

## S.I. Couple Charged With Murder of Daughter, 3

By JAMES BARRON  
and JACOB H. FRIES

The police charged a Staten Island couple with second-degree murder yesterday in the death of their 3-year-old daughter who, the medical examiner's office said, had been beaten repeatedly and forced to eat soap.

The toddler, identified as Sylena Herrnkind, was taken to St. Vincent's Staten Island Hospital by the police at 3:30 p.m. on Monday after the police were called to her house in the Stapleton neighborhood on a report of a child not breathing. Investigators said the child's father, Matthew Herrnkind, 27, told them that he had found Sylena lying unconscious on a bedroom floor. She was pronounced dead at the hospital shortly afterward, the police said.

The girl had bruises all over her body that indicated she had been beaten, said Ellen Borakove, a spokeswoman for the medical examiner's office. She said it appeared that Sylena had also been held under water for some time before she died.

Sylena's 4-year-old sister, who had burns and bruises below her waist, was taken to Staten Island University Hospital, the police said. A third child, the Herrnkinds' 14-

### *A toddler was beaten and force-fed soap, the medical examiner finds.*

month-old boy, was treated for broken ribs at Staten Island University Hospital, the police said.

The police charged Mr. Herrnkind and his wife, Julie, 24, with second-degree murder, second-degree assault and three counts of endangering the welfare of a child. The police said that their investigation was continuing and that additional charges might be filed.

The couple were arrested in 1998 on child-abuse charges involving the daughter who is now 4, who is autistic. The child welfare agency's report says that the child had bruises and that investigators concluded that she had been abused, law enforcement and child welfare officials said. It was unclear last night what the status of that earlier case was.

In all, the Administration for Children's

Services had investigated the family six times, most recently in August, when the Family Resource Program, a private agency that has a contract with the city and works with troubled families to try to keep them together, reported that Sylena had bruises under her eyes, officials said. But the child welfare agency accepted the parents' explanation that the bruises had come from her autistic older sister, and concluded that the report was unfounded.

Jennifer Falk, a spokeswoman for the Administration for Children's Services, said two children from the family had been removed in 1998 and placed in foster care. In 1999, their foster mother reported that they were dirty when they returned from a visit with their parents, Ms. Falk said. They were returned to their parents' household in March of last year.

The charges in the Staten Island case were filed as voters weighed a ballot proposal to make the Administration for Children's Services a permanent unit of city government, a move that the commissioner of the agency, Nicholas Scoppetta, has said is necessary to keep attention and resources

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focused on child welfare services. Before the mayor separated the child welfare agency from the Human Resources Administration, it had gone through a series of name changes and had had a troubled history.

The move to make the agency a permanent part of city government comes six years after Elisa Izquierdo, 6, was beaten to death by her mother in 1995 while she was nominally under the city's protection. In response to public outcry, Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani vowed to overhaul the child welfare system and named Mr. Scoppetta commissioner of a new agency, the Adminis-

### *Suspects in a girl's death had been investigated before.*

tration for Children's Services.

Though Mr. Scoppetta has called his transformation of the child welfare system unfinished, he has said he will not stay on as commissioner under a new mayor because the time was ripe for him to write, speak and teach about what had been accomplished so far. Last night, he was giving a speech at a child and family policy conference in Washington, and could not be reached for comment.