

# *Hansel and Gretel's Gretel*

## **Introducing the Character**

Gretel is the young protagonist in the Brothers Grimm fairy tale *Hansel and Gretel*, which first appeared in print centuries ago and has since been depicted in a variety of media, including: short films, television cartoons, and an 1893 opera of the same name by 19th-century playwright Engelbert Humperdinck. *Hansel and Gretel* is a beloved fairy tale about a woodcutter's children who suffer the loss of their mother and who must then endure an evil stepmother (despite the common occurrence of blended families in contemporary life, stepparents often are stereotyped as "evil" in traditional fairy tales). As often happens in such old-school fairy tales, the woodcutter, about whom we know little other than that he is a hard worker, falls prey to his new wife's desires to be rid of Hansel and Gretel. She convinces him to cast them into the woods where they find a magical gingerbread house inhabited by a witch. Although the witch welcomes the children, they soon discover that she plans to eat them. Upon discovering her nefarious plan, Hansel pushes the witch into the oven. Thinking that the witch is dead, the children remain in the cottage and eat candy and sweets for days before finding their way home thanks to a marked path that they had cleverly left behind. The father, who was heartbroken over the loss of his children, eagerly welcomes them back and rids the family, once and for all, of his evil-doing wife. *Hansel and Gretel* is a timeless tale about parental loss, betrayal, and the resourcefulness and resiliency of children. Using *Hansel and Gretel* as our starting point, the following basic case summary and diagnostic impressions explore a clinically significant pattern of hostile and defiant behaviors we believe a similar 10-year-old girl named Gretel might be experiencing.

## **Basic Case Summary**

*Identifying Information.* Gretel Gerstenhagen is a 10-year-old Austrian girl who is a fourth-grade student at the Gingerbread Learning Academy. Currently she lives at home with her fraternal twin, Hansel, her father, and her

stepmother, who only recently became a member of the family. In appearance, Gretel can be characterized as “a rosy-cheeked, blue-eyed girl with curly blond hair.” She was dressed in a traditional Germanic child’s outfit, left over from a school play in which she starred, which she reported wearing “because it annoys my stepmother.” She lives in a socioeconomically lower middle-class neighborhood, her father is a skilled carpenter, and her stepmother works in the home.

*Presenting Concern.* Gretel was sent to the school counselor’s office for an initial meeting by the assistant principal because she has several times stolen another student’s lunchbox “as a joke” and refused her teacher’s request to return the hidden lunchbox at lunchtime. Gretel had been sent to the principal’s office on several occasions for similar behavior, which seemed to have escalated soon after her father remarried to a woman the child referred to as a “witch.” Gretel also has been diagnosed with juvenile diabetes.

*Background, Family Information, and Relevant History.* Gretel and her fraternal twin Hansel were born in Vienna, Austria, to a fourth-generation military family headed by a father who worked as a skilled carpenter and traveled frequently, following house-building demand across the region, and a mother who was bedridden throughout her pregnancy and sick for the first 2 years of the children’s lives. Reports indicate that Gretel and her brother were only allowed to visit their mother at her bedside for short periods. A day before their third birthday, their mother died, and soon after the father brought an au pair into the house. Apparently, unbeknownst to the father, the au pair was bringing men into the family home when the father was away. Gretel and her brother learned early how to manipulate this woman, whom they referred to as the “evil witch” and who reciprocated in kind with harsh punishment and withdrawal of privileges. Gretel recalled how the au pair used to bake gingerbread houses and eat them herself while the children watched and begged. One day during a rare outing to the park, one of the neighbors noticed the harsh manner in which the au pair treated the children and reported directly to their father, who immediately fired her.

Following this experience, he decided to spend more time with the children in order to make up for his many absences. By that time, the children were 7 years of age, and he decided that it would be beneficial to move to the United States where he took a job with a contractor firm. Although Gretel was upset at leaving the

familiarity of Austria and the friends that she had made, she soon found a safe and secure haven at the Gingerbread Learning Academy, where she and Hansel were enrolled in the third grade. Soon after the relocation, Hansel and Gretel's father married for a second time to a woman who had never wanted children but who fell in love with their father.

Several months after marrying, Gretel and Hansel's father returned to his busy work life, leaving the children primarily in the care of their new stepmother, who like the au pair they had in Austria, put her needs before those of the children. She would spend long hours on the phone talking to friends, neglecting the children, leaving them to fend for themselves, do their own homework, and even make their own food. Gretel became very adept at sneaking candy from the cupboards as well as stealing it from the small grocery at the corner of their street. Gretel also developed what teachers and her father described as a "short fuse," becoming touchy in response to even very minor adult feedback about her behavior, loudly angry at perceived insults, and argumentative at home, in class, and in the Gingerbread Afterschool Program. When household chores such as cleaning the playroom were left undone, she wrongly blamed her brother; at school, she blamed classmates for incidents on the playground. Increasingly, she yelled at her stepmother at home, muttered under her breath at her classroom teacher, and made a clear point of being out of her seat during classroom quiet time.

Characteristically, after a particularly unpleasant evening with the stepmother, Gretel and Hansel ran away from home, living in a small park by the home, and subsisting only on the candy and cookies that they had pirated away before their departure, which Gretel said she did "to show that witch!" It was at that point that Gretel and Hansel's father were summoned to the school and told that unless he took immediate action to control his daughter (and son), they would be removed from the school and possibly even the home. Upon hearing this and realizing that their plan had failed, Gretel told her teacher "maybe I'll just kill myself . . . that'll teach her."

*Goals for Counseling and Course of Therapy to Date.* Several days after the meeting with the children, Mr. Gerstenhagen and his wife visited with the school counselor and the district school psychologist in order to develop a plan of action. It was decided that Gretel and Hansel would undergo psychological evaluations and

review by a planning team, after which a decision would be made determining whether individual or family counseling or both would be implemented.