

Parenting YouTuber Ruby Franke and her business partner Jodi Hildebrandt, who pleaded guilty to child abuse charges that stemmed from one of Franke's children escaping Hildebrandt's house in August to beg a neighbor for help, have been sentenced to prison. Each could serve as much as 30 years, the prosecutor said after the hearing, the most severe penalty available under Utah law.

Franke has been sentenced to four consecutive prison terms, CBS News affiliate KUTV reported Tuesday, which could range from one to 15 years each. The Utah Board of Pardons and Parole will determine prison time, KUTV reported. Franke has 30 days to appeal the decision.

Hildebrandt received the same sentence of four consecutive prison terms, KUTV reported, which could again range from one to 15 years each. Like Franke, Hildebrandt's prison time will be determined by the Utah Board of Pardons and Parole.

Franke, who gave parenting advice on her now-defunct "8 Passengers" YouTube channel, and Hildebrandt, who operated a counseling business called ConneXions Classroom, were each initially charged with six counts of aggravated child abuse, a second-degree felony. Each count carried a potential penalty of one to 15 years in prison and a fine of up to \$10,000.

While reading the sentencing recommendation, state prosecutor Eric Clarke compared the environment Franke's children faced to a "concentration camp-like setting," and said that Franke "committed horrible acts of child abuse." While addressing Hildebrandt's charges, Clarke called her a "significant threat" to the community.

Both women addressed the court before their sentencings, with Hildebrandt saying that she would "submit to what the state feels is an appropriate amount of time served." Franke admitted that she and Hildebrandt had "inflicted the injuries" on her children. She said that she had been "led to believe that this world is an evil place" and that Hildebrandt had never been her "business responsibility," but that she

had paid the other woman to be her mentor. Franke also thanked public safety officials who rescued her children, calling them "angels," according to KUTV.

"My charges are just," Franke said. "They offer safety to my family, accountability to the public."

## **What did Ruby Franke and Jodi Hildebrandt do?**

In December, Franke pleaded guilty to four counts of child abuse and admitted that she tortured her children, including the now 12-year-old boy who escaped Hildebrandt's home. In the plea agreement, which contained graphic details of abuse, Franke said her son was often kept bound, and that her nine-year-old daughter was made to do manual labor outside in the hot sun with no water or shoes. Both children were often told they were possessed and that their punishments were necessary to help them.

The boy told officials that Hildebrandt had tied him up and used home remedies to treat wounds caused by the restraints, according to court documents reviewed by KUTV.

As part of her plea deal, Franke agreed to serve a prison term and agreed that her sentences would run consecutively. She also agreed to testify against Hildebrandt.

Hildebrandt also pleaded guilty, just days after Franke, to four counts of child abuse. Her plea agreement stated that she either tortured the children or was aware of the abuse. The agreement also stated that Hildebrandt "either physically forced or coerced" Franke's daughter to "jump into a cactus multiple times."

The crimes were motivated by their religious faith, said Washington County Attorney Eric Clarke in a statement.

"This is a case about religious extremism. The defendants appear to have fully believed that the abuse they inflicted was necessary to

teach the children how to properly repent for imagined 'sins' and to cast the evil spirits out of their bodies," Clarke said. "Hildebrandt regularly stated that God communicated directly with her and gave her directions. Franke accepted Hildebrandt as her leader and followed her instructions and guidance."

## **Where is Ruby Franke's family now?**

Even before the criminal charges, Franke was criticized on YouTube for her harsh punishments towards her children, including once banning one of her children from his bedroom for seven months because he pranked his younger brother. The YouTube channel, which began in 2015, ended after seven years.

Franke's husband, Kevin Franke, has filed for divorce. In early September, a lawyer for Kevin Franke told CBS News that he was representing his client's interests in keeping his children together and in his care and that he could not comment on Ruby Franke's arrest.

Kevin Franke appeared in court Friday alongside Franke's two eldest children. While speaking from the stand, Franke apologized to her former husband. "You are the love of my life," she said, according to KUTV. "The ending of our marriage is a tragedy."

Franke's parents and brother both filed statements with the court ahead of her sentencing Tuesday, blaming Hildebrandt's influence for her actions. Franke's brother Beau Griffiths said that he had also been enrolled in Hildebrandt's ConneXions program.

"At the continued encouragement of Ms. Hildebrandt, Ruby systematically pushed those around her away, first myself, and then our sisters, parents, and close friends, and then her husband, and finally her own children," Griffiths said in part. "Ruby has clearly been brainwashed. She has been taken advantage of by Ms. Hildebrandt."

Franke's sisters, Julie Griffiths Deru and Bonnie Hoellein, YouTubers themselves, shared videos detailing Franke's separation from the family and stating that they were not aware of her actions.

Franke's parents, Chad and Jennifer Griffiths, said in their statement to the court that for three years they only had "brief communications" with their daughter, where she "accused us of either things that never happen or she grossly exaggerated the events that did."

"She was delusional," they said, according to KUTV. "She was so deeply brainwashed we could not recognize her."