

Co-Parenting: A Commitment of Love

by Georgia Railton and Brendan Smith

Georgia and Brendan are just good friends...and the proud parents of a beautiful little 15-month-old boy, Malakai Finn. Parenting has been an interesting journey for them as when Georgia fell pregnant, her and Brendan were living and working in different states and not in a committed relationship. Brendan and Georgia attended a Nonviolent Communication course offered by Nagadeva and Cate Crombie (cate@powerup.com.au) at Red Hill Paddington Community Centre. **This is their story . . .**

Brendan's Story

The phone call that changes your life - you're going to be a dad. For most people this is the most exciting news they can hear, but as a single man, it turned my world upside down. I wanted to run and hide, deny it...this can't be happening to me! Unfortunately these feelings didn't go away in a hurry. This caused a lot of pain for Georgia as since she was quite ill I had encouraged her to move back home to live with me, and I didn't realise I was in denial until after she arrived. Georgia was going through an amazing transformation as this little person was growing inside her and she wanted to share it with me. The problem was I was still struggling to come to grips with the notion of fatherhood, and she was homeless.

As time went on and I shared the news with more people, the reality kicked in that this was happening whether I was a part of it or not. I started to recognise Georgia's need for support and I wanted to be a part of my child's life. But it was very difficult to provide Georgia with the emotional support that she needed whilst living separately and not having a relationship. The chasm developing between us continued to grow.

The day finally came when Malakai Finn arrived in the world. Instantly the unfathomable concept of fatherhood that had eluded me for 9 months was a joyous reality. I had a healthy, baby boy. It is truly the most amazing experience that anyone can be a part of - to witness the birth of a new life. I'm so grateful that Georgia invited me to be a part of it. Wanting to do as much as I could in my role as a father, I then took a month off work to spend with Malakai and Georgia.

Over the next few months our lives were like a roller coaster with all the ups and downs that go along with a new baby, being compounded by trying to nurture a relationship between us. Georgia and I have very different views on diet and lifestyle, which led to some interesting discussions. At the same time though a lot of our ideas on raising Malakai were similar and we tried to focus on these. We knew that whether or not we agreed with each other's philosophy, it was crucial to have consistency in our approach so that Malakai knew the expectations of his parents and vice versa. In the future when Malakai is spending periods of time with either Georgia or myself this will be even more important to provide Malakai with stability and security, and so as not to undermine each other as parents.

After our attempt at having a relationship ended, our communication rapidly deteriorated to the point where I was considering my options in relation to custody. Sadly, we started to perceive each other's actions as being malicious. Thankfully, our lives were turned around after attending a course on Nonviolent Communication™. I highly recommend this course to everyone, as it provides you with a means of communi-



cating with empathy. We were able to see that we weren't trying to hurt each other; it came down to our perceptions of the other's words and actions. It reinforced for us that we both want what is best for Malakai and that any rifts between Georgia and I will negatively impact on Malakai more than anyone else, and that it's much easier to co-parent as friends than as enemy's.

Co-parenting is very difficult; the hardest part is leaving Malakai every night to go home alone. This just makes the time that I do spend with him more special to me. Malakai is still breastfeeding and as such this limits the amount of time that he can be away from Georgia. This is something that I accept as I'm very supportive of Malakai being breastfed and I know that when he is older and has weaned himself that he will be able to spend more time with me and stay some nights and weekends at my place.

I still believe that a traditional family unit is the optimal way to raise a child, but co-parenting can be a positive alternative. Like any relationship, it takes a solid commitment to your child and each other, and there needs to be a lot of communication, negotiation and compromise to make it work.

Georgia's Story

Brendan recently said that after Malakai, our friendship is the second most important thing in his life. From past experience I know that, like any family, if we don't nurture our relationship, we cannot be the great parents that we want to be. It's a fine line between priorities and it's a matter of finding a balance to make it work for all of us. After a particularly low point, we attended a non-violent communication course to develop our ability to communicate effectively with each other. Without the communication tools and empathy for each other's circumstances that we developed during this course, I doubt we would still be successfully co-parenting Malakai.

