

## Interviews

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To understand the challenges of parenting holistically I conducted interviews with two mothers raising an eight-year girl and a seven-year-old boy respectively. These were done with two mothers who were facing a challenge pertaining to the understanding of a normal child. None of these two children were diagnosed with any specific psychological or behavioral problem yet their behavior was seen as problematic in their own context. The first interview is with a mother who decided to adopt a child when she could not conceive at the age of thirty-nine. Her life underwent a drastic change after this decision since she had to leave her job and become a stay-at-home mother. Despite best efforts, her daughter does not trust her and exhibits violent behavior. The second interview is with a mother who decided to have a child in her late thirties. She too had to leave her well-paying job to raise her child. Now her son is facing issues in adjusting to the school environment and the mother feels that the teachers do not have the patience to deal with him. The teachers find it difficult to facilitate development of self-regulation of behavior in him when others in their class seem to have mastered it by now. The difference between the teachers' and the mother's perception of the concern is what makes parenting a challenge for Ms. Sumi.

### Interview I: Mothering a Different Child

Mothering a child can mean different things to different people. When I became a mother, I started observing other mothers around me. Were other parents as overwhelmed as I was? How do they handle their problems? Sometimes conversations with others helped allay my fear and at other points it made me more anxious. In the process of raising my son, I came across a young child around my house who appeared different from others. I judged her as different because she looked different from her parents, and I found that she was unable to stay still.

Subsequently, I got to know that she was facing issues in school because of her inability to focus and her sudden violent eruptions in class. I found that her mother was very quiet as if trying hard to hold back her emotions. I often wondered how the mother would be dealing with this child. In this paper, I have documented the journey of Reena\*, through an interview, as a mother of a child who was labelled as different, right from the beginning. In her own words, 'Every day is a new challenge. Somedays I feel I won't be able to deal with it any longer. But then something gives me hope and I carry on. I just don't want people to see Kiara as different. I just want her to be like everyone else around her.'

### Q. Tell me about your journey as a mother

I was working as a systems administrator. My work used to be late nights and I hardly had any holidays. I usually came back home from work late at nights. I was 38 years of age and wanted to adopt a child, we tried to get a child within family, but no one supported us. We then went through CARA and after some wait, we were given a 15 days old girl child for adoption, we named her Kiara. We have no idea about her whereabouts and her lineage. We just knew that she was found on a railway track and then she was taken to an orphanage. She looked very frail and very dark. Not that her skin color was an issue, but she was extremely malnourished. Kiara had septicemia when we got her, and she was admitted to a hospital after we adopted her. After she was treated and cared for in hospital for over 15 days and she became alright we got her home. She was so light in weight that I carried her in my lap till last year, she is now over 8 years in age. I made her wear the same clothes for 5 years so you can understand that she was such a weak child. Now she has started gaining height.

Till Kiara was one year old everything was very smooth. She would eat her food easily on time and she used to stay with my parents and my in-

laws. She never demanded that she should be only with me. She was very comfortable. But as she grew one year old then the problem started. She was so hyper and so destructive. She would pick up a glass and throw it. I could never sleep on a Sunday afternoon after she was one year. Once I got into the bed and slept. She picked up a one-liter bottle and spilled all the water on me. My head and my ear were full of water and the bed became wet. Her violence aggravated and she would hit anyone. Whenever we took her to a mall she would be attracted to young children. Then suddenly she would hit them, and they would start crying. I used to feel very bad. I stopped socializing. We stopped taking her out because if we took her anywhere, we had to remain vigilant. When she was two and a half years old, there was a family wedding. I kept her in my lap for three days so as to avoid an untoward incident. She would pull people's hair and hit them. People's gestures changed when they saw such things. It was very embarrassing and disturbing experience. I can't put it in words. I lost my confidence. It seemed as if someone had taken away the ground from under my feet.

We admitted her to a private school. Everyday some or the other parents called to complain, and teachers used to call me to complain about Kiara. I was asked to apologize every day to some or the other parent. It was a nightmare. Kiara would randomly hit anyone in class and despite explaining her to refrain from using her hands she did not stop hitting other children. She had difficulty in reading and writing. And her teachers reported this to me regularly. Kiara was not just violent outside home but even my hands used to be blue all the time because she would hit me and bite me. One she hit me very hard on my face and I still have the scar. We took her to a hospital, but they could not diagnose anything. They said she does not need any therapy. Finally, after one year the school asked us to withdraw Kiara's name from the school. I was totally shattered not knowing what to do.

