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Press Release

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Man gets life for kidnapping, 'playing house' with girl

FORT WORTH — A 52-year-old man has been sentenced to life in prison for kidnapping his 6-year-old neighbor and then taking her to a nearby residence, where he took off her clothes and made her "play house."

On Thursday, a Tarrant County jury convicted Joseph Mitchell Berman of one count of aggravated kidnapping, one count of sexual performance of a child under 14, and one count of indecency with a child.

They then sentenced Berman to life in prison on each of the first two counts and to the maximum 20 years in prison on the indecency count. All of the sentences will run concurrently.

During the trial in state district Judge Robb Catalano's court, prosecutors Rainey Webb and Kim D'Avignon presented evidence that on May 2, 2011, Berman kidnapped his 6-year-old neighbor while she was playing outside

with another child. Berman carried the child to a neighbor's house who was on vacation and had given Berman a key.

Inside, Berman undressed himself and the child.

The child testified that they then "played house" and that Berman was the husband and she was the wife. She told jurors that Berman kissed her all over and fed her cheese balls and Jell-O. They also rode a toy rocking horse naked, she said.

Later, Berman dropped the child over the backyard fence and told her she could go home but not to tell anyone what had happened or she would get a spanking.

A Saginaw police officer who had been looking for the missing girl found the child walking shoeless in a drainage ditch and took her home.

After the assault, Berman shaved his pubic hair and bit a police officer to impede DNA evidence collection.



Joseph Berman

During the punishment phase of the trial, prosecutors also presented evidence that Berman - who has served time in an Oklahoma prison for assault - also molested another child, assaulted a teacher and physically abused his wife.

The offense involving the 6-year-old girl occurred about a half mile from where Opal Jennings was abducted in March 1999.

"Joseph Berman embodies everything that frightens us as parents," said Assistant District Attorney Rainey Webb. "He abducted a child in her front yard, took her to a place where he thought no one would find her and sexually assaulted her. Without the quick response of the Saginaw Police Department, this could have been a very different case. We are thankful for the jury's decision. A life sentence was the only appropriate verdict for this defendant."