

JENNIE OWENS

# DANCING with a porcupine

Parenting Wounded Children  
without losing your self



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without losing your self.

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change prior to publication

JENNIE OWENS



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# Preface

I look back now and wonder how I am alive to tell this story. That I didn't die or lose my mind and end up in the hospital, loony bin, lake, or prison is an absolute miracle. After all, I'd put myself on the back burner for a long time.

Time and time again, I have watched parents caring for children from tough places become so engrossed with their child's pathology that they live their lives on the edge of burnout.

In our minds, if we can just help our child heal, everything else will fall into place. But it's dangerous to become so focused on the quest to help a child heal that we neglect ourselves in the process. Far too late we realize the toll putting off our own care has taken on our bodies, relationships, emotional and mental stability, and even our very lives. Our self-neglect sabotages the helping of our children.

It was hard to go back into those dark times in order to write this book. Yet through those times I learned that no matter how dark the journey gets, there is always hope. Healing didn't always fit my expectations or follow a straight path, but it came.

I tried to infuse this story with humor, but parts will be difficult or disturbing to read. Despite that, I hope it encourages you.

To those parenting a challenging child: You are not alone. If the trials and challenges sound familiar, maybe that can offer you hope – you can survive, no matter how hard it seems at times.

To the rest of you: I hope to give you a better understanding of what these



families go through. I hope you're encouraged to walk alongside a family that is working through hard times.

# Forward:

"Relationships are hard," my mom said, without further explanation.

I was sitting on the time-out chair in the dining room of my childhood home. My sister was planted firmly on her own chair at the opposite end of the hutch. Mom returned to the kitchen to finish making dinner.

We were supposed to be facing forward but every so often I would glance to the side to see my sister's tongue slip out of her mouth ever so slightly. She was always better than me at not getting caught. We were fighting moments earlier over a board game. I was seven and she was four.

I often desperately believed that life was unfair, and the world was tilted in favor of my sister. Every time I felt angry toward her, she would make me laugh. I tried to ignore her but eventually she would wiggle her ears or cross her eyes and a giggle would escape me.

My mom would warn from the other room, "That's enough girls, finish your time out and you can go back to playing." Part of me wanted to stay mad at my sister forever but as I glanced in her direction she smiled again, and I knew I wanted her as a playmate more than I wanted her as an enemy.

"Relationships are hard," my mom sighed when I came home crying in 4th grade because my best friend made a new best friend.

Carolyn was in the "gifted" class. Her classroom was adjacent to mine. I felt shame that I wasn't deemed gifted and spent my days looking longingly into the unknown world of the kids whose futures were more promising than mine.

At first, it wasn't a big deal that we were in different rooms. We saw each other

at recess and walked home together at the end of each day. As the year wore on, she had different classroom assignments and special field trips and I felt envious.

One day, I was waiting for her at the flag pole in front of the building to walk home. She was usually there first, so I looked around in surprise. Finally, I saw her about half a block down the road walking with someone else. I squeezed back tears and began the walk alone. I watched as she turned off at her driveway and waved to her new friend.

The tears unleashed, and I ran the rest of the way to my own kitchen table where I was met by the sympathy of my mother. I wanted to crawl under a rock and never return to school again.

My parents encouraged me to call Carolyn and tell her how I was feeling. They practiced with me a few times and then left the room so that I could stretch the phone cord as far into the dining room as it would go. I started by asking her if I had done something wrong. She responded that I hadn't. We talked for a few more minutes about school, her new friend and the sadness I felt. She apologized and invited me to join the two of them on the playground the following day.

It was difficult to widen my circle of friends, but the difficulty was worth it.

"Relationships are hard," my dad nodded as he stiffly patted my back.

A school bully had been slipping handwritten threats and insults into my locker at the high school. The girl didn't like that I had refused to move from "her" seat on the bus.

The weeks that followed were filled with anxiety as I was afraid to open my locker or enter the girl's bathroom alone. She followed me in the hallways whispering curse words under her breath.

I stood my ground and my dad was proud. "Keep it up, Kristin. You are doing the right thing." It was difficult, but the more I ignored this girl, the stronger I felt. Her threats lost power over me and I began to see her insecurity seep through the cracks in her exterior.

My fear turned to sympathy and my sympathy to compassion. I ignored her

invitations to fight and after a month she let it drop. I never formed a friendship with her, but I was able to walk the hallways of my school with my head held high.

"Relationships are hard," my mom soothed, "there are plenty of fish in the sea." I hated that statement.

I was 16 and my boyfriend had just dropped me like a bad habit. I hadn't seen it coming and I seriously thought that our 8-week romance was true love. I lamented that I would have no one to go to prom with.

I draped myself dramatically across the living room couch until my mom told me to shake it off. "I know it's tough, but you just have to get back out there. Don't let him know this got to you. You are pretty, smart, funny and kind. The right guy will come along one day." I sighed and squeezed out a few more tears, "You have to say that because you're my mom!" She rolled her eyes, "That's true, but the stuff I said was true, too."

I did end up finding the right "fish" eventually and we've been married for many years.

"Relationships are hard," my dad said, "but don't quit. Marriage is worth it." Then he squeezed my hand just before walking me down the aisle to my groom.

He was right. Marriage has been tough. Sharing a home and a life with someone is challenging, but also comforting, fun, joyful and safe. It took years to get into our groove as a couple, then as parents and now as business partners.

When I adopted my first child, I looked into her warm brown eyes, I felt her tiny fingers wrap around mine.

My heart filled with love and I thought this relationship could never be hard. It would be filled with unconditional love - nothing else. I went on to adopt seven more children and with each addition I thought the same thing. I believed I was born to be a mother. I knew I was going to shine at this role. I forgot about my own humanity and the humanity of my precious children. I almost forgot that relationships are hard. All of them.

