

~ Liam's Story ~

Handle with Care

It was so hot out that Liam was sweating. The hotel pool looked cool and inviting and he wanted to jump in. But it also looked big and scary. Miss Janelle* was standing in the shallow end, with her arms out, saying, "Jump, I'll catch you!" They had been at the pool for a long time and had even practiced dangling their feet in the bathtub the night before. But Liam was terribly afraid of water because of the neglect and abuse he had endured, and as much as he wanted to splash in the pool, he couldn't find the faith to jump.*

But Miss Janelle and her husband, Mr. Markham didn't get mad at him like he thought they might; instead Miss Janelle said, "I'm so proud of you for trying. We'll get some lunch and try again later. And remember, Liam, you're safe here."

After lunch Liam agreed to sit on the ledge of the pool with Mr. Markham and dangled his feet in the water. Miss Janelle started playing catch with them. Then she said, "Do you want to try again, Liam?" He nodded solemnly at her and slowly got up to stand on the ledge.



Miss Janelle waited with outstretched arms and started encouraging Liam to jump. He thought of how she had been nice to him ever since he moved in with her; how she made him laugh and feel safe; how she always told him the truth. And he thought of how much fun he could have in the pool. So he did it. He jumped into her arms. And she held on to him...he was safe.

Six months earlier when Liam first came to Miss Janelle's house, having this much trust in an adult would have been impossible. Janelle is a longtime foster parent with Children's Aid and Family Services who has helped hundreds of children along the slow, painful path of healing

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*Names changed to protect identity.



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from their trauma. She has cared for children of almost all ages, seeing and hearing many kinds of manifestations of their pain. Still, it never fails to deeply touch her heart when she sees a child who is hurting; this was certainly the case with Liam.

She had agreed to take in Liam as an emergency placement. When she opened her door to greet him, she drew in a sharp breath. Just 5 years old, Liam was tiny for his age, wearing old, poorly fitting clothes that had large stains. His hair was matted — in desperate need of a wash and cut — and his hands and nails were obviously dirty. His facial expression was a combination of seriousness, sadness and anger. The immense neglect this child had endured was obvious. *He's really fragile*, Janelle thought to herself. *Handle him with care*. As shocked as she was, she knew she had to show him love, kindness and a good dose of playfulness. She greeted him with a big smile and said in a sing-song voice, "I'm so happy to meet you, come in!"

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Liam walked into the house and didn't say much. Janelle knew he had a serious speech delay and that he had been punished when he spoke too much. Liam didn't seem interested in the cars and trains that Janelle's teenage son had set up in the living room. Janelle quickly learned he didn't know how to play. The oldest of three children, Liam was often left alone with his twin 4-year-old brothers. He took care of them as best as he could, feeding them cereal and trying to keep them content and quiet so the neighbors wouldn't complain and Liam wouldn't get in trouble. Having nurturing, attentive parents that he could rely on would be an entirely new experience for Liam.



Liam on his first trip to Washington, DC with Janelle.



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Children's faces blurred to protect identity.



It took Janelle some time that first day to help Liam get cleaned up, as even getting in the bathtub was a traumatic experience for him. But cleaning up gently and putting on new clothes had a comforting effect on him. Afterwards, Janelle took Liam on a trip to the barber. Liam even smiled when he saw himself with his stylish new outfit and hair cut. Janelle knew it would take some time for the structure, consistency and love in her home to help him heal. "Caring for a young child who has had this level of neglect and abuse is like caring for a newborn," says Janelle. "You need to reverse the damage that's been done; to help a child who believes he is 'bad' to realize he is amazing and he can do anything."

Liam was behind academically for his age. Janelle had learned from her training at Children's

Aid and Family Services and her work with our Educational Advocate to set up a daily study hour and incorporate learning into Liam's everyday activities. She and Liam counted out peas and carrots for dinner and sang the alphabet song together. They went through her house, identifying the shapes of the picture frames, windows and doors. Markham read to him every night. Her older sons taught him to play, tossing a ball to him in the yard and showing him how to race toy cars.

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Janelle gave Liam several action figures and the boy discovered a love of pretend play, racing around the yard wearing a cape, standing strong against the “bad” guys.

Most important, Janelle and Markham encouraged him to talk, and to share his stories, which was especially important after his weekly therapy sessions. “It’s vital to educate a child who’s

been traumatized about the danger of secrets and to help them find the courage to speak up,” Janelle says. Every night at dinner, the family played a game where everyone had to tell why their day was good. Each evening Liam had more positive achievements to share: Eating all of his lunch, using his manners with his teachers, and best of all, making his first friend in kindergarten.



“I’m seeing him become more confident in himself and his abilities,” says Janelle. “Teaching him to trust and live in a family is an investment in our future. He has the opportunity, as every child should, to be a success.”

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Children who have endured abuse and trauma need vast amounts of patience, love and structure to feel safe and begin to heal. Because of your generosity, we are able to provide children such as Liam with the tools, support and experiences they need to gain confidence in themselves and go on to live in a family. We are also able to find loving families like Janelle and Markam to care for them and help them have brighter futures. You are changing the lives of the most vulnerable among us. Please make a gift today at www.cafsnj.org or in the enclosed envelope.



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