

# Tales of love and hate

Relatively little is known about the experience of disabled children who have been fostered and adopted. But in an investigation for *Disability Now* **Annie Makoff** discovers a mixed bag of experiences from the abusive and Dickensian to stories of love and liberation

**T**he British Association of Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) estimate that as of March 2011, 65,520 children were under the care of the local authorities, and of these, 56 per cent were boys and 41 per cent were girls.

Yet when it comes to disabled children, we have no such statistics. At best, the Fostering Network estimate that around one quarter of looked-

after children have a disability or multiple disabilities.

Twenty-seven-year-old Tara Hewitt who has a hearing impairment was one of these children.

Deaf in one ear, profoundly dyslexic and diagnosed five years ago with gender dysphoria when she was a young adult transitioning, Tara never knew her birth parents: she was adopted at birth.

Her adoptive parents constantly told her there was “nothing wrong” with her hearing, even though she saw a speech therapist for a short time and to adapt, Tara learnt to lip read.

But Tara could not adapt to the feeling of being the wrong sex. From an early age she knew she was “different” and never felt comfortable conforming to the male stereotype.

Her internal struggles with her





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time in the garage.”

Despite the various professionals involved in Tara’s care, including her child psychologist and her educational welfare officer, no one picked up on what was going on at home.

“I was too young to see a child psychologist on my own for some reason,” Tara recalls, “so my adoptive dad used to sit in with me. I couldn’t tell my psychologist what was really going on and what was going on specifically with my dad, because he was always there.”

Even when neighbours complained after Tara and her younger sister were often left to fend for themselves in the garage whilst their parents went out for the day, nothing was done.

“Because we were a middle-class family in a semi-detached house in Cumbria, social services just stopped investigating the complaints,” Tara says.

Unlike most children brought up in an abusive environment and all but ignored by social services, Tara responded instead by throwing herself into her studies. She worked her way up academically even though every year her father’s new job took them to a different area of the country and she attended five different secondary schools.

For Tara, doing well at school was her only way of escape. She did so well that teachers had to give her extra work to do because she’d worked her way through all the textbooks. After getting GCSEs she taught herself four A-levels from home and gained good enough grades to study law at university.

Throughout it all, it was Tara’s adoptive grandparents who were there for her, even though they turned a blind eye to the abuse. They took her on holiday and spoilt her more than the other grandchildren.

“I know they loved me completely,”

she says. “But my grandad who passed away last year, told me once that if all the grandchildren were in danger and he could only save one, he’d save one of the other grandchildren because they were blood related and I wasn’t. It hurt but I understood.”

**“All I had in my bedroom was a bed and a wardrobe. I wasn’t allowed a duvet. I had to eat my meals in the kitchen but other than that I wasn’t allowed in the house unless I stripped down to my underwear”**

Tina Drake had an equally difficult experience. But unlike Tara whose disabilities and mental health difficulties seemed to start from birth, Tina believes that her condition – clinical depression and suspected borderline personality disorder – was triggered as a result of the trauma she experienced.

“I was in and out of foster care between nine and 16,” Tina recalls. “My family had alcoholism issues and the social services thought it was best for me to be taken into temporary accommodation. It was never meant to be permanent, they thought if they gave my mum chances to stop drinking she’d listen and I could go back home, but it never worked out like that.”

Tina describes the first two homes she was placed in as “homely, kind places”. Yet at 11 years old she was sent from London to live with a foster carer in Margate, Kent where she was to stay for two and a half years.

“My foster carer was emotionally and psychologically abusive to us,” Tina says. “I was never physically abused, though I witnessed her throttling one girl and burning her

gender identity and her disability were against a background of what Tara describes as a “messed up family”.

“I had an abusive childhood,” she says. “My adoptive parents divorced when I was nine so I went to live with my adoptive dad and his new wife. All I had in my bedroom was a bed and a wardrobe. I wasn’t allowed a duvet. I had to eat my meals in the kitchen but other than that I wasn’t allowed in the house unless I stripped down to my underwear. My clothes were all chosen for me, too. I wasn’t allowed friends round and I had to spend most of my





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**“I was never physically abused, though I witnessed her throttling one girl and burning her hand with hair straighteners. She made our lives a living hell”**

hand with hair straighteners. She made our lives a living hell. We were always hungry because she fed us on as little as she could get away with and dressed us in the cheapest of clothes, so I was always bullied at school. She stole money from social services that was meant for us and spent it on herself and told the social services that we were problem children so they'd pay her more.”

