

Case Study – Child Sexual Abuse (Live) & Parenting

Your friend Karina has called a meeting of your close friends seeking advice on a situation with her children.

Karina is the mother of three children – Star who is 8, Jacob who is 10, and Danilo who is 13-years-old. She parents alone, and the children's father, Daniel, has not seen the kids since a few months after Star was born. He and Karina had a volatile relationship, Daniel slapped Karina a few times when he'd gotten upset, and when he hit Karina and bruised her face when Star was a newborn, Karina decided she had to leave. She moved herself and the kids from San Diego to the Bay Area, where her brother Adam and his partner Robert live. Karina and the kids lived with her brother for two years before moving to an apartment in the same neighborhood. Daniel called asking to see the kids a few times, but Karina refused and Daniel eventually gave up. Karina has kept in some touch with Daniel's mom and stepdad who also live in San Diego – sending them pictures of the kids and letting them talk on the phone every so often.

Karina is fiercely protective of her kids. She works two stressful jobs with sometimes unpredictable shift changes, and prides herself on doing her best to make it to as many school events as she can and on coming up with creative family projects to do together. She has a community of other parent friends who help each other by watching each other's kids when they need, and her brother lives close by and is close with the boys, taking them on outings most weeks after school and picking them up when she can't. Since Danilo was 12, Karina has let Danilo babysit for short periods of time when she's had a quick errand to run or was late coming home from work. .

Jacob and Danilo have both been acting differently recently, and Karina has been a bit worried about both Jacob and Danilo. Danilo acting distant, slamming doors, and being short with her. He has always been really sweet and thoughtful. But, she chalked it up to him starting to act like moody teenagers do with their parents. Karina has given extra attention to Danilo. He has been bullied a lot in the last few years, is shy around other kids his age, and prefers to keep to himself at school. Jacob has always been loud and funny, but has seemed quieter and less happy lately, and just seems not himself.

Recently, Karina sat down with Jacob to talk about some of the changes she has noticed in his behavior and mood. After talking for a little while, Jacob mentioned that he feels uncomfortable around Danilo. Jacob eventually shared that a few times last year when Danilo was watching Jacob and Star, Danilo had abused Jacob, making him play a game that was sexual in nature. Danilo told Jacob not to say anything. All of this information made Karina distraught. She thought she had done everything right to protect her kids, and is stunned that Danilo would do something like this. She blames herself for working too much and not being home more or seeing the signs. And, she doesn't know how to be there for Jacob and also be a good parent to Danilo. She also isn't sure whether something happened to Star, too, or other younger kids that Danilo has been around.

The day she found out, Karina asked her brother and his partner if they could watch Danilo for a little while, until she figures things out. She didn't give them all the details – she told them Danilo had been rough with the other kids, but didn't mention sexual abuse. Because it was a school break, she wasn't worried about him being in school, but did ask her brother to check with her before having him around other kids. She knows Adam and thinks he would call child welfare or the police if he finds out the whole story. Adam can watch Danilo for a few weeks, but it's not a permanent solution. Karina also really wants to figure out a way to be with Danilo. She hates the idea of not having Danilo in her home, but doesn't know how else to make sure Jacob and Star are safe, and to show Jacob how much she cares for him and believes him. She's also not sure how to talk to Star about this. Star is already asking why Danilo is staying at their Uncle's house, and Karina's not sure how to explain.

When she tried talking to Danilo about what happened, he got really uncomfortable and kept saying he “just wanted to see,” that they “were just playing,” and that he hadn't done anything like that in a long time. She immediately wanted to take all of the boys to therapy, but talked to one of your friends who is a public defender, and found out that a therapist would probably report Danilo to police or CPS. He could be taken from her, and could be sent to youth prison and required to be on the sex offense registry for the rest of his life. She's also worried that if CPS comes, they might blame her and take Jacob and Star away, especially as a single mother of color. She wants to show Jacob that she's there for him, that she believes him, and that she's on his side. She feels terrible keeping him from talking to someone else about it. But she also doesn't want Danilo's whole life destroyed, wants to be there for him, and knows that even though he's done something awful, he has a good heart and was a good kid before this. She wonders whether something happened to Danilo that led to this. She also knows that Jacob needs help and support right now, and feels awful for waiting to take him to therapy until she can figure out how to keep Danilo safe from being put in prison or on a registry, and how to keep all the children safe from getting taken away.

Aside from Adam, Karina doesn't have close family in the Bay Area. She has an Aunt who lives in San Luis Obispo, and who she really loves but doesn't see often. Since her mom died, her dad moved to Florida and they are in touch by phone and see each other once a year, though Karina was never particularly close with her dad as he was really strict and worked long hours when she was growing up. Luckily, Karina has a great network of several close friends (her pod) in the Bay Area – and many of you have been learning and talking about transformative justice recently. You've gotten together to talk about how you might respond if one of you were being abused, or if one of you harmed someone else and needed to take accountability. You've also talked about how to show up for each other on a regular basis, and how to help take care of each other's' kids (a few of you are parents and a few of you are not). But, you have not talked about a situation like this. Karina called this meeting to brainstorm with you all – she needs your help and support to think about what to do, how to keep her kids and other kids Danilo might interact with safe, and how to support all of her children.