Within the pages of this book, Jennie tells a story of a difficult relationship. She tells of her own hurting, her own successes and her own failures. She tells a story

that we all know in some way: Relationships are hard, but be encouraged, the tough things are also the most rewarding.

— Kristin Berry

Co-founder of [confessionsofanadoptiveparent.com](https://www.confessionsofanadoptiveparent.com)

## CHAPTER 1

# You're Going to Die

"If you don't get rid of your stressors, you're going to die," the doctor stated matter-of-factly.

"I CAN'T get rid of my stressors. They're adopted." I chuckled under my breath and looked up. She did NOT look amused.

"Two years ago, my husband and I adopted three children from foster care. They've experienced traumatic pasts, so they have a lot of issues and extreme behaviors that are stressful to deal with. Those are my main stressors, so there's nothing I can do about it."

"Well, you're going to have to figure out a way," she said.

Something in her eyes took me aback. I sat there, staring at the floor and then at her horn-rimmed glasses. Die? I was too tired to ask why she'd said something so dramatic. Her assessment seemed a bit extreme, and I tried to dismiss it. I wasn't quite sure what to think of the slightly disheveled woman sitting on the other side of the desk.

As she spoke, I let her words roll around in my head, and soon realized she wasn't far off. Anyone looking at me could tell I wasn't doing well. The person staring back at me in the mirror seemed more like a character in *The Walking Dead* than the vibrant person I once was. Who was the crazy lady looking back at me? The one yelling at her kids, tempted to "hug" them tightly around the neck?

At only 37 years of age I could barely walk across my small kitchen without getting winded and having to sit and rest. I weighed more than I ever had in my life. I was constantly forgetting things. My brain was in a fog. I turned from Dr. Jekyll to Ms. Hyde at a moment's notice, and was close to a nervous breakdown.

And the exhaustion! I never knew a person could experience that level of fatigue and still be alive. Having to muster the strength of Hercules just to get off the couch, I plodded through each day. I caught every flu bug or head cold that came my way and I was waking up six to eight times a night, never feeling rested. I didn't have the energy to care about anything.

I walked out of the doctor's office in a daze.

*Get rid of my stressors?*

I let my twisted sense of humor roam. The only way I could imagine ridding myself of stressors was to commit three counts of first-degree murder. While three square meals a day prepared by someone else and a room to myself sounded heavenly, prison wasn't the best fix.

*Decrease my stress?*

Brianna and Stephen, biological siblings, came to live with me and my husband, Lynn, two years before. Bri was now twelve and Stephen was ten. Parker, eleven, arrived six months after Bri and Stephen. Despite my husband's and my extensive training, experience and preparation, parenting these kids for the previous two years had proven way more challenging than anyone could have predicted.

I thought back to my first conversation with our kids' therapist, a year earlier.

"I feel like I've been in a war zone," I'd said. It was the only way I could describe it. She said, "You have."

## Olympic Parenting

While I had been fighting on behalf of my children for two years, trying to help them heal, their behavior toward me at times made me feel as though I were

battling against them. Their past taught them not to trust, so they pushed away anyone who would get close enough to hurt them. From day one I had been the primary target of the kids' rage.

I heard that parenting one severely traumatized child was equal to parenting ten typical children. I'd begun to tell people that parenting wounded children was like running in the Olympics instead of a high school track meet. I would never have said it out loud, but I thought it made typical parenting look like eating an ice cream cone on a sunny day in a beautiful meadow.

That Lynn and I became Olympian parents was surprising. Our biggest fight before we got married was how many kids we would have and whether we would adopt. I didn't want to adopt and wanted only three children. On the other hand, Lynn thought it would be great to have a whole brood of biological and adopted children. He loved watching shows like *Cheaper by the Dozen*. "Doesn't that look fun?" he'd say. I thought he was crazy.

At the same time, it wasn't a surprise God turned my heart toward adoption. According to my mom, at age of five I told her I was going to start an orphanage. And during every trip to the store, all the dolls "wanted to come home with me."

Lynn and I met while I was working at Life Promotions, a nonprofit organization, where I had the privilege of working on Lifest, a music festival that drew more than 20,000 people each year, and Power of One, a youth event attended by over 6,000 students and leaders.

Lynn was a Middle School Pastor at a large church in the area. Prior to that, he worked for five years with criminal offenders at a boy's ranch in New London, Wisconsin. There he experienced everything from having a teenage boy throw a table on him, grab a knife and threaten to kill himself, to transporting an extremely combative teen to a lock-up facility. He frequently joked, "I used to beat up kids for a living."

We met in October, were engaged in December, and married in June. I joined Lynn in middle school ministry for a couple of years until we felt God tugging at our hearts to work in a group home facility. After a careful search, we discovered a group home in Palm Beach Gardens named Place of Hope, where we helped open a shelter-care house for foster children.



## Becoming a Mom

Looking back, I realize that “it” happened during our time at Place of Hope. I didn’t know what it was, but I knew it hurt more than I could explain. Through hours of wiping these boys’ tears and seeing the effects of abuse they had endured, something stirred deep within me. It was as if my heart was walking outside my body, following each of these young boys.

Never had I experienced anything so unsettling. I had always cared about people, but this new level of caring left me feeling raw and vulnerable. I described the experience in an email update to family and friends. Sheri, one of my sisters-in-law, wrote back and explained it well.

“Congratulations! You’ve become a mom.”

There was no mistaking it. In those first months at the shelter, I became a mom. The children became mine. They invaded my heart, and their lives meant something more to me than a statistic or an idea.

