

Josh Timmons

Personal testimony of a child removed from a parent who was harming him, by the family court.

'My mother emotionally and psychologically abused me in a way that I fully, 100 per cent, believed that I hated my dad; that I didn't want to see him, that I didn't want to have anything to do with him. She would make me physically ill to a schedule so that I would miss visitation.'

Josh was removed from the care of his mother at the age of 11 due to psychological harm caused by factitious illness. Josh grew up believing that his father had made him sick and that his anxiety and lack of social development were the result of this. Instead, it was found that his mother's overprotective and intrusive parenting, and her inducing of physical illness in Josh, had caused him serious harm. With a clear judgement from the family court, the assistance of his local authority social worker, and specialised therapeutic support, Josh was moved to live with his father, with whom he now has a strong and enduring relationship. He is now 25 and about to start training as a social worker.

The following text is a transcript of a personal account that Josh gave as a presentation at an international symposium on relational trauma and child protection, hosted by the Family Separation Clinic and the Centre for Childhood Relational Trauma, at the Møller Institute, Churchill College, University of Cambridge, on 12 September 2024.

The text has been slightly edited to remove some discourse makers, filler words and other linguistic idiosyncrasies, in order to enhance readability. A full audio recording of Josh's testimony can be found at: <https://childhoodrelationaltrauma.podbean.com>

To cite this paper: Timmons, J. (2024, September 12). Listening to the voices of harmed children: Personal account [Conference presentation]. Family Separation Clinic International Symposium 2024, *Recovering futures: Working with relational trauma in children of divorce and separation*, in association with the Centre for Childhood Relational Trauma. Cambridge, United Kingdom. <https://childhoodrelationaltrauma.podbean.com>

© This work is licensed under a:
Creative Commons [Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).



THE CENTRE FOR CHILDHOOD
RELATIONAL TRAUMA

Transcript:

My name is Josh; Joshua Timmons. That man, right there, is Clive Murray. I'm very proud that he's my dad but there was a time in my life when I would have confidently said that I hated him. Through, I'd say, three big superheroes in my life - my dad, Karen,¹ and my social worker, who I'm going to be talking a little bit about, a bit later on - I essentially got taken out of custody from my mum, when I was 10, spent a little bit of time in foster care, and then went on to live with my dad until I went to university.

What I want to do today, in the 20 or so minutes that I've got, is really just express what I think is the fact, which is that every case is unique, and that there needs to be prescribed a unique treatment to each of them. So what I want to do is describe my story from, briefly, when I was in custody with my mum, but mostly afterwards and the aftermath, and really make you understand what my mental state was at the time, what helped me in the transition from fully being aligned with my mother, to realising the truth and, really, what helped me mentally, psychologically and, kind of, where I am at with it now. That's what I want to do. So, we'll start at the beginning, I guess.

Okay, so, for the first ten years of my life, I had very, very, very minimal contact with my dad. I, at the beginning, maybe spent about every other weekend with my dad. It reduced, reduced, reduced, reduced to about monthly supervised visits. And, for many years, it would be absolutely nothing at all. My mother emotionally and psychologically abused me in the way that I fully, 100 per cent, believed that I hated my dad; that I didn't want to see him, that I didn't want to have anything to do with him. To the extent where I even have false memories of things that I know for a fact didn't happen, now, but instances where my dad was putting me in harm. Her manipulation tactics - I think it was covered earlier, I can't remember exactly by who - but her manipulation tactics weren't excessively explicit. So it was never a case of... well, it was the case sometimes but, the majority of the times, it wasn't a case of, 'your dad has done this bad thing, this is why you should hate him.' It was always a case... well, again, most of the time, a case of having me wanting to make her feel good. Because at the time she was everything that was to do with my life.

There's a term used about my case, a lot, that she wrapped me in cotton wool, and that exactly hits the nail on the head. I would go to school, and that

¹ Karen Woodall, Lead Therapist at Family Separation Clinic LLP

would probably be about the only time in my day that I would have separate from her. I had very little social life after school - this is primary school, so I'm not going out on the weekends, I know. But, I mean, even the social contact that I had going around to my friends houses, after school, my mum would make a point of befriending their parents so would come round with me. Everything I did, I did with my mum. And, later on, in my school, especially year 3 to year 6, she even got a job in my school - not as a dinner lady, but on the playground. So she was there. She was 100 per cent of my life; 100 per cent of my life. So when I would have conversations with her - and she had said in the past about how she disliked my dad, and what have you - but, she would always say, 'if you want to see your dad, you can.' But, I'm not gonna say, 'yes, I want to do that.' I'm not going to say that. But, it's giving that false sense of freedom with it. It's something which I will come back to later.

