being caught for stealing money and candy from kids in care of the CAS.
- **Threats and intimidation:** Children in the system report being threatened by CAS workers to remain silent about abuse while in care of the CAS. Some children are told that if they don't keep silent about certain things, they will never see their friends and family again.
- **Separation from siblings:** Children in care of CAS have reported that they are forcefully separated by their brothers and sisters and in some cases punished if they are caught trying to make contact with them.

Being in the care of a CAS agency is not a pleasant experience for many children with many of them being left with memories of being in care which scar them for their lifetimes.

It is only natural that many of the children in CAS care are angry at a system for the care they have received and exhibit their anger in destructive ways which foster families often bear the brunt of.

As a result of abuse by the child protect system itself, many of the children in the foster care system have significant emotional issues and can be a risk to those families who take them in.

In December of 2005, a 14-year-old foster girl from Welland, Ontario, murdered a little three-year-old boy who was living in the home where she had been placed as a foster child by the CAS.

The girl, whose name is protected by law, was charged with first-degree murder in the death of the little boy.

The foster girl was a Crown Ward placed in the home by Family and Children's Services of the Niagara Region.

While the girl's identity will be protected, once the CAS moves the girl into another location, it is unlikely that people who this girl will come into contact with in the community will know about the murder she committed.

Children's Aid Agencies have been known to over-prescribe medication. On CBC's The National, an investigative report covered how the Durham CAS was over-medicating one child to the point where the child could not even walk up a flight of stairs.

One sure tell-tale sign of a foster child with emotional problems is when the child has been prescribed some form of psychiatric medication such as Ritalin.

Families who are considering being a foster family would be very prudent to enquire about the history of the child they may be considering taking in as a foster child.

Families who are considering being a foster family should demand a clear record of the number of homes a prospective foster child has been in, where the homes were located and the reasons why the child was moved each time.

The reasons why the child was put into care of the system originally should also be clearly disclosed.

A child on medication such as Ritalin is just one of the warning signs of a child who may have been mistreated by the system.

If the CAS agency does not want to fully disclose information about the child or will not give you the contact information for the previous foster parents, then it is quite likely that the CAS agency is trying to hide things which it does not want the potential foster family to know about.

If CAS agencies refuse to fully disclose information then potential foster families would be best to avoid the risk of taking a child into their home who may have unresolved issues.

To do otherwise may be putting their own properties and the lives of their own family members at significant risk.