

The 'orphan' grandparents

by CLARE CAMPBELL - Last updated at 00:13am on 3rd April 2007



Reunited at last: Pamela Wilson with her beloved granddaughter Jenny

When Pamela Wilson was 55, she gave up her job as an occupational therapist to look after her son's daughter, Jenny, from the age of nine months.

But when Pamela's son James and his partner Anna separated, Pamela found herself banned from all contact with her granddaughter - grandparents have no legal rights when a couple split.

Scroll down for more

Here, Pamela, who lives with her husband, Ian, 60, a retired textile manufacturer, in Telford in Shropshire, tells the harrowing story of her three-year battle through the courts to be finally reunited with Jenny .

Losing Jenny, my four-year-old granddaughter, in the terrible way I did felt like a bereavement. Even

now, five years later, I can hardly bear to recall it. Yet the details of that day, and the date, February 17, 2000, are etched into my mind for ever.

I didn't know it, but that evening was to be the last time I would see my granddaughter for almost three years.

We didn't even have time to say a proper goodbye. One minute I was playing with Jenny in the front room, and the next, following an unexpected ring at the doorbell, I found myself staring into the faces of two uniformed police officers telling me that they had come to take Jenny home to her mother.

I was so shocked I did not know how to reply. All I could think was that I had to let Jenny, who was now crying and confused, go with them. I remember cuddling her as I helped her into her coat, feeling as if my heart was being torn from my body.

Jenny, the only child of my youngest son, James, and his long-term partner, Anna, had been my whole world, my life, since the day she was born. James was 31 at the time and was trying to build up his construction business.

Anna had a job making training videos before Jenny was born, and when James told me that Anna wanted to return to work, I immediately offered to give up my own career as an occupational therapist to care for my granddaughter.

My husband, Ian, had already retired by this time due to ill-health. But even though losing my salary would mean a substantial reduction in income for us, I didn't hesitate. I remember thinking that there were some things in life that mattered more than money. Providing my granddaughter with a secure and stable upbringing was one of them.

From the time she was nine months old Jenny and I enjoyed the most wonderful time together. Each morning, at around 8.30am, Ian would drive over to James and Anna's house, collect Jenny and her mother, before dropping Anna off at work and coming back here.

I must have been the proudest grandmother in the area, wheeling my gorgeous, dark-haired, blue-eyed little granddaughter out to the park each day, taking her to feed the ducks or just sitting on the grass and playing.

As she grew older, I occasionally took her to mother and baby groups, before enrolling her into the local playgroup just before her third birthday. I adored watching her grow up, as did her grandfather. We loved having her in the house and I looked forward to seeing her smiling face arriving each morning.

But by the time Jenny was four, I was becoming increasingly concerned about James and Anna's relationship.

After ten years together they now seemed to be arguing frequently, often in front of Jenny. I did not want to interfere, but started to become worried about what might happen if they separated.

I knew Jenny would not only be very upset but also that it would be very destabilising for her. I hoped desperately for her sake that James and Anna might be able to work things out. In the meantime, I made sure that Ian and I provided Jenny with as stable a daily routine as we possibly could.

It was a very emotional day for us when Jenny finally started full-time school. But I consoled myself by thinking that at least I would still be able to see her in the afternoons and at weekends.

For the first few weeks, Ian and I took our grandchild to school and collected her each day, taking her back to Anna each evening.

At the same time, James and Anna's relationship continued to deteriorate to the point that James finally

called me to say he had moved out into a flat on his own. I told him how sorry I was. My main concern, however, was Jenny's continuing happiness.

Then one evening, around two weeks before the visit by the police, I received a call from Anna asking me to babysit for the evening. She told me that she wanted to see her sister so they could discuss the problems she and James had been having.

Although obviously very concerned, I still wanted to remain on good terms with the mother of my granddaughter and said 'yes' immediately.

What I did not know then, and only learned later from my son, was that Anna was not seeing her sister - but instead was going to meet her married lover at the airport on his return from a business trip abroad.

The following afternoon, while Jenny was with us after school, my son went round to visit Anna unexpectedly - and discovered to his fury that her lover had moved in. After a furious row, James returned and told us that he was not letting his daughter go back while 'that man' was still in the house.

We did our best to calm him and following a very brief call to Anna to tell her what he was doing, James took Jenny to stay with my brother for the weekend as had been previously planned. Jenny then stayed on with us, with her mother's full knowledge, for the whole of the following week.

I hoped that matters might settle down. What I had never in my wildest dreams expected was a visit from the police to take my granddaughter away. It seemed that Anna was so bitter because of the break-up that she'd decided to use force with us.

I'd never have said she couldn't have her daughter back - but she wasn't taking any chances. Jenny was crying now, hanging onto me and clearly distressed. I tried to reassure her that she was going home to her mother.

One of the policemen said sympathetically: "I can imagine how upsetting this must be for you, Mrs Wilson. I have two boys of my own . . ."

I stared back at him, suddenly wanting to pull my granddaughter back into my arms. "What will happen now?" I asked. "As your son and his girlfriend are not married, your son needs to apply for an interim parental responsibility order," he replied, "but there shouldn't be any problem."

