

‘EVERYTHING I DO IS FOR EMMA’

Seven months after her baby’s abduction, mother and infant daughter share remarkable bond

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Fourteen-month-old Emma Grace Kennedy smiles as she feeds her mother, Kristen Murphy, the smallest nibble of scrambled eggs while sitting in her lap at Westside Diner on Jan. 9.

Halle Parker/Register & Bee



Photos: ‘Everything I do is for Emma’

BROSVILLE — Scooted close to the table in a high chair at Westside Diner, 14-month-old Emma Grace Kennedy reached her pudgy arms toward the star-shaped cereal puffs that sat on a plastic Minnie Mouse placemat on Jan. 9.

Her small finger entrapped the puffs, bringing them to her mouth where two tiny teeth welcomed the opportunity to chomp on the captured prey. Her mother, Kristen Murphy, smiled tenderly as she watched her, placing more puffs on the mat.

Her bright blue eyes — colored a hue shared with her mother — were round with innocence, appearing to be blissfully unaware of the chaos that ensued around her seven months ago after her father, Carl Ray Kennedy, abducted her from her mother’s car at a gas station in Danville.

That abduction in June spurred a two-day manhunt to find the then-7-month-old Emma that drew national attention. Law enforcement from all levels in two different states collaborated before finding her in a trailer and returning her to Murphy.

On the day before the Jan. 9 interview, Kennedy pleaded guilty to the kidnapping and child neglect, along with four other charges. He could be sentenced for up to 36 years in prison for the charges and still faces federal charges after he was indicted in November for violating a family abuse protective order.

Taking her spoon and skimming it across the top of her sausage gravy, Murphy offered the rich cream to Emma, who turned her face away at first.

“She’s very spoiled,” said Murphy with affection. “When Emma doesn’t get her way, she lets you know.”



Seven months after she was abducted from a gas station by her father, mother Kristen Murphy said 14-month-old Emma Grace Kennedy hasn't shown many signs of trauma stemming from the event aside from tensing during loud noises.

As patrons and Westside Diner staff passed by the table, Emma was showered with cooed compliments. People smiled across the room at the infant, complimenting her hair-do — two blonde pig tails defying gravity as they sprouted out of her head. Her hair had grown much longer in the past seven months.

Cindy Davis, co-owner of Westside Diner and a close friend of Murphy, beamed at mother-daughter duo each time she passed by the table.

“She looks just like a little cabbage patch kid, doesn’t she,” said Davis once as she made her rounds.

In the months since the abduction, Emma’s become very independent, always trying to do things on her own even if she’s not physically capable yet, said her mom. But that independent streak hasn’t stopped the pair from growing a strong bond.

“She’s definitely a momma’s girl,” said Murphy.

For Murphy, raising Emma alone was unexpected. She said she’d thought Kennedy would be by her side.

“It’s not an easy task raising a child as a single mom,” she said, after delivering another dab of sausage gravy into Emma’s now-eager O-shaped mouth. “You know that saying, ‘it takes a village to raise a child?’ Well, it definitely does.”

She said she was in a relationship with Kennedy for three years — a time she’s trying to move forward from through counseling services that the commonwealth’s attorney office helped to connect her with.

“Because of all the things he’s done, I can’t imagine being with anyone else right now,” she said. She turned her gaze to Emma, who’s high chair was positioned at the end of the table. “Now it’s all about Emma. Everything I do is for Emma.”

Murphy said the court process has been stressful for her, reliving and retelling darker pieces of her life — baring everything.

“I’ve felt naked a lot of times in front of a lot of people,” she said of the past seven months, still awaiting the federal charges to sort out.

To support them, Murphy works at night, which means she’s usually asleep during the day while Emma’s at day care. However, on her days off, she said she tries to spend every minute possible with her now-toddling daughter.

“Emma’s already missing a father, and it’s important for me that I’m here,” said Murphy. “That I’m present.”