On top of this, there's what I think is the main reason why I, eventually, got taken away from my mum is she was diagnosed with Munchausen by proxy.² So, she would make me physically ill to a schedule, so that I would miss visitation with my dad, that I would miss time off school. My dad can correct me if I'm wrong, but I think the statistics is, around about, I was missing on average, 40 per cent of my primary school because of that. And there's a whole argument, here, that it was physically to separate me from my dad which I think, absolutely, 100 per cent, that's part of it. But she was so self-absorbed that I think a lot of it was that she fed off the empathy, the sympathy of others. So that was, in a way, ammunition to then be able to say to her friends, 'Oh well, Josh has been like this today... Josh has been ill yet again today,' and then get sympathy, constantly. And this, again, is another thing which I'm going to continue with later on.

So my dad was able to identify these patterns and was, essentially, able to predict when, and for how long, I was going to be off school with sickness, and that's where Karen came in to help. And that, I think, really, really got the ball rolling to, eventually, me begin taken away and into foster care. I was only in foster care for, I think it was, about two months before something happened. Basically, I had to either choose, at the end of that, to go and live with a new foster family or with my dad. During my time of the two months in foster care, the only point of contact that I had that I really, truly trusted was my social worker, Johnny Hoyle. If you ever have the pleasure of working with him in the future, please do. He is, potentially, my favourite human being. I was first introduced to Johnny Hoyle when, I think, I was 7 or 8. For

² Factitious disorder imposed on another (FDIA), also known as fabricated or induced illness by carers (FII) and first named as Munchausen syndrome by proxy (MSbP)

the majority of what I can remember, social services had played a very small part in my life. I think I maybe had three or four different social workers who would come and occasionally visit me throughout my childhood, but they were always treated as hostile visits. I would always have, not necessarily a 100 per cent complete script, but I would always have my guards up, my defences up, whenever they were around. I knew what I shouldn't say, at least; I knew what I shouldn't say. So, really, what I needed and what Johnny was able to do, was understand my mental state and then connect to me on a deeper level.

Johnny's job was - I think, in his own words, he said to my dad - to befriend me and have fun; and that's exactly what he did. I was shut off so much, socially. I was so socially anxious, that my guards were up with everybody and everyone, but especially social workers. So, when Johnny came round, we would just hang out. We would have fun, we would do the things that I enjoyed doing, and there wouldn't be these intimidating, probing questions that every other social worker, before, had for me. In fact, I don't think we even discussed anything to do with any social work proceedings for months into our relationship. So we grew so close, and I truly trusted him, and I knew that he had my back. And when I got taken away from my mum, got thrown into this foreign world where I'm living with a foster family, who are a very normal family - which was completely different to what I was used to - I was terrified. But I saw him every day. Even if it was just a lift to school and back, or something, I saw him every day. And that was vital, absolutely vital. I would have been completely lost without him.

One day he said, 'Josh, right, we need to organise contact with your dad.' I was kicking up a fuss. I was, like, 'no, no, no, there is not a chance; I'm never gonna do it.' And he's, like, 'come on! No, no, it's fine. This is something that me and you are gonna do. I'm gonna be there. We're gonna do this together. We'll do whatever you want; whatever you want.' And he knew I loved table tennis, so he's, like, 'let's write him a letter; let's write him a letter from both of us saying, 'let's go for a table tennis game.' And that's how it started. I went and had a game of table tennis. A couple of weeks later I went and had a game of golf. etc, etc, etc, until the point of... by about half of my time through the foster home I had spent a couple of nights round with my dad. I had spent full days with my dad and with my stepmom, Chris. And I wouldn't say... I definitely didn't trust them but I didn't feel unsafe. That's what I'd say. It was a huge step, a huge step. So, when the question of another foster home or go live with your dad arose, I chose the latter, understandably. And, thankfully, my dad and my stepmum agreed to have me, as well. So, essentially, that was... I think I was about 11

when that happened; I was 10 or 11, and then the real issues, I think, really happened then.

I struggled hugely, socially... hugely. I think the sort of treatment that was designed for me at the time was very standardised across every single case. I think it was very objective treatment. I think it was, like, if this happens, you do this, rather than taking into consideration my personal needs, my personal experience, etc. So, there's a phrase that everybody would always use, that 'it's not your fault,' and I should preface this by saying that's absolutely true. The child needs to know that it's not their fault; absolutely true. But I think that's probably more useful if the child's a bit younger. By 11 or 12, I knew that it wasn't my fault. It could be anybody else's fault, but it's definitely not mine! At that point, I feel like I've been targeted, not like I've done something wrong. So, what I really could have benefited from, at that time, was support reintegrating back into society. I think that was the first main issue that really needed to be addressed. The process of understanding the real truth about my story, understanding that my mum had really manipulated me, took my entire life. And it's, yeah, still taking a toll now, to be honest. I didn't even start to fully have my doubts, probably, until I was about 15-16. I fully, 100 percent, believe my mum for the first six years that I lived with my dad; and it was rough. It was really rough because I was living in a situation which, for a long period of time, I wasn't even allowed to see my mum which, again, I think was probably a good thing, you know... now. But, at the time, it definitely wasn't... I didn't feel like it was.

