

Child Abuse: It's back in the spotlight with Blackham case

BY CHARLES SOWELL | STAFF

EVERY SO OFTEN a case hits the headlines that rips the cover off child abuse in the Upstate; few have reverberated as loudly as the Bi-Lo baby incident, said officials who work with child abuse cases.

Jessie Blackham, a 24-year-old graduate of Bob Jones Academy from Easley, is accused of giving birth in a restroom stall at the Bi-Lo Center and then leaving her newborn son in the bowl of the toilet.

Two quick thinking cleanup personnel at the center rescued the child and Blackham now faces up to 30 years in prison for child abuse. The baby boy is recovering nicely, according to news reports.

The case has made national and international headlines.

By and large, child abuse is one of those crimes that doesn't make headlines and is often swept under the rug by a society uncomfortable with harsh realities, said Scott Dishman, director of community engagement for The Family Effect.

In a few weeks the furor will have died down and the children living shattered lives of quiet desperation will go back to anonymously trying to survive.

Family Effect is a non-profit in Greenville dedicated to reducing addiction as a leading cause of family collapse and harm to children.

In Greenville County between 75 and

85 percent of all child abuse cases have their roots in drug addiction, state and local statistics show.

For the counselors and professionals who work at Serenity Place, a treatment facility for drug-addicted women and their children, the behavior exhibited by Blackham doesn't seem all that extraordinary.

In the infant and toddler room a three-year-old boy ran across the room with outstretched arms, begging to be scooped up and cuddled. He was a chatterbox for a child that age.

"A couple of months ago he was non-verbal," said Natalie Fryar, manager of Serenity Place.

The surprising ability of children to recover from horrific abuse and of the shattered moms who come to Serenity Place to start the long road toward rebuilding their own lives and relationships with their children is only part of the story.

"There is no way to know all the factors in play with that (Blackham) case," said Dishman.

But there are certain commonalities in all child abuse cases, he said, particularly with women. Foremost is drug abuse but the list of contributing factors is long.

Dishman used, as an example, the story of a young woman who came to Serenity Place in her early 20s.

"She'd been sexually abused by her father since her middle teens," he said. "At some point the father discovered she didn't fight him as much when he

gave her drugs. So he did.

"When she finally got away from her family, she brought her drug addiction along with her. She finally ended up here (child in tow)."

She was one of a depressingly few who do get help. About 120 women a year come through the doors of Serenity Place.

"It's hard for most middle class people to come to terms with just what addiction means, much less what it means for a woman and her children," Dishman said.

"The women we see here often have no idea of what normal is," said Fryar. "They were often abused as kids and think that because a child is with them then they're safe. Often the child is left to fend for itself and is denied the kind of nurturing we consider normal."

In a room for older children a volunteer read aloud to a ring of four to six-year-old children. These are the kids who look like war survivors and, in a sense, they are.

"The children who come here as babies (even the ones who have drugs in their systems) are the lucky ones in many ways," Dishman said. "The older kids are the ones who have lived the addiction with their moms. They are the ones who have suffered the most."

One of the functions of The Family Effect is to raise money to make up for state funding shortfalls that seem to grow with each passing year, said Dishman.



Fryar



Dishman