**Q. Then did you change her school?**

Everyone around me started telling me that Kiara needs help, but I did not accept that. I wanted to prove that my child is normal. I used

to leave her with her maternal grandmother when I went for work. One day while playing Kiara did something which shook me completely. I was lying on my stomach, and she was on my back playing peacefully. Suddenly she took out her plastic hairband and plunged one end of the hairband inside my ear. I had excruciating pain and I saw blood dripping down my ears. I rushed to the hospital leaving Kiara with my mother. Fortunately, the doctor told me that the wound had not reached the tympanum and I would be fine in few days. We came back home, and Kiara was just laughing. She showed no sign of fear or remorse for what she had done, not even when she saw blood dripping down my ears. I wondered whether she even realized how much pain she had caused me.

After the school asked her to withdraw, I started looking for a day-care where I could leave my child. My parents were not able to cope. I found a day care but I was not sure that she will adjust. It was a Jain family, and they needed money, so they accepted to keep her. Luckily, Kiara was fine in their house. The lady told me that Kiara would chant *bhaktambar* with them. I had never heard of *bhaktambar stotram* but I was happy that finally my child was settled somewhere. But this lasted just for five months. Suddenly one day the lady managing the day care told me that she would not be able to keep Kiara. She told me that the previous day she got into an argument with her husband and Kiara reacted in a very violent manner when she was not given attention. The lady's husband asked her to not keep Kiara with her anymore. Hell broke loose for me then. After this episode Kiara developed a repulsion towards men. She never warmed up to any male member in the house. Even with my husband, she maintains a distance. Like when we are in bed, she does not let her father touch her. She says only she can touch Papa, but Papa can't touch her. She had dislike for men earlier too but after the day care experience it became even more noticeable. Till now I wonder what happened there that made her dislike men so much. Kiara has trust issues. I can sense that she does not even trust me completely. After this day-care episode I had to leave my job and now,

I work from home. So, my life has changed completely.

Then someone suggested a progressive school to me and I took Kiara there. When the director of the school was interacting with Kiara, Kiara spat on her face. I was surprised that the director did not say a word. They admitted her. Ever since that day, Kiara has been in this school. She has a special educator who shadows her in the class, she also goes for bridge classes which are individual classes and there is a counselor to map her progress. There are some changes in her behavior, and I see that she is now aligning herself with the school. It is not that things are smooth. Even now she has anger issues. Recently we had one such episode. I had kept a bottle of extra virgin coconut oil on the table. I and Kiara got into an argument, and she spilled the entire bottle of oil on my head. So, we keep having such incidents.

**Qs. How did you manage her during the pandemic?**

Actually, pandemic turned out to be a better experience. She attended school throughout. Sometimes she was the only child in the school. Her special educator worked very hard. She paid attention during online classes too. I find it tough to follow what the school is doing. I rely completely on the school. See we learnt through conventional methods, so I am unable to work with *ganit mala* and other mathematics material which this progressive school uses. They made her repeat a class and I was fine with it. Kiara likes to study, and she likes her school. She never told me that she does not want to attend classes. She takes time to understand English and Mathematics. She is struggling in these two areas, and I find that now the school is going at a fast pace. She is finding it tough to keep pace with the school. I don't know how it will be in future.

When I adopted Kiara, I had lots of dreams that I will teach her in a certain way and I will introduce her to music. All those dreams now seem meaningless now. I just want her to grow up normally. I don't want her to be seen as a different child. And I want her to behave well and not hit others. Now, even she asks me,

'Mumma how can I control my behavior. Please tell me some trick.' What trick can I teach my child!!.

