



What Could We Have Done?: The Biannela Marie Susana Story

Biannela Marie Susana is a 25-year-old widowed Latina mother of four, whose youngest son is dead after suffering severe head trauma, allegedly by her oldest son (and arguably exacerbated by lack of medical attention). Her oldest son, Cristian Fernandez, is 12 years old—the youngest person in Jacksonville to be charged as an adult for first-degree murder and facing a life sentence. Biannela’s two middle children have become wards of the state. She is charged with manslaughter by culpable negligence in her youngest son’s death and faces up to 30 years. Police allege that Biannela knew her oldest son was beating the toddler, but did not intervene, and later lied to investigators about the abuse (Hunt, 2011). Biannela sits in Duval County Jail, only a few hundred feet from where her oldest son, Cristian, was held and questioned for 23 hours before being transferred to a juvenile facility.

The media has dubbed Biannela Marie Susana “the worst mother in the world.” However, Biannela’s story painfully shows what can happen when girls’ neglect and victimization are left untreated. The pain, abuse, and trauma of Biannela’s childhood created a risk trajectory that has irrevocably scarred both her and her family’s lives. Unfortunately, her tragic story is all too familiar.

Thousands of girls share adolescent histories shockingly similar to Biannela’s, and they too are at risk of following trajectories that lead to tragic outcomes. Girls who face cumulative risk are vulnerable to poorer outcomes as they enter womanhood, including poor physical and mental health, substance abuse and dependence, increased likelihood of arrests and criminal activity, domestic violence and parenting challenges (Hipwell & Loeber, 2006).

This brief will highlight key turning points in Biannela’s life to serve as a framework for understanding what can happen when we fail to protect, intervene, and address the victimization of girls. As providers, stakeholders, and conscientious citizens, we should feel compelled to examine the opportunities for prevention and intervention that could have redirected Biannela’s life and improved the circumstances for her children.

Risk Factors: Family Issues, Teen Pregnancy, and Older Partners

Research indicates that children from dysfunctional homes who had distrusting or maladaptive relationships with parents may see “relationships as a source of hurt and disappointment and have negative representations about their roles in relationships, making them easy targets for dating overt and relational victimization” (Leadbeater & Banister, 2008). Relationships are incredibly important for girls and consequently, relational concerns are associated with high risk factors (Bloom et al., 2005).

Biannela’s Story: Teen Pregnancy

At the age of 11, Biannela became pregnant by 20-year-old Jose Antonio Fernandez. Fernandez was subsequently charged with statutory sexual assault charges. And yet, when interviewed by the Florida Times Union, Fernandez blamed Biannela for their sexual relationship, stating: “She would come around to find me ... she would not leave me alone ... [I was giving her the] love and affection that she didn’t get from her mother” (Brumley, 2011).

For Biannela, one of the risk factors associated with relational concerns was involvement with an older partner. Having an older partner, in particular, is associated with risky sexual behavior, pregnancy, childbirth, truancy, substance use, unwanted sexual experiences, and dating violence (Abma et al., 1998; Buzy et al., 2004; Darroch et al., 1999; Manlove et al., 2006; Miller et al., 1997; Rickert et al., 2004).

Unfortunately, Biannela found herself experiencing many of these negative outcomes at a young age. At the age of 12, Biannela gave birth to her first son, Cristian Fernandez. Young mothers may lack the skills, experience, and maturity level needed for healthy parenting, which could impact child behavior and development (Levine, Pollack, & Comfort, 2001). As such, the children of teen mothers may exhibit problems in school such as poor academic skills, repeating a grade, early school dropout, as well as initiating early sexual activity, early parenthood, risky behavior, violent offending, and unemployment (Jaffee, Caspi, Moffitt, Belsky, & Silva, 2001; Levine, Pollack & Comfort, 2001).

Critical Points of Intervention

School

Authority figures and key people who knew Biannela and were aware of her situation could have intervened. Biannela should have been in middle school with multiple teachers and administrators who would have known about her pregnancy. As teen pregnancy is a risk factor for truancy, school failure, and dropout, intervention is critical.

- Biannela's presence in school and obvious pregnancy offered an opportunity for teachers to engage and encourage her participation at school. Likewise, the school administrators can attempt to connect young pregnant girls with school counselors/outside referrals.

Medical Professionals

The doctors and nurses who delivered Biannela's son were another possible point of intervention. As the research shows, fostering strong parent-child attachments, bonding, and positive relationships can encourage more positive outcomes (Arbona & Power, 2003).

- This presented an opportunity to offer Biannela parenting education or support programs for teen parents. Many interventions with young mothers have demonstrated effectiveness. At a minimum, young mothers should receive support services and be informed of places to go for advice.
- It is unclear what level of support and guidance Biannela had from her mother or extended family members. As such, quality daycare would have been critical to Biannela attending school and baby Cristian receiving adequate and safe supervision.

Law Enforcement

Law enforcement officials who arrested the baby's father for statutory sexual assault were a third point of possible intervention. Often pre-teen mothers who are this young require even more specialized interventions.

- The provision of counseling and other social services could have addressed early sexual activity and Biannela’s relationship with her older partner. Girls need someone to talk to who can help guide them to establish safety for themselves and with others, to recognize healthy and unhealthy relationships, and to deal with depression and other common mental health problems (Chesney-Lind et al., 2008).

