

The following are real stories about children and families whom I have had the privilege to know and with whom I have worked. Although the majority of each story is true, some identifying information has been changed slightly so that my friends cannot be recognized. I believe wholeheartedly about protecting people's privacy; their stories are their own except that they have agreed to set me share these "slightly altered" representations of their journey in order that others may feel renewed hope.

Just a "Regular" Kid

Jeremy was one of several children born to a Birth Mom who already had several children removed from her care and parental rights terminated. However, Jeremy's situation was different: his Birth Dad was in jail, and would not give permission to have rights terminated, so when Jeremy was placed in foster care, he was required to continue to see Birth Mom on a regular basis, and Birth Father did not allow for Jeremy to participate in psychotherapy. In other words, even as young as 18 months when he was placed in care due to abuse and neglect at home, Jeremy was "stuck." He could not be considered as pre-adoptive, nor could he come to therapy with his Foster Parents to begin the healing process that eventually took years to accomplish.

Instead, Foster Parents came alone! They decided that if Jeremy could not come for therapy, that THEY would come to learn how to begin healing in their wonderful foster home, and that THEY would learn how to help Jeremy with the heart wrenching nightmares and melt-downs that he experienced -- sometimes before and always after each bi-weekly visit with Birth Mom.

Jeremy's Foster Parents "introduced" me to a youngster who, deep down inside, believed that he was "bad," or "rotten," and acted that way on a regular basis. If his parents praised him for something, he would deliberately sabotage whatever he had just done so as to prove them wrong. He could accept NO criticism, even constructive, lovingly-offered suggestions, without having temper tantrums or, once his language skills were sufficient, long diatribes about why HE was right and THEY were wrong. So sad ... Jeremy was growing up to be argumentative, passive-aggressive in his actions, and developing a core or negative (and unfounded) self-beliefs.

Finally, at age 5 ½, and after another child was born to his Birth Mom and was immediately placed in foster care with Jeremy's Foster Family, parental rights were terminated and the road to adoption was clear and open. And, Jeremy could begin to attend therapy with his parents! This was an exciting and welcomed event for me, as his primary therapist, and also for Jeremy and his Pre-Adoptive Parents, who had been talking about and practicing Narrative Therapy and Theraplay® at home for many years now.

Coming to the Light: Suki's Story

History: At time of first meeting, Suki (not her real name) was a 13 year old girl, living with adoptive parents and their 7 year old birth daughter, and 5 year old birth son. She had been adopted from Asia at age 14 months from an orphanage, having been abandoned during the night at the doorstep of a small town police station. Little was known about the orphanage, which was far from any major city, but the adoption caseworker/translator reported that she heard an official say that she was happy that the baby was "released from that prison."

Suki came to the US with several medical problems, including significant sensory integration difficulties (trouble with becoming overly stressed when she was in a group, or when there was too much going on around her), and what her doctor was calling AD/HD, but which later turned out to not be the case.

Current Situation: When I met Suki, she was a bright, assertive, somewhat surly teenager, who had already been dismissed from 3 schools for anti-social behaviors, including cheating, lying, stealing, and stalking other students. She was certainly academically smart enough to do the work, but was extremely oppositional about doing homework, and said she didn't care that she was home-schooled, except that she would sneak out of the house (very clever at it, too) to meet up with friends at a local park or library. She was rude and dismissive to her parents, and had not accepted affection when it was offered by Mom and Dad since she was very little, except when she demanded it of them.

On top of that, Suki was very moody, her moods shifting quickly, seemingly without warning, and often including a swing towards violent rages, some lasting an hour or more. Once Suki was in a "melt down," as her family referred to these rages, there was little that helped her stabilize, although every so often the rage would end in her asking to be held, rocked, or somehow comforted.

Suki was not good about self-care, and since she started menstruating things were even worse. She refused to take regular showers, brush her teeth, care for her clothes, and her room – well, at one point I asked for a picture and it was beyond bad, with rotten food under the bed, moldy apple cores in the closet, and very dirty clothes pretty much everywhere. What a disaster!

A few positives about our young friend included the following: she was devoted to her younger brother (although not her sister), and read to, played with, and was protective of "Sam" whenever there was the opportunity. Also, she was seen to be very loving to animals in the neighborhood, which, along with her affection for her brother, were good signs that there was some empathy hiding behind the opposition, mood swings, and dirt. And, much to her parents' relief, Suki read a lot, holing herself up in her room, devouring books hours on end...this was especially interesting in light of her AD/HD diagnosis.

Treatment: after a thorough evaluation, including school testing to see if there were learning difficulties which might be in play, (there were not), Suki was recommended to have a 2 month course of EEG Biofeedback* (often called NFB or Neuro Feedback) to help her to stabilize her moods, eliminate rages and violence, address her sensory issues, and extend her attention. Interestingly, after the first month of NFB, Mom reported that Suki was beginning to shower more often and put on clean clothes, much to the delight of her parents and siblings!

Once we began to see some stabilization of her moods, psychotherapy was expanded and included attachment work with Mom, and which focused on Suki's being able to simply sit with Mom, play Theraplay®*-related games of nurture and challenge, and let Mom touch her without Suki pulling away or hollering.

As soon as we could see that Mom was able to soothe Suki, even a little, we knew that Mom was a source of safety for Suki and therapy moved to trauma work, including Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR*). The process of EMDR trauma therapy allowed Suki to bring old traumas, stored in the right limbic area of her brain, to the "processing side" of the brain, to help her realize that these traumatic memories were just that – memories – sad and frightening, to be sure, but old, in the past, and not to be experienced again because now, Suki was safe and with a protective, loving family.

Trauma-art was used, too, to help Suki draw what little scraps of memory she had, or current situations that brought up the old feelings, and scribble them out in a prescribed series of steps, to get them out of her system. And Suki, her Mom, and I sometimes used stuffed animals to say the things that Suki was too afraid to say or hear as we helped her work through the horror that filled increasingly less of her days, but that was still a major force in her emotional and behavioral life.

Family therapy at this point included a few activities such as Suki and Mom keeping a list of the many ways in which they were alike. This later expanded to listing ways in which Suki was much more **like** others in her family (rather than different from), and it was lovely to watch her begin to see herself, for the first time, as a true and honest member of this family that had been trying for so long to embrace her as one of their own.

Over many months the transformation continued, and Suki grew, emotionally, psychologically, and in self-esteem. Suki began to verbalize her shame at having been "kicked out" of her birth family, and "given away" by her birth Mom, although in truth we never knew what were the actual circumstances of Suki's abandonment. Her therapy reached a critical piece when she wrenchingly admitted one day that she never wanted me, her therapist, and the symbolic conduit from herself to her parents, to "see how black I am on the inside. If you know how bad I am, you could never love me, or any part of me." That was a turning point in Suki's work, and she went through a few very bad weeks when parents thought that we had lost all the gains that were made. But once Suki came out of the "RAD pit," the dark place inside of her that had held her wanting-to-heal parts captive for so many years.

And Now? Of course, Suki's story would not be included in my "Success Story" page if there were not a happy ending. I include her story here, with great affection and pride in her hard work and accomplishments, to give hope to families who are frustrated, frightened for, and often demoralized by parenting a teenager who might be thought to be "too old to heal." Believe me, it's never too late to make positive changes. Suki, a happy, positive, clean, well-organized 19 year old college freshman who talks about her family with love and pride, would be the first to tell you that.