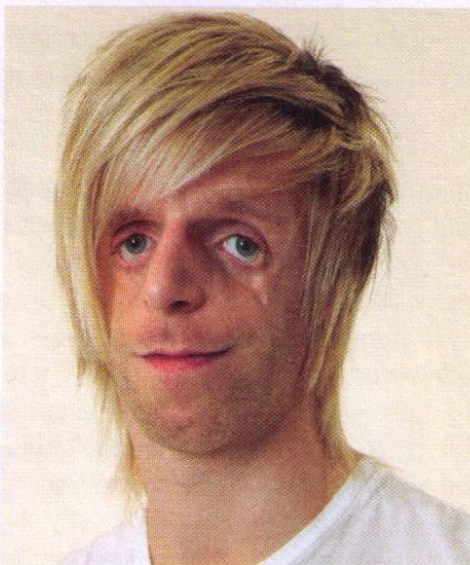
Even though Tina ran away four times, social workers failed to pick up on what was happening.

“She had been fostering for so long that I guess the social workers trusted her over us. She was an accomplished liar and she used to sell cannabis and alcohol to anyone who came to the house. She used to offer it to my mum

when she visited because she knew she was an alcoholic.”

Graduating recently with a law degree and now awaiting an official diagnosis and treatment for borderline personality disorder, Tina is able to be philosophical about her past.

“Looking back, I'm quite angry that social workers didn't take more notice of us,” she says. “It was obvious we were being neglected and treated badly. Obviously, any experience in



care is going to leave a young person with emotional and psychological issues. It certainly did with me.”

Yet as Jono Lancaster (*pictured below*) discovered, being placed under the care of a local authority doesn't necessarily mean a difficult childhood. Born with a congenital facial disfigurement due to Treacher Collins syndrome, Jono was taken into care from birth because his parents couldn't cope with his disability.

Although he didn't find out “the brutal truth” until he was a young adult, Jono always knew he was adopted.

“My adoptive mum was only meant to foster me initially,” Jono explains. “She was a single parent on low income so in those days she wasn't able to adopt me officially. She took me home when I was two weeks old and I never left. Mum was in her 40s then and most people that age just think about relaxing, but she didn't. She took me on, despite not knowing the extent of my disabilities. Then there was a change in the law and when I was five



she adopted me officially. We still celebrate it to this day."

Jono describes his childhood as a warm, happy place where there were always other foster children about who were well cared for. Yet as he grew older, Jono wanted to find out the truth about his adoption. He wanted to let his birth parents know that he was doing well and he was happy. Yet the truth was more painful than he ever imagined.

"I'd convinced myself that they gave me up for the right reasons – that they wanted me to have a better life," he explains. "But when I found my adoption papers it said that they were horrified at the sight of me so they discharged themselves from hospital."

"It went on to say that there had been several attempts to send my birth

parents pictures of me but they weren't interested. It was heartbreaking. I was absolutely devastated. I always had low self-esteem issues growing up because of my face and this was the ultimate

**“There was a change in the law and when I was five she adopted me officially. We still celebrate it to this day”**

rejection. If my own parents couldn't love me, how could I expect a girl to?"

Despite what he had read, Jono was determined to initiate contact with his birth parents in the hope that they had changed. But the only reply he received was a formal letter stating:

"We do not wish to be contacted again, all further contact will be ignored."

Despite this, Jono's confidence has increased immeasurably. He has been the subject of television documentaries, he's been a model and he now lives with his girlfriend in a long-term relationship.

"I'm proud to be adopted," Jono says. "People always stare and laugh at me and at school they'd put two and two together and say I was adopted because I was ugly, but now I love being different. I love standing out. And when I think about my birth parents, I really wish them well. It wasn't always like that, I used to feel so angry towards them, but now I'm genuinely pleased they created me." ■

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