By this point, Murphy had lifted Emma from her high chair and placed her on her lap. A stripe of baby tummy flashed the diner, her purple unicorn shirt displaced while she squirmed into a comfortable position.

Murphy lifted her drink to her lips to sip and as she brought it back down to the table, Emma opened her mouth. Murphy brought the straw her way and Emma’s mouth closed, gulping.

Murphy shook her head and chuckled. “See? Spoiled.”

She spoke of her shock at the backlash thrown at her from the public on social media after the abduction, before Emma was found. Some people called her Casey Anthony.

Murphy said she took responsibility for going to meet Kennedy at the gas station, but her intention wasn’t to have Emma with her nor to have him take her child.

“That was the most agonizing two days of my life,” she said.

While there’s been little indication that Emma was affected in any severe way by the incident, she still worries.

“Sometimes I wonder if what’s worse is not knowing what happened during that time,” said Murphy.

Emma, attempting to use an adult-sized fork, stabbed at the scrambled eggs on Murphy’s plate. With the equivalent of an egg crumb attached to the tip of a prong, Emma shoved the fork toward her mother’s mouth.

Murphy graciously accepted the crumb-size portion of scrambled egg.

“Thank you, Emma,” she said. “That’s another thing about her. Emma, she shares.”

Virginia Baptist Hospital lead licensed mental health professional Ryan Smith, who serves in the child and psychiatry unit, said research shows children as young as 3 months can be affect by a traumatic experience, whether they remember it or not.

Trauma could come from experiencing anything from being in a home where their parents are yelling to something as serious as an abduction.

“A lot of people think that babies don’t notice or they can’t remember, but the thing is they’re able to get scared just like the rest of us,” she said. “Even if they can’t remember, the body still can.”

If they are traumatized, Smith said signs can arise throughout the infant’s lifetime as their minds are still on edge, potentially changing its architecture.



Emma Grace Kennedy takes a break from walking around Westside Diner, turning on her somewhat steady legs to look at her mother.

Halle Parker/Register & Bee

“Your brain’s still scared that it could happen again,” she said.

She said the mother’s stress, through no fault of her own, after a traumatic incident could also impact the baby’s perception of their environment as safe.

“But, the really cool thing is that our brains are not crystallized,” said Smith. “We can heal from trauma.”

Outside the stresses of court, Murphy said they’ve received “an outpouring of support” from the community over the past seven months.

Smith said support from family, friends and health care providers “gives the brain a chance to chill out.”

“It’s just a matter of time before health and healing return,” said Smith.

From the people at Westside Diner to law enforcement to family members and friends, Murphy hasn’t been alone.

Once, when Davis paused next to the table, she announced Murphy was an “excellent mother.”

After the interview with Murphy ended, Davis said, “With everything she’s been through, it’s amazing how well she’s handling everything. She amazes me.”

Aside from Davis, the wife of one of the police officers who first entered Murphy’s home after the abduction watches Emma from time to time. Both the officer and his wife continue to support her and Emma.

“We kind of created a bond,” said Murphy.

Murphy’s also stayed in contact with Emma’s four siblings on her father’s side.

“They have been big influences in her life,” she said.

Slowly, Emma slid onto the floor from her mother’s lap and stood on her own, wavering slightly. She had taken her first steps 10 days before on New Year’s Eve.

She toddled around the diner a few minutes, tugging Murphy behind her. Emma clasped Murphy’s index finger, unwilling to let go.

“It’s her world, and I’m just living in it,” Murphy said with a sigh and a shrug.

When Murphy reclaimed her finger, Emma sat down on the floor. Her brow furrowed, face scrunched and mouth began to open in preparation for a cry to escape.

But then, Murphy started to reach her hand out again and as it neared Emma, the tantrum started to reverse course. The infant's face relaxed as hand drew closer, and Emma put her own hands out to meet it.

Murphy scooped the toddler up from the ground. Surrounded by her mother's arms, Emma was at peace.