The second little boy to enter the shelter, six-year-old Stephen, eventually became our son. Sporting Incredibles footed pajamas, a big, toothless smile, and a broken pinky, he had barely entered the house when he meted out instructions:

“I’m going to need a toothbrush, and toothpaste, and soap and...what are those little sticks with puff balls on the ends? I use them for my ears. Q-tips? I’m going to need Q-tips, and...”

It saddened me to see how matter-of-factly this child spoke about making sure his needs were met. He was a survivor, used to taking care of himself. Looking down at his bright, blue eyes and freckled face, I immediately felt a connection to him.

Stephen’s sister, Brianna, was two years older and lived on-campus, three houses down, in one of the homes for girls. They were removed from their parents when Stephen was born with drugs in his system. Brianna and Stephen spent six years in and out of foster care, often separated for long periods of time. Mom, on another drug binge, would leave them to fend for themselves for days on end.

Dad, drunk or high, abused the kids.

Place of Hope worked hard to bring Stephen from a boys shelter in another city, so he could live closer to his sister.

## 100,000 Kids in Need

Before working for Place of Hope, I had no understanding of the need for quality foster care homes or adoptive homes for legally free foster children. Few people ever talked about foster care.

There are more than 100,000 children in the United States who are unable to return to their biological families and are waiting to be adopted. Most of these kids are older, medically fragile, or part of a sibling group. By the time a child turns nine, their chances of being adopted are extremely small - typically because of their behavioral (or other) challenges.

Each year, more than 20,000 youth age out of the system. Statistics predict a bleak outcome for them. They are more likely to end up in prison or homeless than to finish high school. By age 22, only 54 percent will earn a high school diploma or GED. By 24, nearly 60 percent of the boys will be convicted of a crime. In California, more than 70 percent of those who spent time in the State Penitentiary had been in foster care.

We felt God calling us to change the outcome for at least a few children. We loved the kids at Place of Hope, but we wanted to make a more permanent impact. It didn't look like Stephen and Brianna would be returned home, so we called the social worker to let her know we were interested in adopting them if it became possible.

The court date for their mom and dad to lose parental rights was nearing, so the kids' social worker approached them to see if they'd be willing to voluntarily sign over their rights and they agreed. Their mom knew us and liked the idea of having contact with her children, even if it meant receiving only sporadic pictures. She knew that if she lost her rights she'd have no guarantee of any future contact.

## Getting Ready

Our original plan was to work at Place of Hope for another four years to save enough money to buy a house, but instead we left to move closer to Lynn's family in Washington State for added support. We moved in with Lynn's sister until we could find a home of our own and my parents could bring us the rest of our things.

As soon as we arrived, we jumped into the process of becoming foster parents, attending the 27 hours of mandatory foster parent training. I looked over a list of possible poor behaviors we could expect. We'd experienced many of them at the group home, but I wrote off the more severe ones.

"Surely the kids wouldn't do THOSE things!"

After all, we were a strong couple! I was sure our love would overcome any obstacles for these precious children.

We took eight hours of training in First Aid/CPR/HIV, sent in background checks, had fingerprints taken and filled out towering mounds of paperwork. We labored over an intrusive 13-page personal information form.

Having completed the licensing paperwork, we turned our attention to finding a rental home. Searching high and low, we finally found a nice, clean, three-bedroom home close to a park and middle school – itself a miracle. The landlord had recently lowered the rent because he hadn't received a call for weeks. The day after we settled on renting the house, he was inundated with calls from other people wanting it.

After we got the house set up, we stood nervously as the social worker went through our home, inspecting everything for potential safety hazards. We also spent time talking with her, as she delved deeper into the questions we answered in our paperwork.

The process of becoming foster parents was exhausting, yet nothing else mattered as we trudged on, wondering when the day we anticipated would finally come.

# Forever Homes

Along with adopting, we envisioned creating a nonprofit organization to train and support foster and adoptive families. The intensive training we had received at the group home helped tremendously. We knew families weren't adequately prepared for or supported in dealing with the behaviors and needs of severely traumatized children.

We appreciated how house parents at the group home provided such intense support for each other. We had learned much from veteran house parents. Being surrounded by others who understood what we were going through was extremely helpful and we wanted to recreate that same support for ourselves and others.

As soon as we arrived in Washington, I began the research for a nonprofit organization application, in addition to starting the licensing process. Spending hours at the Washington State University library, I documented the reasons foster and adoptive families needed additional support.

After I compiled what I hoped would be a compelling argument for the IRS to give Forever Homes nonprofit status, Lynn added more information to my research and we sent in the application.

We would have loved to work full-time for our newly founded organization, but we didn't have the money to do so. Lynn found a full-time job at the Boys and Girls Club doing tech support. It wasn't what he ultimately wanted to do, but we knew the state would not hand children over to a couple without an income.

While Lynn worked, I learned as much about parenting wounded children as I could. I read books, spoke with therapists, searched the Internet and attended any seminar I could.

I learned how deeply wounded children push others away so no one else can get close enough to hurt them again. After being abandoned so many times, they reject you before you have a chance reject and abandon them.

They especially push away the primary caregiver, as he or she becomes the target of their anger. They try to prove they don't deserve love or anything good, because they believe this about themselves.

I would soon learn firsthand just how accurate all this theory was.



## CHAPTER 2

# The Phone Call

We were licensed to be foster parents by November. Then all we could do was wait.

I hoped for the kids to come to live with us by Christmas. Visions of them joyfully opening brightly wrapped presents kept me anticipating the moment we would get the call.

Christmas came and went, and Christmas presents sat unopened in the closet.

The wait finally ended with a phone call the first week in February.

"Hello?" I said hesitantly.

"Jennie, this is Karen," she said, "Everything is ready for you to pick up Brianna and Stephen, so I'd like to get your travel arrangements set."

A couple of weeks later, Lynn and I flew a red-eye out of Seattle to pick up our kids. We arrived in Florida, exhausted but eager.

