

## **Reaching breaking point: Post-adoption support can keep families together**

Susan Jones admits she had an “idealist” view of adoption when she decided to adopt two siblings, back in 2003. “I thought loving them would be enough, but it wasn’t,” she explains.

In fact it’s been far from easy. Susan has experienced physical and verbal abuse, financial worries and emotional turmoil during her adoption journey.

Susan already had two birth children, aged 14 and 16, when she adopted Jenny (7) and Sam (5), so it has been a learning curve for all of them. Although ‘neglect’ was alluded to in the children’s history, it became clear to Susan that Jenny and Sam had experienced horrific abuse – not just at the hands of their birth family members, but sadly, at the hands of their foster carers. They had come to learn that the world was not safe, that relationships with adults were not safe, and viewed themselves as unlovable. They couldn’t trust that Susan really wanted to be their ‘forever’ mum and they ran from and fought with all Susan’s attempts to create a relationship with them.

Sadly Jenny and Sam’s fear and distress manifested in dangerous violence and aggression toward Susan and her older children. They regularly ‘trashed’ the family home, stole from Susan and often went missing, necessitating police involvement. During this very difficult time, Jenny and Sam continued to re-enact the traumas they had experienced – they would attack Susan, pull her hair, abuse her verbally and physically, and defecate on her clothes.

Susan fought to maintain a relationship with these two terrified children, but the strain impacted her relationship with her older children, friends, family and meant taking time away from her career, to devote herself to full-time therapeutic parenting to keep the family together. As a result she fell into debt and needed to rely on financial support from friends and family to survive and keep the family home.

Susan was at breaking point, when having approached the local authority who had placed the children for support, they were unwilling to provide anything but very limited post adoption support. She didn’t know who to turn to or where to access help. Susan says now, of that time, that she felt completely unequipped to handle it. “If I didn’t have my two oldest children, I would have thought I was a really bad mother. I smacked Sam out of frustration and desperation. I had never felt it before in my life.”

When the level of violence in her home actually worsened, Susan knew she must seek specialist help if she were to keep the children safe, and the family together.

In 2004, Susan brought Jenny and Sam to Family Futures and, following assessment, she, and Sam and Jenny, entered a therapeutic treatment programme.

“The therapy was very difficult, but within two sessions, the kids started calling me mum. It felt like we had taken a step forward,” explains Susan.

The therapy challenged the neglectful and punitive 'parenting' that Sam and Jenny had experienced in the past and helped Susan develop a reparative parenting style that did the opposite, so that the children could begin to access Susan's love and care, and to internalise a sense of themselves as loved and loveable. Susan began to see changes in how the children responded, not just to her, but to each other. For the first time in her adoption journey, Susan felt like she could see a way forward.

But adding to Susan's stress, her local authority cut her funding for post adoption support, which meant the family had a break in their therapy part way through.

Helping a traumatised child to heal takes a long time and the teenage years, perhaps inevitably, raised more difficulties for the family. Unknown to Susan, Jenny was contacted by birth family members via her secondary school. Before Susan knew what was happening Jenny had been abducted by her birth parents and was missing for several days. The situation was extremely dangerous and required emergency police intervention to safely return Jenny home. Family Futures was able to play a key role in negotiating with the birth family and with local services at that time, to support Susan and to try to keep Jenny safe.

Jenny was profoundly re-traumatised and sadly spent the next several years of her adolescence 'running' and needed to be re-accommodated into local authority care to secure her safety. Susan was heartbroken but with the support of the Family Futures therapy team she remained in relationship with Jenny throughout. Jenny was placed in foster care over 100 miles away for several months and Family Futures supported both her and Susan throughout. Family Futures provided telephone support, emergency out of hours care and out of hours therapy sessions for Jenny. This was working until funding ran out and it fell apart.

Sadly Jenny's teenage years continued to be marked by violence and aggression, drug taking and gangs as she struggled to come to terms with her past and find a way to survive.

To Susan's great credit, today Jenny has been able to do that. Now aged 20, she has her own accommodation, a part-time job and a steady relationship. "She is a grafter, but struggles to manage full-time work. For her mental health, it's good for her to have some structure and work part-time. She would like to go back to college. Family Futures has continued to provide Jenny with therapy, which has really helped her," says Susan.

After the turbulent years of adolescence Susan and Jenny have been able to repair the rupture and maintain their relationship.

Sam, now aged 18, has also been violent and abusive to Susan over the years. He too struggles to control his emotions and has violent outbursts. He struggled at school and was excluded in year nine. But Family Futures was able to work with the

school to support Sam during this period providing support and training to maintain his school place.

Having left school, Sam, like Jenny, has been successful in securing a job, and has recently managed to pass his driving test which he is delighted about. They are small steps forward but significant for his self-esteem, which Susan identifies as an ongoing issue for Sam, linked to his early abuse.

Susan says: "He knows he needs to deal with his anger, especially as him and his girlfriend are expecting a baby. I have said he needs to take responsibility and speak with his therapist at Family Futures.

"You can't undo trauma, there is no cure. But you can talk to people. We're not a conventional family, but we are a family. And when push comes to shove, like in the best families, Jenny and Sam know they can come to me when they need me."

Susan adds: "I have felt safe at Family Futures in the knowledge I am with people who understand what we are going through as a family. The agency has changed my life. I am happier as a person. My family would not be together without Family Futures."