



# Sharing the Journey: Parent Stories on Preventing Child Neglect

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Parent Stories on Preventing Child Neglect is a resource of the FRIENDS National Center for Community Based Child Abuse Prevention. Sharing the Journey: Parent Stories on Preventing Child Neglect was created by the FRIENDS National Center in collaboration with the National Alliance of Children's Trust and Prevention Funds to gather parents' perspectives and expertise from across the country on child neglect and the impact preventing it can have on families and communities.

This series is a selection of video recordings and vignettes presented by parents discussing topics such as the protective factors, fatherhood, and parenting. These stories are an effective tool for use in training, introducing CBCAP resources, and engaging parents, service providers, lawmakers and other community members in a dialogue on child neglect prevention.

The story you are about to read represents an authentic parent experience and is told in the words and the voice of a parent who volunteered to contribute to this resource.

## What Can Parents Do When They Can't Locate Mental Health Services for their Children?

By Beth S., Tennessee

When my daughter was born if you had told me she would suffer from neglect (and there would not be anything I could do about it) I would have called you a liar. I read every book, I listened to every expert, I was going to be a model parent and provide for her every need. Sadly, it didn't work out that way.

At age 7, my daughter began exhibiting troubling emotional behaviors. She would have rages so severe that she would pull door frames off the walls. She was tiny and I was physically afraid of her. "She just needs a good spanking", other parents would say. The psychologist said she was just reacting to things at home and that people like us don't usually need to ask for help. We implemented strategies and things got better but my daughter still struggled with those intense emotions.

At age 13, she began experiencing overwhelming anxiety. We, again, reached out for help. "I know a fabulous therapist. She specializes in teenage girls," the doctor told us. After a 30-minute intake interview this "fabulous" psychologist told us that she would be happy to take my daughter on as a patient, but that it would really just be wasting her time and our money. My daughter grabbed my hand as we left the office. We barely made it to the elevator before she fell, crumpled to the ground in a heaping sobbing mess. I held her until she could stand. We made it to the car where she clung to me and cried for another 20 minutes before I could make the drive home.

At age 16, my daughter had minor surgery. Complications from that and the traumatic experience that accompanied it led to debilitating panic attacks. My daughter, now bigger than me, would cling to me and cry hysterically. I could feel her heart throbbing so hard—it was as if it would burst from her chest. She couldn't breathe, she couldn't speak, and she couldn't stop. Her doctor, who had suffered from severe Post-partum depression, understood and recommended we find a psychiatrist.

We started the referral process. The referral nurse would call with 3-4 names and I would spend the next few days reaching out, leaving messages, and waiting for return calls only to hear, "I'm sorry we're not accepting new patients." I would start the process over again. I called

every child psychiatrist in a 70-mile radius and no one would help my child. I was at my wits' end.

I look back on all this and I think, "As a stay-at-home Mom, I was available to spend my every waking moment on this. If I had been employed outside the home how could I have handled this situation? Interrupting my job to make call after call, leaving messages, and waiting for replies would have made it difficult, at best, if not impossible for me to work." My child's doctor and nurse criticized me for not getting her into a psychiatrist. School was becoming impatient. My friends thought I was coddling her.

And in the interim, my normally confident, outgoing, and independent daughter was disappearing. She didn't want to leave the house. She hated to be alone and wanted me in the same room with her at all times. She needed me to hold her as she cried and sit by her as she slept. It would take almost 40 days for us to find a psychiatrist. And still there was no relief.

At age 18, my daughter considered suicide. She was ordered to have a full psychological profile. We went for testing. After hearing about the childhood rages, the doctor said that it was not a matter of if, but when my daughter's bipolar disorder and anxiety would overwhelm her.

What?!? But we asked for help and were turned away. Not once but twice. For 11 years my child suffered. It wasn't until she was suicidal that testing was recommended. Because my child was not a threat to herself or someone else and was not disruptive at school my concerns were dismissed.

Perhaps a stronger parent/practitioner partnership might have resulted in an earlier diagnosis. And access to adequate resources might also have resulted in earlier treatment. Although, it's difficult to imagine how there could be a shortage since we live near one of our country's largest national healthcare hubs that is home to over 400

healthcare companies. Despite this we continue to struggle with a lack of providers.

At this point we could wallow in pity, but I'm a glass half full kind of girl. We pushed for help. It may have been slow in coming but it came. If I had it to do over, I would push harder and to you

parents out there in the same boat I urge you to do the same. Listen to your gut. To you practitioners out there I urge you to listen to parents. They are the professionals when it comes to their children.

My child suffered neglect for 11 years. But as a very kind person pointed out to me, it was not my fault. This issue is far too complicated to lay blame in any one place and it will take all of us, working together, to find a solution.

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