

The Palm Beach Post

JUPITER

Jupiter parents say adopted teen locked in garage room had attachment disorder. What that means

arrests shed light on a system that provides little support for adoptive families and illy those needing counseling.



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Palm Beach Post

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JUPITER — The teen lied, stole and attacked family members, the child's adoptive parents told Jupiter police. The teen threatened classmates.

The child even fantasized about killing people.

And investigators were ignoring critical evidence as they prepared to arrest the teen's adoptive parents, Timothy and Tracy Ferriter, criminal defense attorney Nellie King wrote Feb. 7 in a last-minute effort to persuade the town police to do otherwise.

Officers days before had discovered the Ferriters often locked the teen in an 8-by-8-foot room within the garage for as much as 18 hours at a time. Now the couple is facing aggravated child abuse and false imprisonment charges. Both have pleaded not guilty.

The Palm Beach Post is not identifying the teen by name or gender.

Tracy Ferriter told Jupiter police officers Jan. 28 that the teen had a history of attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, or ADHD, and a condition known as reactive attachment disorder after she reported the teen missing, according to supplemental reports from the department. She told the officers the disorder causes the teen to become upset and avoid confrontation.

On Feb. 9, King reiterated this fact when she wrote to Circuit Court Judge Charles Burton that documentation had been presented to the court regarding the child having a history of

reactive attachment disorder.

The disorder keeps children from forming bonds with their family members, and it can lead them to act out or make it difficult for children to accept love. The Palm Beach Post has not been able to verify whether the child has been diagnosed with the disorder, and King has declined to answer questions from reporters regarding the teen's medical history.

But social workers and child psychologists say no behavior by a child warrants the intense and punitive isolation that police say the Ferriters subjected the teen to inside their Jupiter home. They say treatment has evolved as the understanding of the disorder has changed.

"Certain interventions such as physical restraint, reattachment, (and) 'tough love' used in the past can actually be very harmful for children with reactive attachment disorder," said Rachel Needle, a licensed psychologist and executive director of Whole Health Psychological Center in West Palm Beach.

She said that to treat the disorder, parents have to "provide a safe, stable and healthy environment, which is the exact opposite of what was going on here."

More on this story:

- ▶ A Florida couple kept an adopted teen locked in the garage. Their lawyer says they had no choice
- ▶ Did Florida's adoption system fail Jupiter teen forced to live in a locked garage room?
- ▶ 'They were in such a rush': After arrests, Florida couple demolished garage room where teen lived

What is Reactive Attachment Disorder and how does it affect kids?

Reactive attachment disorder often appears in babies who don't respond to attention, eye contact or cues from their caregivers.

"When a child is unable to respond to care, it shows up as reactive attachment disorder," said Maurya Glaude, a licensed clinical social worker and professor of practice at Tulane University School of Social Work.

“If the child is not responding to comfort and avoidant in their attention, this is a problem. Children need to develop social skills.”

When a child develops reactive attachment disorder (RAD), they have difficulty forming emotional bonds, she added.

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders says children with the disorder often:

- Can't accept emotional or physical closeness.

- Have difficulty experiencing positive emotions and can appear withdrawn.

- May have episodes of unexplained irritability, sadness or fearfulness.

- May have an intense reaction to being touched.

Needle said a child who has RAD can have fluctuating moods and be erratic. They're difficult to discipline and console because their ability to form attachments is diminished.

Glaude said that in her work, RAD typically shows up before the child turns 5 years old.

“Because of neglect, it is more likely to show up in children who have been institutionalized, in foster care or been exposed to trauma in their early years,” Glaude said.

Families with resources can get treatment for mental illnesses

While the Ferriters may not have had access to state-provided resources, public records suggest they had resources and avenues to provide mental health care to their family.

They bought and sold homes in Florida and Arizona at prices in excess of \$500,000.

Timothy Ferriter recently worked as a vice president for a Catholic publishing company and hosted a health-care and business podcast. Tracy Ferriter told police in Arizona that the family was receiving counseling.

Regardless of whether the family had the time or resources to access mental health care, child psychologists say issues like RAD often manifest at school.

Testimonies from the Ferriter parents suggest that their teen got in trouble at Independence Middle School on Jan. 27, the day before the child ran away. In her letter, King referenced

the adopted teen's history of discipline and said that their behavior "got progressively more disturbing, more violent" as they grew older.

She said in her letter that the teen tortured animals, made racist remarks in class and searched ways for people to die on school electronics.

Glaude said schools can be helpful places for children with RAD if it's caught early and treated appropriately.

"There should be language (in) Individual Education Plans and behavior assistance plans; the school psychologist and school social worker need to be involved, to help the child cope so they are able to perform academically," she said.

School is where police found the teen Jan. 31. Needle said the teen's reappearance at Independence Middle School could illuminate how the teen was attached to the place.

"It could be running back to a source of where some trauma occurred, but it could be running back to a place that felt safe and felt familiar," she said. "There are so many variables."

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