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DATE July 22, 1997
TIME 7:00-9:00 AM
NETWORK NBC
PROGRAM Today

KATIE COURIC, co-host:

Safe and reliable day care is a constant concern for working parents. NBC's Kerry Sanders has the story of one Florida couple who thought they were doing everything right.

Mr. MARK FIEDELHOLTZ: One minute he's here, the next minute he's gone.

KERRY SANDERS reporting:

Jeremy Fiedelholz died at age three months. He was Mark and Julie's first child together.

Ms. JULIE FIEDELHOLTZ: This was the outfit that Jeremy had on. We've just kind of left it there.

SANDERS: Their nightmare began in January, just seven blocks from their home, a licensed home day-care center in a converted garage. The Fiedelholts decided to test it out. On January 29th they dropped Jeremy off for just two hours. When Julie returned, Jeremy was face down in a crib, a blanket balled up around his mouth. He wasn't breathing. That's when Julie discovered the day-care worker at the house didn't know CPR.

Caller: (From day-care center) I'm at day care. A baby stopped breathing. He's turned blue.

Unidentified Operator: How old is he?

Caller: Three months. Please hurry up.

Operator: OK.

Caller: Hold on. He's not breathing. Hold on a minute. I'm trying to find the address. He's blue and cold. I don't think he's alive.

Ms. FIEDELHOLTZ: When I found Jeremy, I remember trying to shake myself and say, 'Wake up, wake up.' That this--this absolutely had to be a dream, that this could not be happening to me. I just could not believe that this could ever, ever happen. Especially not that day. Especially not taking your child for a trial run at a day-care center to see if it was up to your quality standards. Not even that it was up to safety standards.

Mr. FIEDELHOLTZ: First two hours, Kerry. God almighty. That's unbelievable. I--I just--oh, I don't know, it's just really confusing.

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SANDERS: Even more confusing—the discovery that the licensed home care operator had left the house for 45 minutes to shop at the grocery store. Left in charge, an aide who was seven months pregnant. Had there been only four infants in the house as their license stipulated, investigators say the aide might have noticed Jeremy was in trouble. But when police showed up, they discovered 13 children, nine over the limit.

Mr. FIEDELHOLTZ: You've got a death trap. We didn't know it. There was no way--how could we possibly know that? When she left Jeremy off there were two children.

SANDERS: In the wake of Jeremy's death, there are more inspectors now checking on home care centers in this Florida county.

Unidentified Woman: Let me see. I need to see the first aid kit, please.

SANDERS: But for the millions of parents nationwide who choose home care, inspections like this are the exception, not the rule. Child advocates say the problem is, in one city there is one set of rules, in another city, another set of rules. And in so many cities across this country, no rules at all.

Mr. FIEDELHOLTZ: Senators, I'm asking for your help. First of all...

SANDERS: Last week, Mark and Julie Fiedelholz took the fight from their house to the Senate. They want federal child-care regulations and enforcement so no other parent ever suffers their tragedy.

Mr. FIEDELHOLTZ: Look at Jeremy. You want him as a national symbol. You've got him, OK? You have him. But you've got to move. You've got to do something.

SANDERS: Jeremy's parents now wonder if his death can somehow have meaning. For TODAY, Kerry Sanders, NBC News, Miami.

COURIC: A criminal investigation is now under way. The possible charge against the day-care operators: negligent manslaughter.

The Fiedelholz story is a frightening one for a lot of parents with children in day-care situations. Barbara Willer is with the the National Association for the Education of Young Children. Barbara, good morning.

Ms. BARBARA WILLER (National Association for the Education of Young Children): Good morning.

COURIC: It sounds like this couple did everything right. They—they found a licensed day-care center, they got references, they s--ought to--any complaints that might have been filed against the day-care operator. There were none. They felt the ratio was fine. Wh--I--I hate to say what could they have done differently, because I'm sure they're torturing themselves at this moment.

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Ms. WILLER: Mm-hmm.

COURIC: But what should parents do?

Ms. WILLER: Well, I think one of the things we can learn is that as the story points out, we need stronger regulations in every state, as well as better enforcement. But every day, I think, parents need to think, look at the care situations in which they're placing their children and for parents to spend time in the center or the home.

COURIC: Should you spend time in the center before you even consider placing your child there?

Ms. WILLER: Absolutely. And s--more than just taking a tour. You need to sit down and just quietly observe what's happening to children. Watch individual children to get a sense of how the caregivers, the adults respond to those children. Count heads. How many children are there? How many adults? The younger the child, the fewer the number of children. The babies--there should never be more than three to four children with each adult. And groups should not exceed six to eight babies. And the number of children can get larger as children get older. But even with preschoolers, still, eight to 10 children per adult is the--the max. And no group size exceeding 16 to 20 children.

COURIC: Because they had 13 children in this particular center.

Ms. WILLER: And that's 13 children under the age of three. And that's just an impossible situation, particularly with one adult who was there at the time.

COURIC: How could the day-care provider just up and leave and go to the grocery store?

Ms. WILLER: Well, I really--I can't understand that. And I--it's--it's a travesty. And--and these--you know, sometimes things happen that shouldn't happen. And that's why stronger enforcement is so important.

COURIC: So you--you think that federal regulations or some kind of national standard is called for? Because as you well know, it varies so dramatically from state to state--state to state.

Ms. WILLER: It really does. And it shouldn't matter if your child is living in Massachusetts or New Hampshire or Texas. You have the same basic needs to be protected from harm and to have a situation that promotes your healthy growth and development.

Now there are voluntary national standards that are already in place. NAYC has a voluntary accreditation system for centers and there's also a voluntary accreditation for family child-care homes. And so that's something else that parents can look for to make sure that programs have gone through that voluntary set of standards. It's a sys--a system that designates

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excellence in programs and so it provides an extra level of protection for families.

COURIC: And what do you do about day-care providers who simply lie about the situation?

Ms. WILLER: You know, that's a really hard situation. That's one of the reasons I think it's so important to spend time in the program yourself before you make your selection, as well as afterwards. You drop in unexpectedly and ask to visit and again, you know, don't just take the tour, spend some time quietly observing the children. And if paren--if the program doesn't want you to do that, think twice about the situation.

COURIC: And then you should probably drop by unexpectedly afterwards?

Ms. WILLER: Drop by unexpectedly afterwards. And remember that it's really a question about the relationship that you have with the providers. You want to get information about their skills and qualifications, CPR, child development, early education, those are all critical skills that people need to have in working with children.

COURIC: And hopefully we can avoid heart-breaking situations like Jeremy's family.

Ms. WILLER: Hopefully this can lead to better standards and better enforcement...

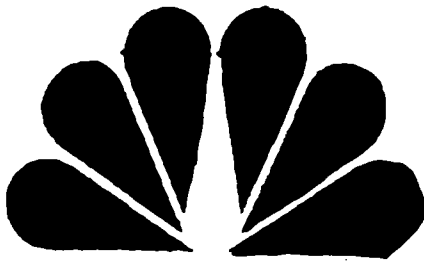
COURIC: All right.

Ms. WILLER: ...and more money for the system.

COURIC: Thanks, Barbara Willer. Appreciate it. It's 7:42. Matt's back in a moment with Harrison Ford. That's right after this.

NBC

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