The confluence of risk factors and the precarious situation in which Biannela and her new baby found themselves called for immediate intervention. Unfortunately, the services Biannela and her infant desperately needed were likely inaccessible to them. The system’s response and the policies and practices are a critical component. The individual characteristics of the mother and her unique risk factors must be considered when designing interventions and providing services to help teen mothers and their children (Jaffee, Caspi, Moffitt, Belsky, & Silva, 2001).

Risk Factor: Neglect and Welfare System Involvement

The circumstances leading to Biannela and Cristian’s removal from Biannela’s mother’s home were undeniably traumatic. Though it is uncertain how long Biannela and her son were placed in foster care, involvement in the child welfare system is associated with its own set of negative outcomes including conduct problems and delinquency. Research has consistently shown that children in the foster care system have high rates of behavioral, emotional, developmental, and even physical problems, which require specialized services and attention (Taussig, Clyman, & Landsverk, 2001). Equally traumatic is the residential instability that results from placement. Existing research suggests strong associations between family instability and the disruption caused by residential moves and adolescent adjustment problems (Adam & Chase-Lansdale, 2002). Additionally, residential instability can result in social, emotional, and educational dysfunction.

***Biannela’s Story:
Teen Motherhood***
At the age of 14, Biannela was found walking around a South Florida motel—her toddler was “dirty and naked”—while the toddler’s grandmother, who would have been about 34 at the time, “nursed a drug habit inside” (Hunt, 2011). Mother and son were placed in foster care.

Critical Points of Intervention

Child Welfare

For Biannela, intervention with her mother and in her family life was critical to breaking the cycles of abuse and victimization that had marked her life. Though details about her relationship with her mother are unclear, the neglect and maltreatment likely strained their relationship.

- Structure and support at home to encourage healthy relationships and positive choices was made difficult by Biannela’s mother’s neglect and substance abuse. Therefore, counseling, parent support groups, and other services and programming were desperately needed.

Foster Care

- Given the high level of need, the foster care system had the opportunity to identify these needs and provide appropriate services.

Risk Factors: Abuse/Domestic Violence in Home

Sadly, for Biannela and her children, the cycle of intergenerational abuse and violence suggests that children exposed to physical abuse are predisposed to violence later in life (Widom & Maxfield, 2001). When a child witnesses and experiences violence there is a greater likelihood that the child will deem violence as an acceptable tool. Existing research findings indicate that in fact “violent childhood experiences are related to attitudes towards the use of violence against ... and frequency of violence against both children and spouses” (Markowitz, 2001).

Research suggests that the effects of in-home violence are experienced differently by boys and girls. While girls translate the experience of violent families into internalizing behavioral problems, boys report internalizing and externalizing behavior as well as adjustment disorders (Jaffee, Wolfe, & Zak, 1986). Additionally, an empirical evaluation of the role that intergenerational violence plays in the expression of aggression in witnesses suggests that, for males, exposure to aggression predicts aggressive behavior (Doumas, Margolin, & John, 1994). Extrapolating from this research helps to better contextualize Cristian’s alleged actions. It is likely that his exposure to violence in the home would have predisposed him to use violence when dealing with his youngest brother.

Biannela’s Story:

Continued Trauma in Adulthood

For Biannela, the cumulative risk factors became a tragic reality. From age 19–23, Biannela had three more children. In her early twenties, Biannela married Luis Galarraga-Blanco. The Florida Times Union reported that Galarraga-Blanco was an abusive, volatile man with a heated temper (Brumley, 2011). After allegations of physical and sexual abuse toward Cristian (his stepson) and an impending arrest by officials, Galarraga-Blanco shot himself in the head in front of Biannela’s younger children (Brumley, 2011).

Critical Points of Intervention

Perhaps the most tragic part of Biannela and her children’s story is that following the allegations of abuse and her husband’s suicide, officials did not intervene. In a letter to the *Florida Times Union*, Biannela said that “state officials knew of troubles in her home ... months after her husband committed suicide in front of some of the family ... [and] officials from the Department of Children and Families put Cristian and her other children on a waiting list for therapy. The counseling and child care help they promised never came,” she wrote (Murphy, 2011).

Child Welfare

- Given the extreme trauma and multiple allegations of abuse and victimization, this family was in severe need of help. Efforts must be made to provide services to families who have experienced multiple and sustained trauma.

School

- Teachers at Cristian’s school saw the signs of abuse and followed up with officials. The role of teachers and schools is critical in efforts to intervene and address child abuse.

Community Services

- The lack of access to critical services suggests that the early prevention and intervention services in Biannela's South Florida community were underfunded, fragmented, or operated independently, which created the opportunity for her case to fall through the cracks.
- Efforts must be made to help clients navigate multiple systems and better understand the services that are available, how to access them, and connecting them with providers who are trauma informed and culturally competent.
- As a young girl, Biannela's life experiences created cumulative risk, placing her in danger of negative adult outcomes. Additionally, teen pregnancy coupled with an abusive relationship with her partner further accelerated her trajectory and her children's risk. For Biannela, these risk factors were ignored or inadequately addressed at multiple points by numerous systems.

Many points of intervention were missed and the services Biannela and her children desperately needed were either denied or never came to fruition. Had the necessary prevention and intervention services been available, one can only speculate that the tragic death of her Biannela's youngest son, David, and the impending trial of her eldest son, Cristian, as well as her own charges may have been prevented. The risk trajectories of her other two children, who are now in foster care, could also look different. Biannela was invisible to us as a young girl, but the tragedy of her story is very visible in the media now. As a community, are we prioritizing prevention and intervention in the lives of girls at risk?

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