

One parent's story of change:

An 'emotional monster' no more

by Jeremiah Donier

"I think this baby is at risk of dying if she is returned to her parents."

These are the words that led to my family's two-year child dependency case. They turned my world upside down, inside out, and changed my life forever. A doctor made this statement because my child was physically abused.



I was the person responsible, but I couldn't account *Jeremiah with his baby during* for the abuse. That was something I had to discover on *a visit at the child welfare office* my emotional journey through the child welfare system.

Repeating the past

It was supposed to be a routine checkup at a local clinic. Because of an ear infection, the doctor told my wife and me to take our child to the hospital to be evaluated by a specialist. The pediatric staff members who examined our two-month-old girl found injuries just short of Shaken Baby Syndrome.

My baby was immediately placed on a hospital safety hold and child welfare was called. A social worker later told me that the only way I could take my baby home was for someone to admit deliberately harming my child and to explain how and why the abuse had happened. But I couldn't explain. So my child was taken into protective custody. My wife was devastated and I felt numb.

I didn't think that I had deliberately abused my daughter. After being married three years, I thought fathering a child would be a wonderful thing. But I didn't know about things like colic and how to handle a newborn. I was stressed out, not getting enough sleep, and disciplining my baby for behaving badly. I was treating my child the same way I had been punished as a child. I thought this was my right and responsibility as a parent. In time, I would learn that I was wrong.

An emotional hermit

Having my child taken away left me bewildered. I couldn't think of any reason why I should plead guilty to child abuse. I didn't understand that I desperately needed help. Since I was a kid, I felt like an emotional hermit, all alone except for two feelings: anger and happiness.

My wife and I attended twice-weekly visits with our child and submitted to psychological exams and parent-child evaluations, but I was suspicious of everything. I pored over my child's medical results, did research, and talked to my attorney, trying to find a logical explanation for my baby's injuries. After losing my job, my family's sole source of income, I knew that I was in over my head. My partner and I both wanted our baby back, but found ourselves sinking into a pit of fear and despair.

A dent in my emotional armor

Two months into our case, my wife found a way to keep hope afloat: She and the baby started a 20-hour-per-week parenting program called the Children's Ark. The program offered wrap-around services, from parent-child attachment to parent training sessions to individual therapy and more. After struggling another month to comply with court requirements, I was accepted into the program, too.

A short while into the program, I had my first significant emotional breakthrough. I remember holding onto my baby as she was crying from hunger and my wife was in the kitchen taking forever to make a bottle of formula. I was fuming at my partner and not paying attention to my child. Suddenly, a staff person had me sit down and asked, "Why aren't you paying attention to your baby? What's going on with you? Why are you angry? What are you feeling?" I wanted to blame my wife, but I was told my feelings were not because of her. I was shocked. I had no idea that I was so visibly upset and I couldn't explain what was going on.

With my counselor's help, I began to comprehend that while I was working to protect myself from past hurts, I wasn't living in the present or paying attention to what was going on with my current feelings. I realized that I needed to be in the moment with myself and my child. This was the first of many steps on a long road to understanding my emotional issues and caring about my feelings.



Jeremiah giving his kiddo a piggyback ride at the park

Beyond my control

In addition to dealing with my emotions and the child abuse charges, I had other things I was struggling with: finding a way to pay child support and handling dubious statements made about me and my past history.

With all of my support and their substantial income, I assumed the kinship home my children were in was capable of taking care of my child. Again, I was wrong. They filed for and received child welfare assistance for my baby, and this instigated Support Enforcement to garnish half my unemployment check. It was a challenge financially, but in the end I paid off all the child support that was due. Nevertheless, it was a bone of contention within the family.

At the start of my case, I disputed many of the stated facts about me. Much of what was said about my personal history occurred when I was a kid. It was hard to hear about these awkward childhood incidents. Even though there was a hint of truth in them, I felt that some accounts regarding my actions were misleading. To me, these statements seemed to cast a cloud over my case, and cast me as a dark emotional monster.

I was called into a meeting and told that child support, past events, and what was being said about me were all beyond my control. I was given a choice: move forward and focus on my family's future, or leave the program and put myself and my family in a quagmire of uncertainty. It was another wake-up call; you can't change the past and you can't control what people say about you.

From that point on, I started to focus on things I could manage. I also accepted the fact that I was an emotionally unstable person, but I wanted to change. My social worker asked me to consider taking an anger management class and I agreed. As a result, rather than wait for a referral, I asked around, found a service provider and quickly enrolled.

Left in the dark

While it was hard to come to terms with all the accusations and implications, it was frightening to have my child raised by someone else. It turned into a power struggle of who was right and who was wrong.

