

Parenting at a Distance

When my adopted son went back into care in July 2021 I felt like my world had ended. I had been forced to beg social services for a section 20 because I was at the point of complete physical and mental collapse having tried to keep him home when there were significant complex issues, and years of violent outbursts and absconding with the police returning him home. His diagnosis is attachment disorder and trauma.

A placement was found for him at a group home about an hour's drive away. My first thought on talking to the manager was how much information he was ready to absorb – my son's likes and dislikes, his hobbies, his strengths, and things he struggled with. He took details about family, pets, friends, and school. Our first visit was for dinner and the staff were welcoming and the home felt like a proper home, not a cold and clinical children's home. It was cheery, nicely decorated and there were no bars on the windows. On moving him in, I was encouraged to bring as many of his belongings as he wanted – he chose to bring pretty much everything he owned, leaving very little behind. At that point he was feeling incredibly rejected.

The staff were amazing, they allowed him to decorate his room and arrange the space to his taste. He had all the familiar things from home including bedding and crockery (his spiderman mug and cereal bowl). Over the next 6 months I visited every Saturday morning. I rocked up at 10am and was greeted by a friendly face, staff offering me support and making me feel welcome. The reaction from my son was completely contrasting; he would lock himself in his room, refuse to speak to me and, in turn, scream obscenities at me through the door. Coupled with the abusive text messages that I would get from him it was incredibly difficult. The staff at the home continued to maintain a positive message around me and my visits and there was always someone available to support me when the tears flowed. And they did. Regularly.

The staff kept me in the loop – every meeting, every visit from a professional connected with us, every incident and every major decision included me. It left me feeling pretty deflated about my ability to parent him at home until it was pointed out that there were double numbers of staff in the home and always 4 on duty plus, they could leave at the end of the day to recharge and take a break. I should add the home has 4 young people at any one time, never more.

For me, parenting from a distance has been about teamwork. The home and I supporting each other, providing the same messages to my son and reinforcing each other as jointly responsible for his wellbeing. This has been critical when he has tried to get his own way by playing us off against each other. My relationship with him has changed – gone are the little daily fights like brush your teeth or put your dirty dishes in the kitchen. I no longer need to ask him if he has done homework or hung his wet towel up. Now I can focus on enjoying our time, making it meaningful despite feeling a little unnatural and contrived.

We are now able to spend quality time together, it started with short periods of time in the house. The staff were great at allowing us space and privacy but also being present in case I needed support. We would bake cakes and cookies, play games and do craft activities like pumpkins. With time this period got longer, and we started going out more – he let me take him shopping, the cinema and, after nearly 2 years, for food. There were more tears at that point, it had been 2 years since we had eaten a meal together and it felt like a huge breakthrough.

3 years later, my son remains in the same placement, we have been lucky that he has been able to remain there. There has been staff turnover but I continue to be grateful for their willingness to communicate with me regularly and for their ability to include me in the decision making processes and daily instances of his life, despite the distance.

Positive experience of parenting at a distance by Lorraine.