We spent the week at Place of Hope's guest cottage, connecting with the kids, their schools, the house parents, and the department, taking care of details and ensuring the children would feel safe traveling with us. The kids knew us at the group home, but hadn't seen us for more than six months. We needed time to become reacquainted.

Finally, we loaded the kids into a rental car and headed out. At the airport, Stephen refused to pay attention to Lynn, at times breaking into a full run in the middle of the airport hallway. I focused on Brianna. She sat quietly, deceptively compliant throughout the entire trip. Later I would discover she was listening

to incredibly inappropriate music the whole time. She was also wondering if we would beat them.

After a long and exhausting flight, a drive through the mountain pass from Seattle and a stop along the way to play in the snow, these two sweet children came to live with us.

When we arrived home, the kids squealed as they saw Captain, our Newfoundland dog. Captain had been quite a celebrity at the group home, and they were excited to call him their own. They checked out their rooms, shrieking in excitement as they explored their new home.

## The Honeymoon

For two weeks we kept the kids home from school. We enjoyed tickle wars, played capture the prisoner (they loved being chased), built forts, and had an all-family slumber party in the living room, complete with Milk Duds and a large-screen projector showing a movie on the wall.

Lynn took a week off from work and we tried everything we knew to bond with the kids. Chasing them around armed with Hershey's kisses we would fire into their mouths, emerged as their favorite silly game, while *Annie* became their favorite movie. They insisted on watching it over and over, and soon we were belting out *Together at Last* at every opportunity. It made me chuckle. I could see how vastly different adoption was from how it was portrayed in the movies.

The first Friday after the kids' arrival, Lynn and I took each one of the kids on a date.

Stephen and I had a blast at Chuck E. Cheese, wearing matching bright, lime green shirts Stephen had chosen.

Lynn took Brianna to a father-daughter ball put on by a local church. Brianna, who frequently chose to look like a little homeless girl, decided that she would only wear camouflage to the event, despite the 50's theme.

Being a good sport, Lynn walked his date around in brown and green while the other

fathers in dressier outfits showcased girls in poodle skirts and costume jewelry.

Brianna, refused to dance with him, and spent most of the night playing hide and seek with a group of girls that she met, while he sat alone at the table in his camo, trying to ignore the confused looks sent his way.

I was encouraged by how quickly Brianna's "homeless girl" routine dwindled. Soon after the Father-Daughter Ball, as we drove down the road, Brianna asked me, "Mom, do I HAVE to wear a dress to your friend's wedding?"

Thinking back to the recent camo scenario, I thought I'd be nice and not force a dress on her. "No, sweetie. You can wear a nice shirt and pair of pants."

Brianna started getting agitated. "But MOM, do I HAVE to wear a dress?!!"

Confused, I repeated myself, "No. You can just wear a nice shirt and pair of pants."

"But do I HAVE to wear a dress?" It sounded like a plea.

Finally, the light bulb went off in my head.

"Yes, Bri. You HAVE to wear a dress."

"Ok." I looked back at her in the rear view mirror. She relaxed back into her seat, a huge smile on her face, obviously glad to have finally heard the answer she wanted.

This was not the last time Brianna tried to get me to force her to do something that she already wanted to do. Countless times, uncomfortable with making a positive choice on her own, she created a scenario where our only option was to give her a consequence that put her exactly where she wanted to be.

Sabotaging her own success at times and keeping herself out of an uncomfortable situation at other times, Brianna complained to others that we didn't give her enough freedom, even though the situation was of her own making.

I could never figure out why she always got in trouble during lunch, which required her to stay in with the lunch staff to clean. I finally realized that she didn't trust herself enough to hang out with friends at recess, so she kept herself perpetually in trouble. That way, she could save face, staying safe with the adults and not having to go out and potentially make poor choices with her peers.



## My Little Porcupine

The depth of Brianna's anger took a while to surface. At first, she was somewhat compliant, although we noticed quite a bit of attitude from the beginning.

Once the honeymoon was over, the gloves were off, and the battle began. She wanted nothing to do with Lynn the first few months and communicated an intense dislike for me. Our days consisted of slammed doors, emotional outbursts, looks of contempt and deep-cutting jabs.

She made sure we knew she did NOT want to be there and did NOT want to be part of our family. I was NOT her mom and there was no way she would ever think of me that way. She was there because it was better than being at Place of Hope. Also, she lamented, she had no say in the matter.

As if in some strange, confusing dance, though she pushed me away, she never wanted to leave my side and demanded constant attention. She walked into the room like an industrial-sized, turbo vacuum stuck in the "on" position. Her neediness drained the energy from the room like a black hole.

Brianna constantly rolled her eyes and flipped her hair like a teenager. I got so used to the eye rolls I made a joke of it. She'd roll her eyes; I'd playfully freak out.

"Oh my gosh, there's something wrong with your eyes!"

She'd roll her eyes again.

"There it goes again! Look at that!"

Another eye roll.

"I think we need to take you to the hospital. Your eyes are going to pop out!" I'd say with a wink and a smile.

I figured I could either cry or laugh about it, although her rejection frequently made me feel like crying.

Her message was clear: "I'm only here until I turn 18. Then I'm out of here."

It seemed that her plan was to take us for whatever she could get until she could reunite with her birth mom. I was supposed to be her personal genie.

My function was to grant her every wish.

## Where's My Candy?

When Brianna first arrived, we had a big bag of Halloween candy her group home housemother had given us to keep for her. We decided to keep it in the master bedroom closet, so we could dole it out at healthy intervals.

A few weeks after her arrival, Brianna asked me, "Where's my candy?"

This sounded like a quiz.

"You already know where the candy is because you took it." I hoped my instincts were right.

Sure enough, the candy was missing from our bedroom closet.

