



Cultivating Connection: How a Mother and Son Grew Together Through PCIT

Parent-Child Interaction Therapy (PCIT) is a **parent coaching model for young children** with behavioral challenges. In PCIT, caregivers are taught specific parenting skills to strengthen a nurturing and secure relationship with their child while teaching positive discipline and behavioral management techniques. The caregiver receives coaching and direct feedback from the clinician during session using an earpiece to aid in the development of these skills. The treatment has been shown to avoid further involvement of the child and family in the behavioral health and other child serving systems.

Beth* and her husband were a foster resource family for **Bethanna** in 2013. Their third foster child, Alex*, was a 6-year-old boy and he was their first experience with, “behavior problems.” Alex’s biological mother was not present, he experienced abuse and neglect from his father, and witnessed domestic abuse at home. Alex barely attended school, did not play with other children, and the family was socially isolated. The only relationships he had at that point were with his father (abusive and neglectful) and his grandmother (loving). Both adults were drug-addicted.

Beth and Alex completed PCIT treatment with Allyson Monarch, a clinician at **Bethanna**. The following is an interview with Beth about her experience with Alex in PCIT treatment and how it helped them to engender trust within their relationship.

*Pseudonym

EPIC: How did you get connected with PCIT?

Beth: Pretty much every day after my husband and older son left in the morning, if there was not an organized activity, a device to play on, snacks or whatever he demanded, Alex’s, “pot would boil over.” There would be tantrums—screaming in my face, throwing things, slamming doors, “I hate you,” “I’m gonna run away,” swinging/kicking at me, etc. In my desperation, I reached out to my CUA case manager and she told me about a new therapy Bethanna was offering called PCIT. I knew I was doing or saying something wrong, but I was so turned around I couldn’t see it. Relationships were a two-way street, and I was definitely going the wrong way.

EPIC: What was different about PCIT for your child? As compared to other treatment?

Beth: Noticing and verbalizing what he was doing. For example, saying, “I like how you are coloring with crayons.” It was about play and transacting. Me and him getting therapy together as a unit. It taught us how to get along and interact.



EPIC: How were you motivated by the therapist or intake worker to participate?

Beth: The PCIT sessions we had with Allyson taught me that the practice of acknowledging what Alex did in play, by describing and praising his actions, I was then able to give commands, timeouts, say “no” to requests—the right way—and get compliance in return. It was transactional, behavior-focused therapy, but it wasn’t about sticker charts. The reward wasn’t



A picture of a house drawn by Alex for Beth

EPIC: What was your first impression/ what did you think when you started the treatment?

Beth: Finding the baseline for Alex was hard. Having the headset and having to meet goals reminded me of other behavior-oriented therapies and was intimidating. There was no stickers, M&M's or charts so I knew it wasn't that. When I saw it working almost immediately, I knew it was working.

EPIC: When did you start to see a difference in your child's behavior?

Beth: Almost immediately.

EPIC: What was the biggest change you saw in your child after PCIT?

Beth: He's just relaxed. Alex used to wake up in the morning and be afraid to go downstairs if we weren't up yet. Now he'll stay downstairs if we're upstairs. He feels more secure in the family.

EPIC: What was the biggest change you saw in your parenting after PCIT?

Beth: I validate people now. That part sticks with me.

EPIC: What was Alex's favorite part?

Beth: He could decide what to play. He had a cooking set, cars, it was his choice. He always had an opportunity to make decisions.

EPIC: What would you say to someone skeptical of PCIT?

Beth: It saves you time on the back-end because you're not losing time on the meltdown that's going to ruin your entire day. It's like a savings account. You build social capital. If you give a command later, they're going to listen and do it. I also liked working with others rather than trying to figure it out on my own.

EPIC: Where are you now with the status of your child (adoption)? Do you attribute any of this to PCIT?

Beth: We adopted Alex in July 2018. PCIT fixed the relationship, engendered trust between us, and paved the way for us.

EPIC: How have you stayed connected to DBHIDS/CBH?

Beth: I am part of the [Philadelphia System of Care](#) Family Member Committee and Social Marketing. I also participated in a consensus review for the PCIT Request for Applications to

M&Ms, it was a connection. It was clear that it was about how to communicate what Alex needed to hear from me: that I witnessed what he was doing and that I acknowledged when he did something well. That he was seen and valued for who he was. The gentle back-and-forth in play rebuilt our relationship. Our relationship improved dramatically after the first couple of sessions, and the behavior problems abated. I feel strongly that this type of therapy should be part of foster care training because it is the single most helpful thing I've learned as a foster parent.

EPIC: What was your favorite part of PCIT?

Beth: It's a toolset. Sometimes I get away from it and stop using but then the pot boils over so I have to go back to the skills so the pot stays boiling. Play is a big part and something I try to do with him. I try to praise Alex while he is doing his homework and then give him a directive. I don't even think he knows I'm doing it but knows that he loves me.

EPIC: What was the hardest part?

Beth: Trying to get Alex to have a meltdown so the therapist could find the baseline was the hardest part because I didn't want to do it.

help decide which providers would be trained in and provide PCIT to the CBH community.

Special Thanks

Special thanks to Beth for sharing her and Alex's success story as well as Allyson Monarch for providing excellent care to them. Click [here](#) to learn more information about Bethanna.

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