**Qs. Did you ever consider taking her to a counselor outside school as well?**

No, I did not take her. After my initial experience, I found that she is more sorted at school and is aligning herself with it. Kiara has trust issues. Now I don't want to disturb the balance that she has found. The counselor has not diagnosed anything specific. Sometimes she says Kiara has few characteristics of ADHD and sometimes she says that Kiara has one characteristic of ADD. Nothing is clear. Taking her to another counselor may disrupt her newfound sense of balance. I think she must repose her trust in me first. Kiara has some other issues as well. One of them is that she has difficulty in bladder control and as a result she has accidents in class. This can be embarrassing, and I wonder how she will make friends if such accidents continue. Sometimes she soils her clothes too. I want her behavior to change first, and she should start taking care of herself. I just hope that she starts to manage herself.

**Qs. Have you found out who is she comfortable with?**

She is unusually comfortable with domestic helps. She likes them and behaves normally with them. Probably she feels a certain sense of belonging with them. Kiara displays some behaviors which are contradictory to one another. Like she wants to say hello to everyone and then she becomes very shy. She cannot sit still for a minute and would change several channels in few minutes. But she can sit and study for long durations. She is very warm and loving and yet she can be aggressive and violent. She uses lots of abusive words and no one in our home uses such words. It leaves me very confused at times.

**Qs. How have you changed as a person after you became a mother?**

(laughs) I am very upset with God with what he has done to me. I was a very spiritual person and would meditate regularly. I even taught meditation. Even now I do it but I feel drained -

emotionally and spiritually. I wonder why I had to go through this. I was a topper in my class and did very well in studies. I had dreams for my child too. Probably we (I and Kiara) had some karmic baggage to resolve. Let's see how things will shape up now that schools have reopened.

### **Interview II: Complex Choices, Self-Doubt and Decision Making in Parenting**

The decision to become a parent in today's time is not a simple decision. In nuclear families, with more education and less support, we feel nervous and apprehensive about having a child. To raise a child is a full-time work and the challenge lies in who will give up their professional aspiration to accomplish this task. While my son started to go to school, the first parent that I became friends with, was a mother who decided to give up her plush job to raise her son. I found her in school most of the time since her son took time in adjusting to school, just like my son did. I found Sumi a very amicable person who would sometimes get very anxious. We both had quiet moments where we would silently comfort one another. I decided to interview her to know what complex decision making is involved in raising a child. She faced major challenges in making people understand the child's perspective. People often labelled her son as hyper and stubborn. And she had a tough time making people understand that they are not able to see things from the child's perspective. So, here's is her perspective of raising her son:

#### **Sumi, what does it mean to be a parent?**

Being a parent is like being custodians of a bird's egg. You have to provide the right atmosphere for it to hatch so that it can one day fly away - and feed, fend, soar independently. Our job is to raise children to become independent adults.

#### **You are Master's in Computer Science and Information technology. You had a very well-paid job. Why did you give up your job to raise your child?**

Yes, I started working in 2004 and I had to leave my job in 2014 when I decided to have a child. My son was born premature and underweight. He was born with a congenital problem. The cap

of his oesophagus was pushed back, and he had a strider. He was born with that, and he had to be given artificial respiration. He had a slight murmur in his heart but when he turned one that fear was also removed. The tests indicated that he did not have a hole in his heart. Due to this problem, he had a lot of acidity and reflux. He had a very difficult six months period and so did I. I was getting calls from office, and then I looked at my child. I wondered can I put this child in hands of someone who does not relate to his problem? I decided that I will continue to take care of my child. When he turned one and half year, we started looking for a day care. But I did not find anything very satisfactory. I realised that I would get a job again. I trust my calibre. But for now, I must invest time with my child. I am not judging parents who decide to leave their children in a day care. It is perfectly fine. I was not ready to do that. Now during pandemic, I have got many offers which include positions to head an organisation. These offers are equivalent to what I would have got if I had not left my job. Now looking back, I feel happy for my decision. Currently, I am working as a product manager in artificial intelligence domain.

#### **How do you think cultural beliefs and practices influence your parenting decisions?**

In the early years - 0-3 years, I would say, the influence was more. I was constantly told by people around me that this is how we did things, in our times this was done, by this time this should have happened etc. As a parent our choices have a direct effect on our children and that has given me the courage to align myself with what and how best can I provide for the child even if it means moving away from said cultural beliefs. One such example was the tradition of getting the head shaved of the child, popularly called as the *Mundan* ceremony. In our family head shaving can be done only after 4 years, but for my child, I had to get it done earlier. He had long hair and his hair would irritate him. Everyone in my family told me that this ceremony can be done only when the second child is born. I and my husband were clear that we did not want another child. I was 35 years of

age when I had my first child and even then, we had to undergo chromosomal testing to be on the safer side. I was admitted in hospital one week before the due date since the foetal heartbeat was weak. This whole experience had shaken us, and we were sure of not having another child.