Only days before Lynn overheard Bri and Stephen plotting to steal the key and break into our only locked cabinet, in which we kept money and everything we had of value. We were able to thwart that plan, but it wasn't long before other items began mysteriously disappearing.

We decided to install a locking handle on our bedroom door.

The kids watched as Lynn installed the lock. "Why are you doing that?" Stephen asked.

"I'm pretty sure you guys know why," Lynn replied.

I hated having to keep a key to my bedroom with me at all times, but it was better than having things stolen. Even with the lock, this bag of candy would not be the last thing stolen from our room.

Other than a few isolated incidents, Brianna was usually the culprit.

It felt as if Brianna were using both stealing and lying to test how observant and smart we were; as if she were asking, "Am I in control here? Can I outsmart you? Or am I safe with you because you can figure out what I'm doing?"

## Mom and Dad's Visit

While much more compliant than Brianna, Stephen loudly clamored for non-stop attention, constantly making noise and chattering. He was a touchy-feely kid, with his hands and much of his body constantly touching anyone in close proximity. He loved to have his face inches away from mine, clinging to my arm and breathing the air I was about to take in before I could get to it.

Stephen's attention-seeking behavior became more evident a month after they moved in, when my parents came to visit. The kids had made huge strides in the short time they had been with us and I was excited for my parents to meet them.

I was aware of Brianna and Stephen's unusual, challenging behaviors, but my parents' visit made them even more pronounced. As we attempted to sit down to dinner, the kids ran around the table like wild banshees, refusing to sit. Their manners, still atrocious, embarrassed me. We couldn't carry on a conversation without them constantly interrupting and talking nonstop. Seeing them behave more like wild animals than children, I realized even more vividly that my work was cut out for me.

Mom and Dad stayed for four days. My mom, who has the patience of a saint, would later confess that it was three days too long.

At the end of their visit, we took a picture of my parents with the kids. Mom was forcing a grin and my dad wasn't even attempting. The blood vessels in his neck were about to pop and his jaw was clenched more tightly than I'd seen in all my life.

Despite the difficulty for them, the visit had an encouraging outcome. Before, Mom had often tried to offer helpful parenting advice when I shared struggles on the phone. She'd say things like, "Well maybe if you didn't make Brianna clean her room she wouldn't act out so much."

After her visit, all she would say was, "I don't know how you do it."

My parents were now supportive resources and allies. Now, when I described difficult behavior, they knew exactly what I was talking about. That helped me to know I wasn't going crazy.

It was the first time I felt understood by someone besides Lynn. Even Lynn didn't

see how the kids treated me when he was gone. That made my parents more powerful allies for me than he was at times.

## Teaching Children to Play

I never anticipated having to teach children to play, but when Brianna and Stephen first moved in, that's exactly what I had to do. They struggled in doing anything on their own. It motivated me to find fun events to go to after school or on the weekends.

Having an event to provide structure for a while took some of the pressure off me. Even going to the park provided a little reprieve, although they still spent most of their time trying to get my attention.

When Brianna and Stephen had lived with us for two months, I took them to a local gymnastics center, determined to get what I thought would be a much-needed break. As we entered, I looked excitedly at the foam pit, ball pits, balance beams, trampoline, gymnastics rings, springboard, rope swing, and mini zip line.

I looked at the other parents, who were all kicked back, reading a magazine or playing on their phones.

*Finally! A place where the kids can play while I get a short breather.*

After getting the kids situated, I tried joining the other parents. That lasted all of two minutes.

"Mom! Look at me!"

"Come take a picture of me!"

"Mom! See what I can do!"

I looked around. Three, four and five-year-old children contentedly played, while my seven- and ten-year-old kids yelled the moment I looked away, "MOM! MOM! MOM! Watch me do this! MOM! Take a picture of me climbing this! MOM! See me?"

I was exhausted. I had given nearly constant attention for two months. Now, in a

place where I had hoped they would be able to entertain themselves, they yelled for my attention the moment I looked away. As I dragged my lips off the ground to engage with the kids, I found myself jealous of the other parents and embarrassed at being the only one having to supervise her elementary-aged children so closely.

What I didn't know at the time was that my children were going through a very normal phase, just not at the typical age.

## Emotional Age

Early on, I read about the need for children who'd been through trauma to experience bonding activities.

I learned that foods with lactose promoted bonding, which is why we fed the kids sweets like Hershey's Kisses. I spent thirty minutes of "mom time" with each child after school doing bonding activities. Sometimes this included feeding them ice cream, teaching them fun songs they'd never learned, like *Itsy Bitsy Spider*, or helping them express their difficult feelings.

In the beginning, Brianna would refuse to look at me. Since loving eye contact was an important part of bonding, I'd hold ice cream on a spoon until she looked. Instead of waiting long, I'd surprise her by playfully eat it, the quickly another spoonful and feed her the next bite.

At bedtime we'd often carry the kids to bed, swinging them around and singing "Rock-A-Bye Baby" on the way to their rooms. The nights we didn't, they begged to be carried.

I knew many of these activities were typically early childhood experiences but didn't think much of it. I practiced the recommended attachment techniques but didn't fully understand the role of emotional development at the time.

Part of the reason they needed those experiences was because wounded children's emotional age rarely matches their biological age. I didn't understand that those younger behaviors were normal and that wounded kids needed to fill in the gaps in their childhood. Through neglect, abuse, lack of stimulation, or in-utero damage, parts of the brain remained underdeveloped and needed to heal.

When my kids wanted every moment of my attention or to eat whatever I had, they were acting out their emotional age, which was somewhere in the toddler range. Even if they had their own pancakes, they wanted mine. They didn't want their drink; they wanted to drink out of my cup.

