



Boyfriends of moms may put tots at risk **11.23.07**

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Experts say it's a troubling trend: men accused of killing children of the women they live with.

As more American children grow up in homes without their two biological parents, the risk of child abuse is markedly higher than in traditional nuclear family structures, they say.

In the past 12 months, four children in Southwestern Pennsylvania ages 14 months and younger allegedly have been abused and later died, and police have arrested the boyfriends of their mothers:

- A North Versailles man watching his girlfriend's 14-month-old boy put the baby's head in the crook of his arm in June and squeezed until he "heard a popping noise," killing the child at her White Oak home, police said.
- A 10-month-old Troy Hill girl was sexually assaulted and fatally beaten, and police arrested her mother's live-in boyfriend, who was babysitting.
- A Butler County man is charged with beating his girlfriend's 13-month-old son to death in June after he found out he was not the boy's father.
- In March, a 3-month-old Fayette County girl died as a result of severe skull fractures, and investigators charged the infant's mother's boyfriend with aggravated assault. Officials are awaiting the opinion of another pathologist before deciding whether to charge James Ray Morrison, 27, with homicide.

"There are certain risk factors and recipes for child abuse, and they include having an adult in the home who has poor bonding with the child," said Dr. Janet Squires, chief of the Child Advocacy Center at Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh.

"They may be in the relationship for the mother and not have much interest in the child and view them as an annoyance. These are men raising other men's children, and though there are exceptions, they don't all necessarily want to do it."

In the latest case of a child's death, Clinton Smith, 30, is scheduled to appear Nov. 30 in Pittsburgh Municipal Court on charges of homicide, rape, aggravated assault and other offenses. Police say he beat and sexually assaulted Da'Niyah Marie Jackson, 10 months, at her Troy Hill home while her mother, LaToya Jackson, was working an 11-hour shift as a waitress.

She returned home to find her baby -- whom family members described as content and not prone to crying or fussing -- bruised, beaten and unresponsive. The girl died two days later at Children's Hospital.

In another case, a 7-year-old North Side girl was beaten and burned more than 37 times with cigarettes in November 2006. Police charged her uncle, who was living with the family and babysitting the first-grader and her siblings when the injuries happened.

The existing data on child abuse in America is patchwork, making it difficult to track national trends. The most recent federal survey on child maltreatment, compiled for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, is from 2005 and tracks nearly 900,000 abuse reports to state agencies. The survey did not examine how rates of abuse correlate with parents' marital status or the makeup of a child's household.

Similarly, data on the roughly 1,500 child-abuse fatalities that occur annually in the United States leave unanswered questions. Many of those deaths result from parental neglect, rather than physical abuse. Of the 500 or so deaths caused by physical abuse, the federal statistics do not specify how many were caused by a stepparent or unmarried partner of the parent.

Other studies reinforce the fears of experts that children from broken homes are at a higher risk of abuse:

= Children living in households with unrelated adults are nearly 50 times as likely to die of inflicted injuries as children living with two biological parents, according to a study of Missouri abuse reports published in the journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics in 2005.

= According to several studies from the University of New Hampshire's Crimes Against Children Research Center, children living in stepfamilies or with single parents are at higher risk of physical or sexual assault than children living with two biological or adoptive parents.

"This is the dark underbelly of cohabitation," said University of Virginia sociology professor Brad Wilcox. "Cohabitation has become quite common, and most people think, 'What's the harm?' The harm is we're increasing a pattern of relationships that's not good for children."

In the late 1970s, nearly 80 percent of America's children lived with both parents. Now, only two-thirds of them do, according to U.S. Census Bureau statistics. Of all families with children, nearly 29 percent are one-parent families, up from 17 percent in 1977, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

The result is a marked rise in the likelihood that adults and children with no biological tie will reside together.

"I've seen many cases of physical and sexual abuse that come up with boyfriends, stepparents," said Eliana Gil, clinical director for the national abuse-prevention group Childhelp.

Dr. Mary Carrasco, director of A Child's Place at Mercy Hospital, Uptown, said she often sees abuse cases where a nonbiological man caring for another man's child felt competition for the mother's attention.

"There's often a jealousy issue," Carrasco said. "And to some men, the fact that they're at home, changing diapers and comforting a child while the woman is working causes resentment. It's a threat to their manhood."

Squires said many single mothers find themselves in an almost impossible predicament: With little education or job training, they work jobs paying minimum wage and cannot afford quality child care.

"Sometimes women get into these relationships with live-in boyfriends for emotional or financial need," Squires said. "Often when we see cases of a child being abused by a mother's boyfriend, it's when the mother was out working long hours and the child was left at home with an adult male who isn't working and doesn't care too much for that child."

"Some people can blame the mothers and say they shouldn't have had children until they were financially ready to raise them, but it's the children who are caught in the middle and the children who suffer."

A Tribune-Review sampling of about a dozen child care centers in Allegheny County showed that full-time care for a child 6 weeks to 5 years old ranges from about \$450 a month to nearly \$1,000.

Some programs subsidize the cost based on the parent's income, and federally funded programs such as Head Start and Early Head Start exist for child care and preschool programs. But experts warn that some programs have long waiting lists for enrollment and don't provide services at night and on weekends, when many single mothers find themselves working long shifts at menial jobs.

The Allegheny County Department of Human Services has programs designed to prevent and educate parents and caregivers about child abuse, said Leslie Reicher, an administrator in the unit of outreach and prevention. One is First Steps, which provides home visits in McKeesport, the Hill District, South Side and North Side to assist pregnant women and families with children younger than 6, Reicher said.

Preventing and stopping child abuse -- regardless of who is living in a home with a child -- is everyone's responsibility, Squires said.

"If we, as a society, truly valued and treasured our children, we would think twice about who we leave them with and would do everything we could to protect them," she said. "Otherwise, the children are the ones who, ultimately, pay the price."