

Case study

Jack's, Matilda's and Jacinta's story

Fiona is 36 years old and lives in rural Victoria with her three children: Jacinta (11 months), Matilda (4 years) and Jack (10 years). Fiona separated from her partner and the children's father, Steve, four months ago and he has not had any contact with the children since.

Fiona attends a scheduled appointment with her GP, Anne, who she has been seeing regularly since her separation from Steve. Fiona informs Anne that her eldest son Jack has been experiencing vivid nightmares and flashbacks which wake him up in the night. In these nightmares, Jack sees his father standing over his mother and threatening to hurt her. One of Anne's recommendations is that all three children see a psychologist for support. Fiona acknowledges this is a good idea as she has benefited from ongoing counselling since the separation.

At school, Jack is in Grade 5 and enjoys sport and being outdoors. At a recent school camp, staff became alarmed about his night waking and nightmares. When asked, Jack reported that he often experiences nightmares and finds it hard to sleep without a night light on. In the classroom, Jack often seems to be daydreaming, is easily distracted and fidgety. Jack is part of a small group of children who receive remedial support in English and Maths. A recent NAPLAN test showed just how far behind Jack is academically, and his teacher has decided to

schedule a meeting with the Learning Support Coordinator and Jack's mother Fiona, to discuss where to go next. His teacher and the Learning Support Coordinator are unsure how the meeting will go as they have had minimal contact with Fiona in the past, and know she recently separated from Jack's father.

Fiona's daughter Matilda has been attending full-time childcare at the local long day care centre for the past two years. Matilda is a bright and inquisitive girl at childcare and has built strong relationships with the educators in the room. Matilda uses a high pitched 'baby voice' to speak at childcare and sucks her thumb continuously, even when playing. When the educators have encouraged Matilda to use both hands to play and explore, she becomes distressed and crawls under the table to cry hysterically. With her peers, Matilda tends to dominate play and has become close friends with two other children who are extremely shy. In observing her play, the educators note that Matilda often orders her friends to play the 'mother' and 'father' of the family whilst she is always the baby. At these times Matilda repeatedly asks the other two children to 'feed' her and 'put her to sleep'. The same play scenarios are re-enacted over and over, and Matilda can become upset when the other children try to change this theme.

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Matilda's sister Jacinta recently started in the babies room of the same childcare centre. Staff in the room observed that Jacinta often had a 'blank' expression on her face when she started and was not easily soothed by any of the educators when she hurt herself. In just a few months, they have noticed some positive changes. Jacinta will now look towards Naomi, who is a full time educator in the room, and babble or clap her hands. Jacinta has slowly started to form a routine with her eating and nap times. When she first started, Jacinta would scream and push away any new food that was offered and only napped for 15-20 minute intervals.

Through a communication book, Fiona was able to pass on a brief note to childcare staff, informing them that she separated from the children's father Steve. In this note she informed childcare staff that she was seeking support for her children as a result of the family violence they had witnessed at home.