

# Jackie's story

Cas O'Neill

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When the time came to make the tomato chutney, all the jars had matching lids.

In February Jackie and I spent an afternoon together when she and Lisa needed a break from each other. While we were baking and chatting, Jackie sorted all the jars. This was her gift to me.

I met Jackie five years ago, when she came to live with Lisa, my neighbor and friend. She was just nine years old, a slim, active girl with watchful eyes. She was intelligent, attractive and eager to learn - as well as irritating, self-destructive, aggressive and manipulative. She had spent her life from early babyhood moving back and forth between a violent, neglectful birth family and various foster families and family group homes.

Lisa is small, quiet and determined. She loves animals and has an ironic sense of humor. Six years ago she applied to the Department of Human Services to share her home with a child who needed one.

Every year in Victoria, more than 100 school age children join new families in Permanent Care, Intercountry Adoption and Special Needs Adoption placements. Hundreds of children are also in long-term foster care. Research indicates that between 10 and 20 per cent of these placements do not last, usually because of the children's behavior.

Early in 1995 Jackie moved in permanently with Lisa. At first Jackie seemed mature beyond her years, although it became apparent that this was a cover for a needy 'baby' self inside, who had frozen emotionally at a much earlier stage. At 13 Jackie still took a dummy to bed.

Like other children who join foster, permanent care or adoptive families at an older age, Jackie brought with her many stressful experiences: abandonment, neglect, violence and

lack of love. However, while most of these children eventually thrive in their new families, Jackie's hurt and distrust were deeper than most.

As she settled in with Lisa, Jackie needed to test whether this situation would last. She lied, stole and threatened other children. Both adults and children experienced her as 'fake' in some way, and children shunned her. While she was longing for care and permanency, she actually expected to be rejected, as she had been so many times before. Often it seemed that this was what she wanted. However, when Jackie and Lisa were alone together and Jackie had all Lisa's attention, their relationship blossomed. Jackie learnt to play the piano, recorder and clarinet; she joined the school band and did well academically.

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Yet over the years Jackie's lying, stealing and aggression continued. Lisa learnt to cope with complaints from teachers, other parents and neighbors. But what really got to her was the way Jackie urinated over her clothes, in her school bag, in her cupboard and over her soft toys.

When Lisa bought a plastic protector for the mattress, Jackie tore it off and kept wetting the mattress. This happened every day for five years, but only at home, never when Jackie stayed

with other people. Did she want to be Lisa's baby? Or did she want to punish, through Lisa, all the adults who had let her down?

Lisa is someone who doesn't give up easily, but Jackie rarely gave her hope that things would change. Earlier this year Jackie started to say that she wanted to leave Lisa and she became even more aggressive.

At a case planning meeting in February, a young solicitor, acting on Jackie's instructions,

argued that Jackie should not stay with Lisa. Shortly afterwards, Jackie took matters into her own hands and spent a night away from home without telling Lisa.

The welfare authorities held a meeting, and decided that Jackie would not return to live with Lisa. Contrary to department guidelines, Lisa, Jackie's mother of almost five years, was not invited to the meeting, nor told of it until it had occurred. The professionals who organised the meeting were no doubt worried that Lisa was at the end of her tether and probably wanted to protect her from involvement in this hard decision. Yet it had the opposite effect: Lisa felt angry, desolate and dishonored as a mother.

Was it wrong that a 13-year old effectively had the power to make such a momentous decision? I believe so. Jackie's actions were consistent with the whims of a toddler. She was battling for control, but was too young to understand the consequences of her actions. She told me that 'they' would find another family for her and that she wouldn't have to go into a residential unit (which she had lived in before and hated). This was the magical thinking of a child, affirmed by the no doubt well-meaning solicitor. Paradoxically, it seemed that her baby self was desperate for the authorities to be strong, caring guardians, who would reaffirm their

confidence in the family unit of her and Lisa.

Jackie is now in a residential unit, which houses several disturbed teenagers. She has already been moved once, because in the first three weeks she was badly bashed several times by another girl (who recently died through drug abuse). She has experimented with drugs, had frequent contact with teenage prostitutes, been allowed out on her own at night and once stayed out all night, because the staff are not allowed to restrain young people.

Jackie is now able to live without some of the boundaries that make life tolerable and joyful. The child welfare system has helped her do this by allowing her to act in a way that is not in her long-term interests.

While giving Jackie full access to her legal rights, a range of professionals has not been able to assess whether she understood the risks of acting on those rights. I believe that she did not understand and that she is probably now horrified by what has happened. She will see this as further proof that she is profoundly unworthy of care.

Lisa is not encouraged to contact Jackie, although Jackie regularly rings her. Jackie has also rung me and another neighbor. She sounded sad and lost.

Individual social workers have been kind at times, although Lisa felt that few of them understood the depth of the problems Jackie brought with her. (From the outside it is hard to understand the impact on families of children such as Jackie). Lisa often felt blamed for her inability to heal this troubled child and relied on reports from teachers and holiday camp organisers for confirmation of Jackie's extreme behavior.

So, what, if anything, would have made a difference?

Lisa says that over the five years no-one from the welfare authorities asked her how she wanted to be supported. If they had, she would have told them that above all she desperately needed to be believed - about the stress of living with such a traumatised child and about her own efforts to make it work.

If she had been asked, Lisa might also have said that she needed someone with skills in behavioral management who could spend time with her and Jackie working on Jackie's more destructive behavior; that when things were really bad, she needed respite every second weekend; or that she needed a family aide after school some days.

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These things cost money and the Adoption and Permanent Care authorities do not have enough for families with children like Jackie. During Jackie's five years with Lisa, the department provided financial support such as a carer's payment, private school fees, counselling, school holiday camps and respite care a weekend a month. This amount, less than \$13,000 a year, is far more than most families in a similar situation receive. None of it (apart from the carer's payment) was easy to obtain, as each item had to be argued for separately.

But here's the rub - the department now pays \$80,000-\$95,000 each year, as well as school fees, to keep Jackie in a residential unit. She lives there with older teenagers, whose troubled backgrounds and behavior place her at grave risk. These are some of the young people who end up homeless, using drugs, committing crime and becoming parents to children who will probably repeat the cycle.

For less than a quarter of that sum, Jackie and Lisa might have been able to make it work, in a home and neighborhood in which Jackie was known, cared for and watched. While adoption, permanent care and foster care agencies struggle to fund resources

to prevent family breakdowns, other parts of the welfare system pay enormous sums to maintain children after the breakdowns have occurred.

It would be easy to blame all this on unfeeling welfare authorities and a lack of money. However, while money is an issue, it is the child welfare system that needs to be looked at. Welfare professionals care about children such as Jackie and residential care workers (who are paid around \$6.00 an hour) tend to be very committed to their work despite difficult and sometimes dangerous circumstances. The fact that they are not allowed to restrain children from staying out all night is outrageous, and contrary to any basic notion of care.

Solutions, although complex, can often involve spending a little money to save a lot later. Just as more financial and emotional support might have enabled Jackie and Lisa to stay together, Jackie's natural mother, if she had been given a full time family aide, might have been able to escape a violent husband and raise her own children. This would have cost a small amount of money compared to the subsequent costs of caring for the children in publicly-funded care.

I remember Jackie as a girl happy to spend an afternoon matching lids to jars. In the past four months the same girl, now 14, has spent at least one night on the streets, been exposed to drugs, dealers and prostitutes, deliberately cut herself, been assaulted several times and has threatened suicide.

All children deserve better. I believe that Jackie is now lost, to herself and to this community. Despite many well meaning efforts, in the end we did not understand or care enough. □

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