From the beginning, my parenting program provided a communication log book where I could write about my child's day with me. My baby's caretakers would also briefly describe my child's time with one of them. At first, communication between our families was fairly good. Gradually, their messages took on darker and disapproving tones.

It was hard reading about my child's treatment in their care. It seemed to me that the caretakers were doing things with my baby that was contrary to what I was being taught in my parenting program. To add to this, we learned that my daughter had developmental delays. It was unclear whether this was because of the physical abuse or because she wasn't receiving proper care from them.

Then they stopped writing about my baby. I was left in the dark wondering what was going on in their home. If my child arrived for a visit and was sick or had a small injury, I didn't know how or why. To make matters worse, I was told my their family planned to go on vacation and take my child out of the state for a few weeks.

During those weeks, my wife and I were frantic with worry, and I reached another breaking point. When I met with my counselor, all I wanted to talk about was what the other family was doing with my baby. But I was reminded that I needed to concentrate on what mattered most: my emotional needs, caring for my child during visits, and the fact that child welfare still considered me unsafe around my child.

Reunified as a family

A month passed without any visits with my baby, and I took the time to reflect on my emotions, my actions, and what happened before my family's case was opened. After comparing what I learned in my parenting program and my anger management class to what my baby had suffered at my own hands, I knew without a doubt I had abused my child.

Although my initial intentions were to discipline my baby, I did it out of anger and frustration. I harmed my child, and what I did was wrong. The shame hit home. Realizing this took a substantial amount of soul searching and I knew I had to be honest and do the right thing. Eight months after my case was opened, I pleaded guilty to third-degree assault of a minor.

After making my plea, I was mercifully sentenced to one year of community supervision. I was able to continue in my parenting program, where I still strived to understand my emotional issues, but my relationship with child welfare had changed. For the first time, I was showing progress in my case. Within a month, supervised in-home visits with my child were scheduled.

I celebrated my baby's first birthday with my heart full of hope and my feelings open to others. The in-home visits worked well. My child, my partner and I were making progress. I was learning to talk about my feelings and to nurture my child in new ways. Visits were gradually increased month by month, until to my delight my child was returned.



Confronting my childhood memories



Jeremiah with his toddler

Our case was open for nearly 14 months and my baby was fast becoming a toddler. But my family's dependency remained open because I still needed to understand why I was so angry. My counselor and I wanted to make sure I could safely express all my feelings and face things from my childhood.

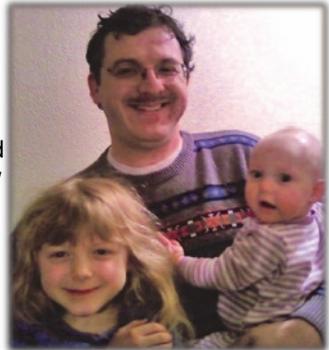
In my individual counseling sessions, I was open to exploring the relationship between shame and anger, but I still had to realize how my feelings of fear and sadness were linked to my anger. Confronting my childhood memories was the key to understanding why I became an emotional monster. Doing this was absolute agony.

In my mind, I grew up in an idyllic setting: a rural community, close friends, and a happy family. In reality, I suffered significant emotional abuse. My oldest brother was the prince and pride of my parents. My second oldest brother was the baby. My younger sister was the princess. I was stuck in the middle, isolated and alone.

The cycle of emotional hurt on my dad's side of the family had gone on for generations. My great great grandfather was abandoned as a child by his father. My grandfather lost his mom when he was just a toddler and was raised by a harsh dad. My own dad was mistreated and thought he had to be strict to make my brothers and I tough. Both of my parents struggled with physical and sexual abuse.

Once I understood my extended family's history and the role it played in my emotions, I decided I would be the last in the chain of emotional abuse. Finally, I appreciated my feelings and what was behind them. I was able to break free of my anger and fear, and feel safe around my child. For the first time in her life, I could see her for the wonder that she really is. I was able to start showing my baby the empathy I didn't receive enough of as a child. After two years, my case was closed at last.

I am happy to say that my wife and I are still together. At five years old, my daughter is remarkable and creative. She loves art and will spend hours drawing and coloring pictures. My wife and I recently had another little miracle, also a girl. This new baby has been a second chance for me. Although I am sad about the past, everything has been so amazingly different this time around. It's not easy being a parent, but I know that I am now safe emotionally. I am not perfect, but I love my family. I look at the world differently now. There is a lot of good in it, and I want my family to be a part of it.



Jeremiah with his two daughters

Jeremiah is a member of the Washington State Parent Advocacy Committee, a founder of the Spokane Parent Advocacy Committee, and is actively involved in local and statewide workgroups and committees focused on strengthening the state's child welfare system including the WSPAC's Fatherhood Council

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