

Fostering children from indigenous communities

This family has welcomed children into their hearts and homes for many years.

My husband and I foster children from indigenous communities and have done so for many years. We have a respectful and functional relationship with the leaders of these communities and will often take time out to visit their communities with our foster children, staying in the homes of the older community members.

Over the years that we have fostered children, some of them have had obvious FASD and some have had diagnosed FAS. One little girl I have at the moment was diagnosed by a paediatrician and maternal drinking was confirmed by an elder of her community.

Isabel came to us at eleven months but she looked and behaved like a six month old. She was very tiny and had a difficult time as a baby; she took a long time to crawl and walk and if I placed her at the kitchen table, sometimes she would just sit and stare, sort of 'zone out'. She didn't reach her other milestones and she cried a lot until we discovered she was lactose intolerant. As we live on a farm I began feeding her goat's milk and from then on her diarrhoea stopped and she began to thrive and never looked back as far as physical growth goes.

When I first began my research into FAS, I discussed what I had learned with a friend from church who told me that FASD was like a brain injury that you would receive in a motor vehicle accident. When she described it that way, I was able to understand the condition a little better. She also said that physical stimulation such as massage and other strategies to increase her fine and large muscle coordination may be of help so I grabbed onto that idea. We had never talked to our children in 'baby' talk, always in age-appropriate speech but none of the 'goo goo gaa gaa' kind of talk.

So now we included in Isabel's regimen swimming lessons in the hope that they would assist with her coordination and also enhance her enjoyment of life. I put her in the parent/baby class and now she absolutely adores swimming. When we went to the paediatrician recently he said that she is now a normal healthy toddler. She is putting sentences together, she puts her toys away, she still gets very tired and has an afternoon nap and she can only swim for about fifteen minutes before she has to have a break, but she is doing wonderfully well.

We don't have a television so our children have always had to make their own fun. We have educational toys and lots of books. At this stage in her life (almost two years of age), I feel she is a normal child and the paediatrician agrees as do her swimming instructors. They say she has come a long way from her first lesson. I can even read books to her now and I know she understands the story.

I have two biological children and four foster children, all from the one indigenous community but only Isabel is diagnosed with FAS at this stage. All the others appear to be normal, healthy children.

Before I knew about FAS, I had many other foster children many of whom I now believe have the condition. They had the physical features and the behaviour described in the books and research I have undertaken.

Isabel is now my goddaughter and I hope to have a lot more contact with her throughout her life. She is now due to go back to her community but there is no one who is able to take her at the present.

I currently have some contact with Isabel's mum but she is still drinking. When we go out to the community she must be sober to see Isabel. I like Isabel's mum, I know some of her history and I think if I had that history I would be an alcoholic too. She has been sexually and physically abused all her life and her mother was also an alcoholic, her parents were both 'park people'. I am not angry at her. I've had some people say she must be the scum of the earth, but I don't see that. What has happened is not right but she doesn't know anything different. When she is in trouble I am the first person she calls, she trusts us but she is somewhat naïve. She couldn't understand what she was supposed to do with the goat's milk I prepared for Isabel. She stood there until I mimed that she was to put the bottle in Isabel's mouth and let her drink the milk and then she 'got it'. I know one young girl from this community who probably has FAS herself whose baby died because she didn't know she had to feed it when they came out of hospital.

Many of the teenagers or younger girls in this community are having babies; I would expect they will all have FAS. It's a great tragedy for all the indigenous communities but I don't see it entirely as an Aboriginal problem, or an Islander problem, it's more of a human problem.