

# They said we hit our baby when all the time he had brittle bones

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*MAGGIE EATON spent three-and-a-half years living with allegations of child abuse before her daughter was diagnosed with Osteogenesis Imperfecta (OI). Her early fears were dismissed by the GP Joanne was 18 months old when X-rays finally revealed that she had suffered broken ribs, a fractured skull and two broken arms. She was placed on the At Risk register. By her third birthday, she had sustained more than 20 fractures, and social services had threatened three times to take her into care. Maggie and her husband were only cleared when they moved to Northern Ireland and their new doctor confirmed Joanne had OI. Joanne, now 27, has broken more than 500 bones and is confined to a wheelchair. Her own daughter, Rachel, is nearly eight and has had 93 fractures. She recently broke her hip rolling over in her sleep. Maggie's experience has ensured.....*

JAMIE stopped growing when I was five months pregnant. He was born weighing 4 lb 6oz and would not take a bottle. I was always taking him to the GP but I was dismissed as a fussy first-time mum. In January 1997, when Jamie was four months old, we took him to the hospital and eventually they agreed to run some tests. They examined him, did blood and urine tests and gave him a chest X-ray to see what was stopping him eating.

We came home to a phone message saying they had found something on the X-rays. You straight away think of leukaemia but when we called the doctor, the first thing she asked was: "Has he had an accident?" They had discovered at least three fractured ribs. We were relieved that it wasn't anything more serious. I knew there was no way he had got fractured ribs — he had never been out of my sight. I thought it was a mistake.

We went to the hospital two days later and I was still saying: "The real problem is he's not eating," but they only seemed interested in the bones.

When the doctor told us: "We think the rib fractures re NAI," I thought it was a disease. But it means Non Accidental Injury —abuse: "If you try to take your baby out of hospital we're going to phone the police," we were told. We were stunned. They said we could go home but couldn't take Jamie, so we stayed at the hospital for eight days until they could arrange a case conference with social services. We were advised to get a solicitor.

I went to the library, quizzed medical students and in one book found the condition OI, Osteogenesis Imperfecta. It listed low birth weight, small size, blue sclerae (the whites of the eyes), triangular face, excessive sweating--when you got Jamie out of his cot he was wringing wet--and hyper extensibility of the skin and joints (his elbows would bend the opposite way) there were 12 indicators and Jamie had 10. I photocopied the pages, went back to the doctor: "I think he's got OI." She said: "I'm not having this conversation."

We brought it up at the conference but it was ignored, on the basis that there was only one set of fractures. They said if he had OI he would have different types of fracture, of different ages. They put his name on the At Risk register, under the category of physical harm.

We tried to co-operate. We let social services into our house, answered their questions, but I was angry and resentful. Then the day before the next case conference we were told that a second opinion on the X-rays had found two sets of fractures, of different ages.

We thought now that they would agree he had a bone condition. Instead, we were accused of serial abuse. We were told in court that either Jamie could go into foster care or we would all have to go and live in an assessment centre 300 miles away for three months.

My partner David had a job, we had a house and two cats, but it was immediate. David did not even get to say goodbye to his parents. We went from a beautiful house to one room in a slum. There were prostitutes outside our door, no air conditioning and there were flies everywhere. We shared a bathroom with 11 other families and found used sanitary towels and dirty nappies in the bath. Sometimes we could not get in because there were people taking drugs or self-harming in there.

A couple of days before we were due to leave, eight or nine people from social services came for final review meeting. The assessment centre knew we were not abusers and had given us a glowing 63-page report, recommending that I should return home immediately.

But social services said they were going to take him into foster care. They told us we were no further down the line. I had always said if they were waiting for a confession they would not get one, but they claimed that all they wanted to know was how we were as parents.

So we spent another four days in court, living in another assessment centre with intercoms in the so they could listen to us. On Jamie's first birthday we were in court

all day but on the Sunday before the case ended we had a party at the centre. It was the most miserable birthday party. They threw everyone out at 4pm, and everyone was crying. I'll never forget that. We thought we would be home and dry with so many people giving evidence for us. We had the GP, paediatrician and staff from the assessment centre. Even one of the social workers spoke in our favour. We lost. The judge said Jamie had to go into care, and social service came round with the foster parents. David went with them to take Jamie to their house and had to leave him screaming and hysterical.

We had two hours contact for three days a week, and four hours for two days. That is apparently a lot, but not when it's your baby. I lost two-and-a-half stones in four months. I would wake up crying and fall asleep crying. Every time I tried to eat I was sick. I was told: "Your level of distress is upsetting Jamie," but I couldn't help it.

Social services thought he would go into care and start eating. Instead his weight dropped, he got eczema and was hospitalised four times with 4 different illnesses. On one occasion I was not allowed to see him but I could hear him in the background on the phone, crying hysterically: "Mummy, mummy, mummy."

All the time I was seeing him deteriorate it was as if social services were trying everything until someone said we were guilty. We did three months with the NSPCC and their conclusion was that we posed a low risk. They cannot say no risk — it is either high, medium or low.

The recommendation was that he return home immediately but social services wanted a psychological-profile of us. I honestly did not think we would get Jamie back. The first assessment centre had cost social services £30,000, the NSPCC one was £20,000, and all their recommendations had been totally disregarded. Our son was in foster care, costing £460 a week.

David and I began the psychological profiling. The questions included, "How many times have you been on the cover of a magazine?" and, "If you see somebody spit on the street, does it make you so angry you'd like to kill them?" Then I got the phone call we had been praying for. It was awful but the only thing we could think of that might help was if Jamie had a fracture while in care. Now he was in hospital and X-rays showed a recent fracture in his ankle, but that the tibia and fibula in his leg had been broken for four weeks.

There were two alternatives: Either he had a bone condition, and we were innocent, or the foster parents were.....

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