I wasn't allowed to see my mum and I was surrounded by people that I didn't trust, fully, and I thought that there was some form of scheme around why I was there. And not only that, I just started secondary school - not the best. So many emotional tolls that combined at one time, and I think that was really the wider perspective that I think, in my personal experience, wasn't addressed the best, and what I think needs to be taken into consideration in future cases. It's not just simply the alienation and then the recovery, and then the realisation that they have been alienated and manipulated, it's just the reintegration back into society, because I've really struggled with that; really, really struggled with that. But, with regards to how and when I started to come around to the truth, like I say, I think I was about 15 when I first started having my doubts with my mum's side of the story, and that was predominantly because I had been living with my dad for so long. And, when you've been living with somebody who, beyond all odds, cared for me, it was difficult to then go to my mum's place and then hear her say bad things about my dad.

And that was, I think, the the first thing that started poking holes in the story. It was the contrast of what I knew was true at home compared to the stories that she was telling me, when I saw her, and having conversations with my dad. Now, I believe this is a piece of advice that Karen gave my dad - and this was the best advice ever - that I needed to figure it out by myself. I couldn't have just been lectured by my dad; just being, like, this... ABC... this all happened. I needed to figure this out by myself, because I didn't trust him. I didn't trust him, and I didn't trust anybody official. Even my social worker, Johnny Hoyle, when it came down to this, I would still argue with him that he was wrong about things, you know? Like I needed to figure things out by myself and a really good example of this is that my dad said to me once - we were talking about me being ill all the time when I was round at my mum's - and I was saying, like, 'yes, yes,' you know, 'but I really was ill,' you know, 'I did actually go to doctors, I did go to the hospital, I did feel ill.' But my dad said, 'yes, but since you've been to live with me and Chris, you haven't missed school once - you haven't been ill once.' And it's those little piecings together of evidence that really are important. And another thing that I can really say is, it's just time. You need time with it. You need to sit with it.

I was 16 when I first started having doubts. I was 18 before I, probably, believed about half the story, and I think I was 21 by the time I fully believed the story. By the time I reached 21, I realised that my mum had this hunger, I guess, for sympathy and would fabricate lies and fabricate stories, or twist the truth and manipulate me, in whatever way, to gain sympathy from me. And she would be so controlling... well, not necessarily controlling, but constantly wanting to survey what I'm doing, keep up with me, constantly wanting to be such a huge part of my life. And, when I started going to university and having less contact with her, I realised my life was better when I didn't have contact with her. I went through phases of not having any contact with her. I would ignore her phone calls. I would not see her when I went home. But I would always, eventually, come round to it. And by the time my second year at university came round, by the time I was 21, I decided to cut contact with her altogether. It's not a method of practice I would recommend to anybody, and I don't think anybody should ever suggest that somebody does that but, at the same time, you should never argue against somebody doing that, too.

It's a difficult one... but she would still always be in the back of my mind, and I would always tear myself up about the fact that I'm not speaking to her, but it was never really so much of a conscious decision when I first started it. I would always have long periods of time where I didn't speak to her or I would find myself silencing

the phone calls, just subconsciously. And then, later on, I realised that the reason why I was doing it was because I couldn't put everything that she did behind me, and that I didn't want her in my life. I didn't want her to be a huge part of my life. I didn't block her on anything³ - interestingly, I didn't block her or anything. So, one day, I got a message through; a really, really long one - a really long one. I thought, 'okay, I'll open it.' She was telling me that she had cancer - this is about a year after I stopped speaking to her - and my instant thought was that she was lying. And then I thought, 'oh, what the hell.' I mean, the bad part is that I thought that she was lying in the first place, right? Whether or not she has it isn't... that's not irrelevant, but you know where I'm coming from. So I called her up, a couple of months later, and I basically just tried to... tried to just get her to admit everything to me which, of course, she didn't and blamed ignorance and everything. And I basically just said to her, whenever... whenever you're ready to admit it, give me a call. And she never did. And then she died a year later. Yeah... which... yeah, sucks?

So I'm still, yeah... So talking about it taking a long time to heal, it's still happening. But this was two years ago now, and it's been an interesting one, because my entire childhood has been shrouded in this, like, cloud of... I don't know... like evil, I guess. I really struggle to have positive memories of my childhood, even though I know I had so many. But I actually cried about two months ago because I had my first positive thought about it in about, like, six years. So it's good! Yeah, we're... we're... we're getting there. We're getting there. But I want to end it on a positive note. I would not be the same person today, nowhere near the same person today, if this intervention didn't happen. Yes, there were some things that could have been better, and they're very, very easy changes. But I would be a shell of the person that I am today, now. So, thanks to everybody that put in all the work, because I owe you my life.

³ Referring to social media