With tears in my eyes I kissed Jenny goodbye, and the policemen slowly led her from the house. My last sight of my grandchild for the next three years was a forlorn little figure on the front path waving a tearful goodbye.

Following a sleepless night for all of us, James went to see our family solicitor the next morning. After talking to Anna later that day, our son came to tell us that Anna was not objecting to James seeing Jenny - but on condition that he did not bring her to see us.

I could not believe that Anna could be so cruel. But my main concern was how Jenny would take it. I was determined that I was not going to be prevented from seeing my granddaughter, so the following morning I went to see our solicitor myself.

As grandparents, we did not count as 'relatives', he told us. We had no intrinsic legal rights to see our grandchild. I was horrified. But there was a gleam of hope. He advised us to apply to the court for a visiting order - and there was a strong chance of it being granted.

In April 2000, just over a month after Jenny had been taken away, Ian and I attended court to plead for leave to apply for our own contact order.

Four weeks later, James was granted an interim parental responsibility order to see Jenny every

Saturday from 12am to 5pm. But we were still not allowed to see her.

Following a second court hearing in June 2000, Ian and I were granted an indirect contact order. We were still cut off - but at least it meant that we could send letters and postcards to Jenny, although at her mother's insistence we were not allowed to see her.

Anna gave no reason other than she felt I was trying to undermine her as a mother.

I wrote to my granddaughter, and got two letters in return saying how much she missed and wanted to see me. I kept her bedroom at our house exactly as it was on the day she left it.

Haunted by the thought that I might never see Jenny again, I was by now determined to fight to do whatever it took.

A few weeks later, after attending an extensive interview with a family welfare officer, a report was submitted to the court to request that Ian and I be granted full contact with Jenny.

But again at Anna's request, although with no specific reason given, the contact was denied. Christmas 2001 was undoubtedly the worst of my life.

Without Jenny there I had no heart to decorate the house. All I could do was to buy her presents of dolls and toys to give to James to pass on.

The following summer, James was at last granted full parental responsibility, which meant he had to be consulted on everything from Jenny's education to medical treatment. He'd also get regular access. But there was still no news of our separate application to see Jenny again.

James talked about her endlessly, as well as giving me photographs to look at. But it wasn't the same as being able to hold her in my arms. She was growing up and by the time we finally saw one another again she might not remember me, I realised.

Another Christmas came and went without her. My worst fear was that I might never see her again. Then in spring 2003 we at last received a date for a further hearing.

It would be in the autumn, ages to wait. But, to my joy, the judge confirmed a direct contact order. I looked forward to a reunion more than anything in my life before.

It happened on November 13, 2003, at a contact centre in Wolverhampton. I was extremely nervous as Ian and I sat there waiting for Jenny to arrive.

Then suddenly she was there - standing shyly at the door looking at us. I stood up immediately to rush over and give her a hug. For the first ten minutes we were all very self-conscious. It was strange seeing one another after so long and Jenny had grown up so much.

But knowing we had two hours together, I took things slowly, playing with Jenny rather than bombarding her with questions, and showing her a story I had written for her about our new Jack Russell puppy, whom she had heard all about from her father.

Tears welled up in my eyes as I watched her suddenly slide off her chair and come to sit on her grandfather's lap. I knew then for the first time that we were going to be able to rebuild our relationship. After that, Jenny seemed to relax and be comfortable with us again.

Through the years of anguish before the reunion, I had begun to think more and more about other grandparents like ourselves.

I discovered that more than 200,000 non-custodial fathers had lost contact with their children after separation and divorce, so the parents of these men would have no contact with their grandchildren.

I started up a support group for other grandparents, running a helpline as well as answering some of the

most distressing pleas for help. Some died without ever seeing their grandchildren again, and in many cases, I felt, it was a death hastened by a broken heart.

It is now four years since we were reunited with Jenny and we see her every weekend as well as school holidays. Last Easter, she spent five days with us.

It was wonderful celebrating Jenny's 10th birthday, Ian's 60th and our wedding anniversary all at the same time. But at the same time, it saddened us to think of how much time we had missed together through our enforced separation.

The whole experience was horrendous. I could not help feeling at times that the courts had no interest in the way families are breaking up, and children are losing their roots as a result.

Perhaps if the Government put more money into helping women stay at home and look after their own children instead of into assisted childcare, the divorce rate might come down and there would not be so many children forcibly estranged from their own families.

Grandparents in our position will continue to lobby Parliament until the law is changed to recognise us as family members who can do an important job in providing security for children damaged by the separation of their parents.

Grandparents Action Group UK can be contacted on ☐01952 582 621☐, www.gaguk.net.

15 people have commented on this story so far. Tell us what you think below.

I wonder what the child's mother's view is on this story. I don't worry about unmarried fathers, if we teach our sons that women are to be protected and respected then they wouldn't be making babies without the secure relationship boundary called marriage.

- Sandra, UK

As grandmother of two very small grandsons, whilst reading your story, I had a huge lump in my throat.

Can only imagine the heartache both you and your husband went through, to see your little granddaughter again. Once a grandparent, always a grandparent and I applaud your actions.

