

Ariel finds a friend

This little girl has at last found some stability, routine and love in her life

Two years ago I took a six-year-old girl called Ariel into my home. At that stage I didn't know anything more about her than that she was diagnosed at birth with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome because her mother drank during her pregnancy. Her mother lives in the same street as us which is unfortunate because Ariel doesn't like to see her or meet up with her in the supermarket or when we are out shopping.

Ariel is a lovely little girl and very affectionate but her brain seems to work like a faulty wire going over a speed bump. For a while everything works well and then when we go over a speed bump, the wires become dislodged with the movement and then everything she's learned seems to fly out the window.

For instance she knows how to operate the television and video but I saw her the other day with a video in her hand looking blankly at the video player. I asked her 'What's wrong, honey?' She said, 'I can't remember which way to put the video in, Mama, I'm silly aren't I?'

Another time we had visitors and I think she became overwhelmed with all the excitement but when she told me she wanted to go to bed and came over to kiss me, instead of walking up the stairs to her bedroom, she walked into the laundry. I let her go for a few minutes and then went in to see what she was doing. When I asked her she said, 'I forgot what I had to get from the laundry, Mama.' And I said, 'Honey, there was nothing you had to get from the laundry, you were going to bed.' 'Oh,' she said, 'I'm a silly billy, aren't I, Mama?' And she went off to bed.

She can't remember how to eat sometimes either or ride a bike – at least not consistently. One day she can do these things and the next day it's like she has completely forgotten everything she knows. It's sad watching her but I think she is gradually getting better.

She loves her nan and pop (her father's parents) and her dad but she is too much for them and they can't handle her. For a time before she came to me she went to her aunty and uncle but they couldn't cope with her either so DOCS* sent her to me. That was two years ago and I now have her until she is eighteen years old. After that time I hope she will remain with me because I'm not sure if she will be able to live independently. I would like to foster more children particularly children with disabilities because they are so often overlooked by people wanting to foster or adopt.

Ariel's mother is sober at the moment. She is not allowed to visit Ariel or visit us unless she is. She is nice when she is sober but when she has a few drinks her personality changes and if she is on the phone at the time then she will put her boyfriends on the phone to talk to Ariel. I don't want that to happen because it unsettles Ariel and I certainly don't want her exposed to the boyfriends face to face. She sees Ariel once a month but it is always supervised because no one knows what she will do or who will be there with her.

I don't drink now at all although once when I did have one of those little bottles of Kahlua and milk or whatever, Ariel was surprised when I only had one. She said, 'You didn't get drunk, Mama?' I said, 'No I didn't, Ariel, does it bother you when someone gets drunk?' She asked, 'You don't want to get drunk like Mum and them do you?' I felt

sad that my little girl had been exposed to this and said, 'No love, I don't get drunk.'

*Department of Community Services

I could see that she really needed to feel secure, cared for and loved and must have felt very anxious about what was going to happen when I started drinking because she was thinking back to what used to happen when her mum drank. I have never had another drink.

We have an exciting house with twelve puppies at the moment, two dogs, five birds, a cat and an itinerant rabbit. Ariel seems to enjoy all the animals around her.

She will never be a mastermind but she loves to make people happy. Of course this could create huge problems for her too but at the moment it is good. She has special tutoring at school and she is in a special needs class which has smaller groups than an ordinary classroom. She enjoys doing her homework but she has trouble with maths.

Last week she had to colour in a butterfly for homework which had numbers in each section of the butterfly that corresponded with the colours she was supposed to use. She read out the numbers and then read out the corresponding colours correctly so I thought I could leave her alone for a couple of minutes while I started dinner but when I came back she had coloured the butterfly using completely different colours to the ones she was supposed to use. When I asked her why she used the wrong colours she said she didn't know.

A few weeks ago I went to a Fetal Alcohol Syndrome conference in Sydney at the Westmead Hospital and found out a few more things about FAS. I also heard Elizabeth present and after listening to all the speakers present, I think the butterfly thing was because her corpus callosum has been damaged – she can recite what needs to be done but can't actually do it.

Another thing she used to do and thank God she doesn't do it anymore was pick her nose until it bled. There has been blood all over the inside of the car, all over her doona, blankets and sheets. It was awful but she seemed to just stop it one day and never started it again.

I know people don't really understand or believe me when I say she is difficult to handle sometimes. If she met someone first off she would be perfect. She would speak well and act like an angel. She said to me once that she is scared that if she doesn't act perfectly when she meets someone new they won't like her and won't want to see her again.

One thing that was very frightening and upsetting while she was doing it was that she became obsessed with touching my breasts and 'down below'. This started once when she came back from visiting relatives. It went on for months and months and I just couldn't get her to stop. I asked for help from her DOCS worker and the counsellor but they couldn't get her to stop. It was very embarrassing and made me fearful of hugging her which I did not want to be. In the end I did the only thing that I hadn't tried and that I didn't really want to do but there seemed to be no other choice. I said to her, 'Honey, if I did those things to you and touched you in those places, the police would have to come and take me away from you. I don't want to but if you keep doing those things to me I will have to call the police.' She stopped straight away and I was so relieved, it had been a very challenging time but now I can hug her without having to worry about anything like that happening again.

When I told the DOCS officer they said the reason she did it was because she just didn't understand but I thought it must have been because it had happened to her. So the officer said she would discuss it with her but when the officer asked Ariel if she knew what boobs or breasts were, Ariel said 'No.' So the officer didn't follow it up. When Ariel and I left the office I said to her, 'Ariel, why didn't you tell the truth that you know what boobs and breasts were?' She said, 'Mama, I didn't want her not to like me.' She knows what to do to make people like her and that scares me.

There is definitely no help out there for people like myself and people like Ariel with FAS. Going to that presentation in Sydney helped a lot but basically so many people don't know about the condition who really should know about it because they are the ones who are helping people like me look after people like Ariel.

Sometimes I just don't know what to do. I think Elizabeth's books will help a lot.