While most of the time it irritated me, I sometimes used it to my advantage. To get them to eat vegetables, I pretended to care if they ate "my" sugar snap peas. If they thought they were taking something I wanted, they gobbled it up.

We even had a joke about the mama bird feeding her baby birds. My kids would chirp at me, half-jokingly. As I ate a sandwich one day, Stephen stood in front of me and began chirping. I decided to have fun with him, so I spit the food into his mouth. After he recovered from the shock, I could tell by the look in his eyes that at that moment, I was the coolest mom on the planet.

## She Handed You Her Heart

A couple of months after our gymnastics venture, I was enjoying what precious little free time I had after the kids went to bed. Sitting in a comfy chair in the little office area next to the kitchen, I looked up to see a little girl coming toward me down the hallway.

"What's the matter, Brianna?"

A flood of sobs shook her whole body. I pulled her into my lap as the tears streamed down her face.

"I...pht...pht...miss...pht...pht...my...pht...pht...mom!"

I have never heard such crying. It was coming from a pain so intense I could only imagine what this child was experiencing.

"Oh, sweetheart! I can only imagine how hard that must be for you," I whispered into her ear.

Holding her tight, I rocked her, caressing her cheek and stroking her hair.

The wails of pain lasted more than thirty minutes. She continued to cry for a little while longer, then calmed and decided to go back to sleep.

The next day when I called the kids' Florida therapist, Cindy, to tell her what happened, she gasped.

"Jennie, I have worked with this girl for YEARS. She has NEVER cried! NEVER! Not even ONCE!"

"Really?!"

"Jennie, do you realize what just happened?"

"No," I sheepishly replied, still unsure of what the big deal was.

"This girl handed you her heart on a silver platter."

I wished I had known better how to handle the tender heart that had been handed to me.

## Our First Summer

Lynn and I learned early on that to heal, wounded children needed to do something fun every day, even if they didn't deserve it. It could be something as simple as letting them play with Legos or as elaborate as an outing. To help kids attach, I learned that mom and dad should be where the fun is, so I took that to heart.

In addition to fun being beneficial, I found the kids did better when I kept them busy and planned their every moment. With that in mind, I frequently planned a special activity for the kids right after school. Sometimes we played a board game. Sometimes I took the kids to the park, pushing them on the swings or chasing them around. We joined an athletic club with a pool, so the kids and I frequently went swimming after school.

That summer, the kids and I rode bikes everywhere. I usually had a destination in mind, like McDonald's for ice cream cones. Often, we rode to the park.

Because of the abuse they had endured, they were extremely hypervigilant; constantly on guard, scanning their environment for anything unsafe. Every bike ride, car trip, whether on bikes, or walk, began with an intense and panicked, "Where are we going?" and "What are we doing?"

If we were going to do something fun, I'd simply reply, "You don't need to know. Just trust me." Sometimes I would tell them, tin hopes of reducing their anxiety. While the hyper-vigilance was exhausting, it seemed to help when I created scenarios where they had to trust I would take care of them and they could see a positive outcome from doing so.

When we were walking, sometimes I made the walk fun by playing "follow the leader." I'd walk silly, dance, skip or wave my arms and they had to mimic everything I did. I found that playing this game of follow the leader helped the kids with bonding and made the trips more fun. At times, my background in youth ministry came to the surface and I'd jump out of the car and run around it when very few cars were around. They would talk about it for hours afterward.

We spent the summer constantly active and doing something: swimming at Aunt Lisa's pool, Chuck E. Cheese, going for walks, playing a board game, running through the sprinklers outside, and going to the library and park. At the park, I would play with them for a while and then attempt to read a book while they played. That usually didn't work since they spent the time trying to get my attention.

I planned out every moment, even though providing an insane amount of structure did not fit my personality. I scheduled the day in 30-minute increments, knowing exactly what I would be doing with them.

At home, I'd set up an art project, have them work on that for a while, then move them to a board game or reading a book they'd checked out at the library on one of our outings. Neither of the kids could read well, so I spent quite a bit of time reading to them. The non-stop activity was exhausting, but keeping them busy seemed to help prevent emotional outbursts.

That summer, we went camping as a family a lot. I loved camping with extended family because we had other people to help watch the kids. We had the extra responsibility of watching them with the younger kids, but at least there were more eyes.

By this time, Bri was getting much better about receiving love and attention. The kids loved playing in the woods with cousins and playing baseball with the



uncles and cousins. The boys pretended that the canoe paddles were guns and played army in the woods.

While camping, I had to watch Bri to make sure she was interacting in healthy ways with any male in the vicinity. I watched both kids to make sure they were not going off with another family.

Neither child displayed an ounce of stranger-danger, a trait very common to children with attachment issues. Both kids would walk right up to a stranger and stand very close to them, as if they were family. If we were present, the kids would stand closest to the strangers and as far away from us as possible. Someone walking into the situation would have incorrectly assumed the kids belonged to the stranger's family. It was stressful trying to keep them safe.

## Adoption

When Brianna and Stephen first moved in, we didn't force them to call us Mom and Dad. At Place of Hope we were called "Miss Jennie" and "Mr. Lynn," so we allowed them that option.

It didn't take Stephen long to call us Mom and Dad, but Brianna wanted to be clear she did NOT see us as her parents.

That July, as the adoption date neared, I figured I'd better move it that direction.

One day I decided to have a little bit of fun with her.

"Miss Jennie," she said, trying to get my attention.

I pretended not to hear her.

"MISS JENNIE!"

Again, I pretended to have lost my hearing.

"MOM!" she yelled, exasperated.

"Why, yes, Brianna," I said, looking over at her with a playful smile, "What do you need?"

It didn't take many of those silly interactions for her to start calling me Mom.

