the two young children sat helplessly while pornographic images seeped across the usually friendly television screen. They didn’t understand what they were watching, but the 6-year-old boy called it “real yucky.” His 5-year-old sister agreed, especially when the man whose care they were under exposed his genitals to her.

This wasn’t a classic case of stranger danger. It usually isn’t with child sexual abuse. Instead, the enemy is typically from within—within our hearts, within our homes, within our trust.

The children knew the man. He was their aunt’s boyfriend. They didn’t like him.

Two months passed before his name came up while their mother cooked them breakfast in their Chicago home, just before Christmas last year.

“Why don’t you like him?” the mother asked.

They explained as best they could. The mother was dumbfounded. The father, too.

The parents called police, filled out a report and officers spoke with the children. The next day the family was contacted by a worker from the Chicago Children’s Advocacy Center.

“We had never heard of the center before,” explains the mother, whose name is not being revealed for privacy reasons. “But if it wasn’t for the staff at the center, we wouldn’t have known what to do next. They explained everything in great detail so we knew what to expect.”

The Chicago Children’s Advocacy Center, or CCAC, is a sort of one-stop shopping for healing families whose children are victims of sexual, physical or psychological abuse.

The child-friendly, multi-colored center offers families access to police, doctors, family advocates, mental health counselors, forensic interviewers, the courts and a street-savvy staff. In all, roughly 130 professionals under the same roof.

Before the center opened its doors in 2001, child victims typically had to tell and retell their story at least a dozen times to various adults in authority. For instance, their teacher, a school counselor, a nurse, a police officer, a doctor, a lawyer, a social worker, a judge, and so on.

Each time reliving the horror of their abuse.

Sometimes, this process took weeks. Other times, months. Cases dragged through the court system with a prosecution rate of 10 percent. The conviction rate was even
more disappointing.

“It was an extremely inefficient system,” says Theresa Olson, the CCAC’s chief external affairs officer.

The center, located in a nondescript building on South Damen Avenue, changed all that. The average time from the initial abuse report to a child interview is five days.

Child victims are now interviewed once by a trained professional in a kid-cozy environment through a series of gentle, non-leading questions. The recorded interview is conducted behind a two-way mirror in the presence of the Chicago Police Department, the Cook County State’s Attorney’s Office, and the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services.

“I usually interview a child alone, without their parent,” says Rebekah Stevenson, an interviewer. “Sometimes a child is afraid of the parent’s reaction to what they say. But it’s often the first step in their healing.”

Stevenson typically begins the interview as a free-flowing conversation before delving into more weighty issues or the abuse itself.

“Tell me about school or your favorite hobbies,” she will ask kids while looking for nonverbal cues, body language and things that are not voiced.

Some interviews last five minutes. Others linger for an hour and a half. Once in a while, the child will ask to hold her hand. Or for a hug. During one interview with a girl, Stevenson had to read into the consistent lack of eye contact. She offers a few water fountain breaks and constant reassurance.

“You’re not in trouble at all with me,” she tells the Latina girl in Spanish.

‘Come on sweetheart… It’s OK’

The Chicago family visited the center a bit warily, but the staff immediately calmed their concerns.

Both of the young children soon played with the center’s resident dog, Polly, a yellow lab that’s part of its “canine therapy” program.

“It really set the tone for our visit,” the mom says.

The 24,000-square-foot building was built specifically with kids in mind, from the lower windows and sun-splashed hallways to the decorated doorways and protected playground courtyard outside. Soft pastel colors adorn the walls. Kid-friendly posters welcome strangers. An inchworm wearing glasses is on the door to an interview room. A box of Kleenex rests on a nearby table, for obvious reasons.

“Come on sweetheart,” a staff member tells a teenage girl who’s waiting for a doctor appointment. “It’s OK.”

Afternoons and evenings are busier than mornings, after kids get out of school and parents leave work. On this day, the staff will see 10 families and 12 cases, but dozens more are in the works.

The center handles more than 2,000.
cases each year, and 20,000 children have been referred here since 2001. The demographic of kids here reflects that of many Chicago Public Schools: 60 percent black, 30 percent Hispanic and 10 percent white.

There are more cases of child abuse in this country in any given year than the combined diagnoses of cancer and diabetes patients, Olson says. Most victims of sexual molestation are not old enough to even spell sexual molestation.

In Chicago alone, an estimated 3,200 incidents of child sex abuse are not reported each year. Abused kids are 59 percent more likely to be arrested, 66 percent more likely to use drugs, and 30 percent more likely to be abusive as adults, Olson says.

“Obviously, it’s a lifetime sentence for all the victims,” says Chicago Police Lt. Jack Connelly, who works as a supervisor at the CCAC. “We can never erase that.”

Connelly, who oversees 30 detectives, says some officers simply can’t handle working here. They would prefer working, say, homicide cases.

“You can’t bond with a dead body but, here, you can sure bond with these little kids,” explains Connelly, who’s been here since day one. “Plus, child sex abuse work is not a 9 to 5 kind of job. These officers are the best of the best here.”

In the old days, cops would interview abused, scared kids in the family’s home, even if the abuser was on the premises but in a different room, he says.

Cops also had to play phone tag with attorneys, doctors, and social workers. Under the CCAC roof, everyone knows everyone and this warm atmosphere trickles down to families and victims.

“It’s far less intimidating for them, and you’ll never see a perpetrator walking down a hallway in handcuffs, like you may see at a big, cold police station,” he says.

Parents: ‘Monday morning quarterbacking’

The center is one of the largest of its kind in the country, with an annual budget of $4.5 million, funded mostly by government sources and also private donations.

“There is no glamour in this job,” says Char Rivette, the center’s executive director. “You need to find ways to separate your work here from your personal life.”

The center doesn’t have many “C.S.I. moments,” referring to open-and-shut cases that get wrapped up in a speedy, tidy fashion, says Dr. Michele Lorand, one of a handful of certified child abuse pediatricians from Cook County Health & Hospitals System.

“All children have a natural tendency
to want to please adults in their environment,” Lorand says in between patients. “This is something that abusers play off of.”

Lorand is a 22-year veteran who sees roughly six kids a day, although one day she handled 15 cases.

“One of the first things we do is reassure the kids that they’re normal,” she says. “Sex abuse doesn’t happen in a vacuum. There are often other things going on in the home—drugs, domestic violence, guns in the home.”

Parents visiting here do a lot of “Monday morning quarterbacking” after finding out their child was abused, Lorand says: Who did it? When? Why? Where was I? What should I have done differently?

The Chicago parents did, too.

The father regrets not making a better parenting decision about whose care he left his children in. If there is one piece of advice he wants to tell parents, it’s to know exactly who is with your children.

“Our kids will never forget what happened to them,” the father says.

The mom adds: “They know now what is right and what is wrong.”

In their case, the perpetrator has been arrested, charges have been filed, and he is in jail. When he gets out of jail, the parents will file a restraining order.

“Our kids walked out of the center relieved, which is all we could ask for,” the father says.

Rebecca Alten, the same staff member who first met the family, continues to check on them with regular follow-up phone calls.

“I appreciate that gesture beyond words,” the mother says.