Whilst I was very happy to be pregnant, I understood that for Brendan it was an abstract concept that was scaring him. He was not experiencing the miracle of the little life that was developing inside me. I was very hurt at times by Brendan's actions, or lack there of, during my pregnancy. Yet I knew that he would be a wonderful Dad and so I promised myself to allow him the time and space he needed to come to grips with what was happening. And I am glad I did, as from the day Malakai was born, Brendan has been in love with his son. He quickly mastered the art of changing, washing, and folding nappies, burping Malakai, and easing his colic pain. These days he's just as hands-on, coming over every afternoon after work. We all play together for a while so that Malakai gets some time with us both, and we get a chance to chat and talk about our day. Then I go and have some time to myself whilst Brendan makes dinner for Malakai, feeds him, then gets him bathed and dressed for bed. Some nights Malakai falls asleep with Brendan after reading, other nights he just wants 'boobies'.

I love seeing Brendan and Malakai enjoy their time together and I know that Brendan spends as much time as he can with Malakai. However, many a time in the middle of the night, I have wished that Brendan were here to share the parenting load and not tucked up comfortably asleep in his own bed. At times it has been easy to take the moral high ground and add up all the things I've sacrificed and everything I do for Malakai and lament Brendan's absence. But then when I start to get resentful, something will remind me of everything Brendan misses out on, like morning kisses and hugs from our beautiful little boy and getting to go to sleep with a cheek resting against his soft, sweet smelling head. And I realise that I am the lucky (though somewhat sleep-deprived) one in so many respects.

Most weekends we also spend time together or 'the boys' will hang out while I have some 'me' time or run errands. Brendan has a large, close-knit family so they will often visit them. Brendan's parents have been very supportive of both Brendan and I in our parenting of Malakai. They've made me feel like one of the family and I make an effort to attend their family functions so that Malakai can form a bond with his many aunts, uncles and cousins. Brendan also has a lot to do with my mum as she has predominantly lived with me



since Malakai was born. Whilst we've had our disagreements about mothering, she's been my saviour; and my life as a 'single mum' would have been a lot harder without mum's love and support. I'm so grateful to mum and I'm glad that her and Malakai have formed a special bond. He loves his 'Nannoo'.

Like many parents, we've had some interesting discussions about the best way to approach our parenting. I have always been very passionate about nurturing Malakai along natural parenting principles and Brendan has been mostly very supportive of this. I know it has been hard for him with me breastfeeding on-demand, and when we were having a relationship, Brendan was not a big fan of co-sleeping. But now they often share a bed if Malakai falls asleep at Brendan's when I'm out. And the pram he bought now sits and rusts as Brendan quickly fell in love with the idea of wearing Malakai. He tells people how easy and convenient the sling is and how much Malakai loves being worn, but I think he just loves the female attention it brings him!

Sometimes I even think that co-parenting as two single people living in separate houses actually has its advantages over a 'traditional' family arrangement. Now that Malakai's getting a little bit older, it means that when I want to go out I just organize with Brendan to look after him, whereas when a couple want to go out together they have to arrange a babysitter. It also means I don't have a partner coming home from work expecting the house to be clean and dinner to be made. I know there have been days when I've been very grateful for not having to 'give' to anyone else at the end of the day. I could just go off for a swim, come home, eat and drop into bed ready for Malakai's next feed. I have the utmost respect for mums with partners, as they have to find the energy at the end of the day to nurture another relationship.

For me, the hardest aspect of co-parenting has been seeing Brendan every day and not being able to share the love I feel for him. To strangers in the street, I have a wonderful son and partner. The reality is, I live with this illusion everyday and that makes the grieving harder. Many a time I've wanted to pack up and run away, but then I remember how much I love watching Brendan and Malakai together. That special father-son bond they have. So I put my ego aside and deal with the emotions as they come up. Some days are easier than others but most nights it breaks my heart when Brendan gives me a kiss and a hug goodnight then leaves. Often I've ended up in tears; but then a little head rests on my shoulder telling me it's time for bed and I remember how blessed I am. I'm known as 'mum' to a beautiful little soul named Malakai and Brendan has given me that gift for which I will be forever grateful.

We've had a lot of challenging times and as Malakai grows up our family dynamics will continue to change. I know I will find it hard when he weans and starts to spend more time at Brendan's. And if either of us has another relationship, we will no doubt face some challenges too. But it saddens me when I see adults putting their child(ren) in the middle of parental ego battles. So I will continue to work at giving Malakai the gift of a wonderful relationship with both Brendan and I, and our families. Co-parenting can work; it just takes a lot of work and sacrifice. But I think it's worth it!

Brendan Smith is a Human Resource Manager for Education Queensland and is in the process of setting up a Property Management business he can run from home, so he can spend more time with his son. **Georgia Railton** lives in Brisbane and is a stay-at-home mum who works from home as a Mortgage Broker. She hopes that Malakai won't be her only child.