

Juvenile Justice Developmental Case Study

Kesha is a 16 year-old African American who attends the Local Middle School where she is in 7th grade. She lived with her father from age 2 (when Kesha's parents divorced) until the age of 13 when he was murdered, and Kesha went to live with her mother who has multiple open cases with the Department of Family and Children's (DFACS) services for various concerns of abuse, neglect, and child endangerment regarding Kesha's younger siblings. Kesha's father had been a fit parent. The youth has not been identified by the DFACS as needing protection or supportive services.

First contact with the Juvenile Justice system occurred when Kesha admitted to bringing a hunting type knife to school. Kesha later claimed the knife had belonged to a friend who already two strikes against her and would have been put in a juvenile detention center. Because Kesha had previously been involved in several incidents of physical violence on the school campus (she claimed it was self-defense), and the school's zero tolerance rule about knives, she was expelled from school and placed in a group home that had full time teaching staff.

While Kesha is relatively compliant, she resists cooperating with group house rules about cleaning her room and attending to her studies. Kesha frequently pulls out her hair or falls on the floor, curling up in fetal position, when confronted about doing school work, especially English. When counselors and teachers attempt to coax Kesha up off the floor, she slaps and kicks at them screaming.

After a complete psychological evaluation, Kesha was diagnosed with low working memory and an auditory processing disorder (she is a slow thinker and does not always understand what she hears). During a physical exam at the local health department, it was discovered that Kesha self-mutilates on her arms and legs. When asked about it, the youth pulled a hood over her head and folded her body up into a ball with her head on her knees, refusing to answer.

Kesha continues to defend her mother, claiming that she has not been harmed or abused in any way by her mother or mother's boyfriend. She did admit that there is rarely food in the house, and she has to bring home chips and crackers from school in order to eat, but insists she is happy living with her mother.

Kesha sleeps with a light on and her back against the wall at all times. She is easy to startle and worries that she is going to get into trouble for not doing her schoolwork; yet she fails to complete her studies. Kesha is uncomfortable around all adult females, but at ease with male teachers and officers. She often steals food from the cafeteria and hides it in her pillow case, which is against regulations.

INSTRUCTIONS: You are the probation officer. Based upon clues in the case study, evaluate Kesha's developmental age for the critical capacities of trust, sense of security, emotional awareness, and self-regulation. Discuss your findings as a group and determine a single set of recommendations for the court regarding Kesha's placement and what services she might require.