We finalized Brianna and Stephen's adoption at the end of August, a little over the mandatory six-month wait after they moved in with us. My parents flew in for the festivities and marveled at how far the kids had come so quickly.

"These aren't the same children we met five months ago," my mom said.

Both sets of grandparents went with us to the kids' adoption proceeding and joined us at IHOP to celebrate.

Later that night, twenty-five others came to our house for an adoption party. Lynn led a little ceremony where we gave the kids rings to symbolize being part of the family. We gave each of them a scrabble board, which I had filled with positive affirmations.

After the ceremony, everyone milled around the house talking and wrote encouraging notes to the kids, placing them in the wooden mailboxes the kids had painted.

After their adoption was finalized, Brianna and Stephen suddenly seemed to settle in. It seemed to help them feel that they belonged. I was amazed at how much progress seemed to be made in such a short time, and I was thrilled to see the kids respond positively to the idea of us adding another child.



## CHAPTER 3

# Meeting Parker

I will never forget the day we met Parker.

Since Brianna and Stephen came from Florida, they were assigned two social workers, one in Florida and one in Washington. We had grown close to Megan, their Washington social worker.

Megan had been telling me about Parker for months. His case was so dangerous that she couldn't even put his picture on websites that feature kids available for adoption. She brought him up casually in conversation from time to time, and his story pulled on my heartstrings.

My heart also went out to the social worker as she expressed concern as to whether she could find a home for this little boy without access to any of the normal channels.

Lynn and I asked friends and family to pray about the situation. Neither of us realized we would end up being the answer to those prayers.

We had no intention of adding more children to the family anytime soon. We planned to adopt children younger than Stephen, but figured it would be a long time before we would even consider it.

Four months after Bri and Stephen came to live with us, the social worker begged us to take Parker overnight. She was trying to get respite every weekend for him, trying to appease the foster parents and prolong his stay until she could find a permanent family. Reluctantly, we agreed to help.

When Parker walked in I noticed the cheap, old gym shorts that clad his

incredibly skinny legs. He wore a slightly dirty t-shirt that looked too small for him. Though he was ten years old, he looked to be only six.

While his body looked young, his empty and vacant eyes lacked any signs of feeling or life. Without a hint of a smile, his face displayed a scary indifference. I felt as if I was seeing the picture of a kid on TV who'd just perpetrated a school shooting.

The moment he stepped into the house I whispered into Lynn's ear, "If someone doesn't help this kid, he's going to end up in prison."

Despite Parker's challenging behaviors, two hours into his time with us I began to get that all-too-familiar tug on my heart. Hoping it was heartburn rather than God speaking, I held onto the thought until Lynn and I were alone.

The next day, the social worker came to pick Parker up, and Lynn and I dropped the other two off with Grandma before driving off for our first weekend away since the kids had come to live with us.

"What do you think about Parker?" I acted as nonchalantly as I could.

"I think we're supposed to adopt him." My heart sank as his matter of fact tone confirmed my suspicion.

"I thought it was just my compassion running away with me. Are you sure this is God?" I hoped he would change his answer.

Lynn turned toward me, his voice serious yet full of compassion. "Jennie, you know God's voice."

I did know God's voice, but that didn't make this decision any easier.

While I knew in my heart God had asked us to bring this little boy into our home, I kept whining to Him, "Why me, God? I'm already exhausted. Why me?"

Every time, the same answer came.

"Who else, Jennie? Who else?"

"I can't do this, God." I felt like I'd already run a marathon and was being asked to run even further.

"I know, but I can," I heard in a silent whisper.

Some may say that adopting three older, wounded children so close together wasn't the wisest thing anyone has ever done. I would be the first to agree. In fact, if someone came to me and laid out a plan like the one we followed, I would warn them against it. With that said, I can truly say that we were simply following God's leading, despite how utterly crazy it seemed.

## Parker Moves In

The first night Parker came to live with us, a family member called Lynn to ask if he'd help with a computer problem.

"Sam needs my help with his computer," Lynn said.

"Wait. What?? You can't leave me alone with this kid on his first night. He's tough."

"You'll be fine. I'll take the other two, so you won't have to deal with them too."

Despite my protests, he took Stephen and Brianna and left me alone with this deeply troubled little boy.

After an already challenging night, I asked Parker to take a shower. Surprisingly, he complied right away. Soon he was in the bathroom with the shower running.

After 15 minutes, I called through the door, "Parker, it's time to get out."

No sound came from inside except the running of the water.

Unsure of what to do, I repeated the same instruction every 10 minutes. As the shower ran, I brainstormed possible solutions. What was I supposed to do with a naked little foster boy who, after the night's oppositional behavior, seemed to be taking an incredibly long shower to tick me off?

More than an hour into Parker's "shower," I'm sure he was no closer to having put any kind of soap or shampoo on his body, yet the water still ran.

Unsure of what to do, I called Lynn. "What should I do? He's been in the shower for over an hour."

"Get him out of there!" I could hear the irritation in his voice.

"How? He won't even respond when I talk to him. Can I physically remove a naked little foster child from the shower? I'm not sure what I legally CAN do!"

Within 20 minutes, Lynn came home and immediately went to the bathroom door, mad.

"You have 10 seconds to cover your body with a towel," he barked through the door.

After counting down from 10, he opened the door, picked up Parker, who was luckily draped in a towel, and set him in his room. With an hour and a half shower out of the way, Parker was finally out of the bathroom.

That night, lying in bed, I thought, "*Well, I suppose I could have done that.*" I'd been so afraid of getting into trouble. Foster parenting classes don't teach you how to get a child out of the shower.

## I Love You Too Much to Argue

Within a few weeks of moving into our home Parker's behaviors were so extreme that the school had to place him half days in a classroom for behaviorally challenged children. He spent the other half in the traditional classroom.