### **What challenges did you face in the process?**

The biggest challenge one faces while even deviating from said cultural social practices is adjusting to not pleasing everyone all the time. As the saying goes - "You can't please all the people all the time" so is true in parenting. You end up coming out as choosing sides. Being called - overprotective, pampering, helicopter mom even. Parenting is not for the soft hearted. The biggest challenge is self-doubt, and standing up to what you believe in, hoping that everything resolves with time and is worth the effort.

I have self-doubt when people constantly judge my child. People say that he is not behaving in a certain way, he is hyper, he has too much energy and he is not behaving in an expected way. People also say that before the pandemic he was different and now there are changes. There was an instance, when he was standing at a place in the playground, and everyone was asking him to move from that point. I asked him later, why he was standing there. He told me that I was standing there so that I could see you and I could not see you from the point where I was asked to stand. There was no effort to understand the child. Such remarks shake you from inside and make you wonder whether what you do is right. I have realised that one needs to conserve one's energy and not be rattled by all this. This is where you have to go to the depths of your heart and you hold on to that one small ray of hope that I will remain steadfast no matter what the challenge is. I know my son. I must give him time and give him the best.

Another instance that I remember is that once my child very clearly articulated and asked for a quiet time in school. He was questioned in the set-up of school that why he wants a quiet time. What is it that you have done that you need a quiet time? Now here again there is

preconceived notion that if this much work is done then output should be this. The teachers felt that he has just come to school. But no, he was sitting in the bus for last 80 minutes and then he has reached school. When you change lens of your glasses you see the correct image. Sometimes we must be fearless and point out where the mistake is. A child is seen as a problem to be solved. Ask him why he wants a quiet time and let him answer. Not everyone is well-versed with psychology so they should abstain from labelling. We live in our heart and there is an inner being. We must stay calm because your child needs it. Have faith in your values and your child. We must stay steadfast. This is what I tell myself over and over again.

### **Can you elaborate further on self-doubt?**

I think parenting in the modern, urban, nuclear families is nothing, but self-doubt served on a platter. There is so much noise - so much material, so many options, even when enrolling in a play school is something people can shame you about. So, there's this incident that happened, my child loves to interact but would decide with whom he wants to interact. There was a lady who would stop and say hello, for whatever reasons, my son wouldn't reach out to her. I never insisted or forced. He was about 2 years then. When one day, my child refused to say hello to her, she immediately retorted - You should try schools in Delhi, since they don't have an interview process. In Noida you will never get it as your child doesn't speak. I wasn't worried about the admission, but I started doubting myself - am I really so late? Why would I send a child to school at such a small age? In the end, I waited - I wanted to send my child where he can be close to nature and be grounded to reality. Or even before this, night-time schedules and breastfeeding can put a whole lot of doubt in you. I breast-fed my child for four years since my child demanded that.

### **What do you do in case of doubt?**

When in doubt, trust your gut! Own what you must do - with what you have and that's it. We are a complex function of what we experienced - and always have the right to correct our ways. So, deciding what is best then and ignoring the

noise of doubt is what I do. At least we can try doing this most of the times.

### **Do you experience emotional outburst due to overwhelming demands of parenting?**

#### **When and how?**

It is a given that parenting will overwhelm you. It is so demanding. Emotional Outbursts too happen - mostly when there is too much on the plate - work, home, child, etc. or when I am unwell. In what forms they happen? It depends on my situation - sometimes, it can be tears, sometimes a raised voice, sometimes being too snappy.

#### **How do you cope with emotional challenges?**

Breathe, take a break, listen to music - Play with the child, to just cuddle up for stories, take some alone time – even if it is a long bath. Anything and everything. For more serious ones, even when the decision has been taken, the best way to talk to a friend and ask them to just hear you. Having someone to just listen to you without judging you is sometimes more than enough.