- Glenda Case, Alberta, Canada

You Go Grandma! Good for you for fighting for your Granddaughter. After all you did to help Anna with raising Jenny, she was heartless and cruel to prevent you from seeing her. She did it for her own selfish reasons. I'm so glad it worked out!

- Cathy, Calgary, Canada

I don't think Grandparents should have rights, my mother in law scares my child and is obsessed with her. If my husband and I split I would fight till the end to make sure my daughter did not have to see her. I appreciate these grandparents did no wrong but it is a parent's right to protect their children.

- Claire, Scotland

One paragraph in this heartbreaking story sums it all up! Perhaps if the Government put more money into helping women stay at home and look after their own children instead of into assisted childcare, the divorce rate might come down and there would not be so many children forcibly estranged from their own families.

- C Green, Brussels, Belgium

I can't understand a mother that would deny her child access to love, she has in fact indirectly punished her daughter in a pathetic point scoring attempt.

Regardless of the mother's feelings toward her previous partner the child has every right to maintain her relationships. Would this not after all help her adjust through her parents break up with more ease?

- Dawn Best, Geneva, Switzerland

What about the fathers? Many will be amazed that there is not a presumption of 50:50 custody of children unless one parent is proved to be inappropriate. I'm extremely surprised (well not really) that the so called 'equal' opportunities commission doesn't make this it's number one priority. How Mr Cameron/Blair can criticise 'absent' fathers when they won't even allow fathers that want to be with their children custody. This is a modern day outrage.

- Simon, York

Unconditional love is what is needed, to be a good parent and this means allowing your child to form bonds with other people without feeling threatened by this. I was the happiest grandmother and looked forward to see her grow up but it has been a year since I was banned from her life by her mother. I can't even see my son without her being present. She has made up all kinds of weird stories about me and I realize now how easy it is to play on a young mans' (25) still ambiguous feelings about his mother and vilify her. So please, don't shut your eyes to the signs of mental instability and self-centeredness like I did. I tried to nourish this painfully insecure young woman and see no evil, until suddenly she stabbed me in the back, with gusto! I trust that time will set everything right but meanwhile I'm missing out on the first years of my granddaughters life! This can never be replaced or made good.

- Anne Marie, Stockholm, Sweden

Never mind grandparents have no rights, dads have no rights either. My husband went to court on numerous occasions to get access to his 2 daughters. Court orders were made in his favour and his ex just sacked them off with no punishment for doing so. 18 months ago my husband nearly died after having a massive brain injury. His ex has now refused to let him see their girls again, safe in the knowledge that he now has neither the energy or funds to engage in futile court arrangements. He doesn't know if he'll ever see his kids again. His ex now has a new fella on the scene and just wants to edit my husband out of his kids life as he's disabled and can't pay maintenance for them. Family law in this country is a joke and not a very funny one.

- Clare, Derbys

We've only heard one side of the story and if this is the way Mrs Wilson behaves when she can't have what she wants, I'm not surprised Jenny's mother stopped her having access.

Mothers absolutely DO have the right to remove their children from parents-in-law's care if they feel their own roles are being undermined. Nobody loves a child more than their mother - not even grandparents - and it's good that the law reflects this.

- Anon, UK

And the courts do it all in the 'best interests of the child'.

- Roy, Southend, UK

Grandma sounds like a control freak to me, women without an employment history are doomed to low income jobs no matter how easy the government might make it for them to 'stay at home'. I'd move to the other side of the planet and tell Grandma she was welcome to visit whenever she fancied a stay in a hotel.

- Gill Holmes, Nottingham, UK

Sadly just another symptom in the breakdown of family life. Adults do their own thing regardless of the consequences and children in many different ways are often the real victims.

- Jan, UK

I am sitting in my office with tears in my eyes after reading this. We are in a similar position ourselves, and I identify with every one of Pamela's feelings and observations. Our grandson is five and a half, and we have seen him only briefly since January 06. Our ex daughter-in-law has stopped contact with both our son and ourselves. She reinstated it briefly last summer, but stopped it again suddenly after a few weeks. Our son earns a little over the limit for legal aid, but isn't able to afford a solicitor - on top of this he now says he's reluctant to pursue the matter because he's worried about causing upset for our grandson if his ex decides to suddenly stop contact again as she did before. The long and painful goodbyes after our few brief times with him last summer were very hard to cope with - to hear a five year-old say "Bye bye Daddy/Grandma/Grandad I'll never forget you" is heartbreaking.

Grandparents do deserve rights just as children deserve grandparents.

- Anon, Sheffield

For all you people commenting about the grandmother and going on about the mothers rights - it is the child's rights not anybody else's that should be considered. Anna was quite happy for her daughter to spend every day and time during holidays with her grandparents whilst she worked so how come all of a sudden they are some sort of monsters that should have no contact with their granddaughter? Seems she made use of them and then became jealous of the bond between them and her daughter, but this was not doing what was right for Jenny, it was all about her own jealousy. To stop a child spending time with the people who have all but raised her since she was nine months old is just plain cruel.

- Cathy, Watford, England