At home, he'd follow me around, arguing over ridiculous things.

"Parker, I'd like you to pick up the food you just dropped on the floor."

"Why should I have to do that?"

"Why do you think I'm asking you to pick it up?" I'd ask, returning his question with a question.

"Because I dropped it, but I don't see why I have to pick it up."

"Sweetheart, I love you too much to argue." I'd learned that phrase in the book, *Love and Logic*. I was trying to be patient, but I could feel myself gearing up for the "War of the Worlds" to last the next 45 minutes. "Just do what I've asked you to do."

"But why do I have to pick it up?"

"I love you too much to argue."

Pointing at Brianna and Stephen, he'd say, "THEY don't have to pick it up. Why should I?"

"What did I ask you to do?"

"You asked me to pick up the food, but I don't see why I should have to."

"Parker, I love you too much to argue."

"But why do I have to pick it up?"

At this point, I'd ignore him, hoping the fact I'd begun dusting the furniture would make it clear I was not going to be pulled in to his argument.

"This isn't FAIR!" His volume would escalate as he followed me around the house, practically tripping me by following so close.

"I'm sure this is tough for you, buddy." I tried to ooze empathy but felt harassed.

I'd head toward my room, hoping he'd give up and stop following me.

"But why do I have to pick it up? Why don't YOU pick it up?"

"I love you too much to argue," I'd say for the 180th time, closing the door behind me and leaving him outside my room to scream. I needed to get away for a moment.

I knew that arguing with a wounded child makes them feel unsafe, as if power is up for grabs, but what I wanted to say was, "Shut the h@#% up!" Eventually he'd do what I'd asked him to do, but not before I wanted to wring his neck.

## Tough Kid

When given instructions, Parker would insist he did not hear what we'd just said, becoming agitated or starting to yell if we didn't repeat ourselves. If I did repeat my instructions, he'd say, "Thank you for telling me what I didn't already know," his voice oozing with snarky, sarcastic glee.



I'd look over to see a celebratory grin on his face and felt like I'd been had.

Parker insisted we listen to his constant chatter, becoming frustrated if we didn't listen to every detail of a book he wanted to describe. He asked silly questions he knew the answers to and insisted that I answer each time. When I didn't, he either tried to pull me into an argument or threw himself on the floor in hour-long temper tantrums and wailing meltdowns. If I sent him to his room, he threw and kicked things, screaming at the top of his lungs, sometimes for hours. I thought the screaming would never stop.

The most frustrating part of the whole thing was that hour after hour, I endured his tirades; then, as if it were a bizarre, psychotic dance, the second I showed a hint of frustration, Parker would crumble to the ground in the fetal position, throw his arms in front of his face, squeal and wail as if I were about to beat him. It made me so mad that if I hadn't felt like beating him before that, I certainly did then. And then I felt like a monster for wanting to harm him.

Even on good days, I had to limit the number of questions Parker was allowed to ask or they never ended. After he had asked the allotted number of questions, I simply told him he was done and tried to ignore the rest.

The incessant questions were likely related to the fact he was on the autism spectrum – something we didn't discover until he was 17 because it was masked by trauma. Since he was emotionally young, much of his life centered around himself. He may have been trying to connect with us by talking about something he already knew.

During the challenging times, it was only my commitment to God that kept me going. I knew He called me to parent this child and I wanted to do what He asked of me, but I was mad.

In the middle of the chaos, I told God, "The LAST time I listened to you, you did THIS to me! I'm not talking to you anymore!" I didn't realize that in doing so, I was cutting myself off from God's power to do the job.

## Star Chart

In the beginning, as I saw no change on the horizon, it didn't take long to need something more than relating to Parker to give me a feeling of accomplishment.

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In the middle of tantrums, constant questions and arguing, it was difficult to continue giving firm, loving structure and nurture.

One day, I looked at Lynn. "I need to get something good out of handling his outbursts well, because right now I don't even WANT to be patient and loving!"

I decided to do a star chart.

Growing up, I loved stickers and star charts. As a child I collected stickers, especially the scratch and sniff kind. At school or church, seeing that gold star next to my name made my heart swell with pride. I loved the sense of accomplishment!

While typical star charts and motivational methods may not work with some wounded children, I created a twist that helped me. The next time Parker was thrashing around, wreaking sheer havoc, I said, calmly and with a smile on my face, "Thanks for giving me a star, Parker."

"WHAT?!" Parker paused his meltdown.

"Hey, Lynn! I just got a star!!" I yelled across the house.

"Cool! I can't wait to get one!" Lynn yelled back.

Seeing that I wasn't getting upset, Parker stopped his fit. Obviously agitated, he looked up at me. "What do you mean I gave you a star? I don't know what this is all about, but I'm going to stop what I'm doing so you don't get anything out of this. I do NOT want you to get a STAR!"

He quickly calmed and pulled himself together.

We continued to use our star chart for a couple of months. When we handled his difficult behavior well and didn't lose our cool, we gave ourselves a star on the star chart I purchased from the dollar store and followed with a reward after collecting so many.

In the end, this helped to decrease Parker's poor behaviors and lightened the atmosphere at the house. We weren't becoming as agitated or angry, because we knew we'd be getting something out of handling difficult situations well. This allowed us to respond more calmly and therapeutically.

Most importantly, it caused me to realize that my success in parenting Parker did not depend on his behavior. It came down to mine.

I wanted to be a successful mom, and each time I parented without anger or agitation was a success. Every moment I could look at Parker with loving eyes, patiently redirect him or provide empathy with his struggles was an achievement. My sense of being a good parent came from loving my child well, despite his response. My success was based on my choices, which I could control, rather than his behaviors, which I could not.

**This is the end of the preview. You can find links to purchase the entire book at:  
<https://dancingwithaporcupine.com>**