

*Engaging Youth. Building Supports. Strengthening Opportunities.*



Fifteen years ago, I became a parent in one of the most unusual ways possible. At the time, I was working for a child welfare agency and was part of a project that sought to find families for teenagers living in group homes. At a meeting, I saw a video of an 18-year-old young woman (who I will call Jessyca) talking about why she wanted to be with a family, and something about her struck me. Having worked in child welfare for several years at that point, I had considered that fostering might be part of my life eventually, but it was not in my short-term plans. Despite that, the following week I went to a meet-and-greet event for foster parents and youth that I was told Jessyca was attending to see if we would naturally click. Jessyca's shyness made that difficult, so a colleague ended up introducing us, letting her know that I had come to meet her. Jessyca's first questions to me were about what her curfew would be and whether her boyfriend could sleep over—and with that, I was her mom.

Starting a parent-child relationship at 18 is both surprisingly easy and indescribably difficult. On the one hand, you don't need to arrange for child care, teenagers can feed themselves, and I could still have something of a social life, which was important for maintaining my sense of self. On the other hand, I was thrown into 2 a.m. texting, her romantic drama, navigating my relationship with her family of origin, and, once our "honeymoon" phase was over, lots of conflict between us. There were many nights when I got home from work and sat outside in my car for an hour or more to avoid the stress that was waiting for me inside.

From the beginning, I had told Jessyca that I considered her my daughter regardless of our legal status and that her turning 21 (when youth age out of foster care in our State) would not change anything. My house was *our* home. Despite my assurance, the year between her 20th and 21st birthdays was one of our most difficult, perhaps because she had trouble trusting what I was telling her. It was during this year, when we went through long stretches of silence, that she gave me one of the best Christmas presents I have ever received: a mug of Eeyore (my favorite A.A. Milne character) to match a mug of Winnie-the-Pooh (her favorite character) that she got for herself. Whenever I look at that mug, I am reminded that even when things were so hard between us, she knew that we were connected.

After more ups and downs in the subsequent years (happily more ups than downs, as time went on), Jessyca, at age 25, decided that she wanted to be adopted. People are always surprised when I tell them that, asking why someone would want to be adopted as an adult. My response is always "Why do people get married when they could just live together?" For some people, having that legal recognition of their relationship, and having their loved ones join them in recognizing that relationship, is incredibly meaningful, as it was for us.

There was a long road between those evenings when I sat in my car alone and when we sat together in a judge's chamber surrounded by our closest friends and family. I know that first commitment I made to

Jessyca—that I was her mom—was central to getting us there. That’s another parallel to marriage, that sometimes it is having made the commitment that gets you through the hard times. We just passed the 8-year anniversary of our adoption. In those 8 years, life has thrown many things at both of us—illness, loss, COVID-related stress and isolation, and another adoption (this time with a tween)—but like Pooh and Eeyore, we remain family.



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