

The Three Abbott Children

Mark and Joelle Abbott are a lower, middle-income family living in a small city in Pennsylvania. They have three children: Milo, who is 14; Kira, 5 ½; and Jack, 13 months. A fourth child, Celine, died at age four, almost six years ago. Celine had spina bifida and was always confined to a bed or chair. During Celine's life, Joelle was active in an association of parents of children with severe birth defects, and she still does fundraising for the group. She is a stay-at-home mom, and Mark is a car mechanic. They attend a Methodist church, where Mark is active on various committees. The family is receiving child welfare services because when Milo talked back, Mark hit Milo in the face and gave him a black eye.

Milo, 14

Like both of his parents, Milo is tall, standing 5'10". He weighs 135 pounds. Right after his 13th birthday, his voice began changing, and he began getting facial, and then genital, hair. He often gets acne and stands in front of the bathroom mirror for long periods applying medication to his face, shaving, combing his hair, or, alternatively, playing the air guitar to headphone music. While Mark and Joelle regret the day they settled for a one bathroom house, they are pleased to see Milo "so normal." During the years Celine was alive, Milo, an outgoing and cheerful toddler, became quiet and hyper-vigilant. He was mother's helper for all that was needed to care for Celine. Today, he is an average student in the 8th grade. He plays basketball, and he and Mark practice a lot in the evenings and on weekends. His eyes are on the prize—making at least the JV team next year in high school. Maybe even Varsity freshman year, he's just that good.

While Milo loves his parents and little sister and brother, there is much that he keeps to himself. He wishes his mother hadn't been pregnant with Jack; it was embarrassing to have her waddling around town, coming to school activities, all sticking out like that. Some guys at school kidded him about his parents "doing it." Jeez, how embarrassing that was! Milo has wet dreams sometimes, which his dad told him would happen, but it is embarrassing, too—his mom finding the sheets! Well, at least she hasn't said anything to him. And worst of all, he hates it that his mom still keeps talking about Celine and that her picture is on the mantel—she is so deformed looking! He hates himself for feeling this, and he never says anything, but he wishes they would put it away. And that his mom would stop talking about her, like she's still alive or something! Another thing—his parents are always telling him to try to see things from other people's point of view because, to be tolerant, you have to do that. Well, that is okay as an IDEA, but in reality, it can be really stupid. Like, Mr. Carlson, his social studies teacher, is ALWAYS harping about the rights of minority groups, but everyone can see that he is totally gay, and so it's way obvious that he just says that because he wants all those rights for himself! If Milo joins the Army, which is in fact just what he plans to do right after high school, he does not want any gay guys there in the shower with him! No way. So, you can only take ideas so far, and this idea of tolerance is good, but there are limits!

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While all of these thoughts occupy many hours of his day, Milo keeps them to himself. Sometimes he daydreams that he could tell all his thoughts to Ms. Arlen, the math teacher, and that she would comfort him and tell him that he is right about all of it. She is a new teacher, so she can't be more than about 20, or something like that, and she always smiles extra long at him.

Kira, 5½

Kira is a happy child, who started kindergarten this year. She is outgoing and physical, and enjoys playing rough and tumble games, and she wants very much to be with other children. She is 3 feet, 11½ inches tall, and weighs 55 pounds. Dr. Ebbert, the pediatrician, has encouraged Joelle to plan her meals well. She tells Joelle to let Kira play as much as she wants—it's good for her physical and mental health. Joelle and Mark agree—Kira has always been kind of a handful, and it seems to help to let her burn off energy. And, following her older brother and father, she seems to be naturally athletic. Mark is amazed at her skill and nerves of steel on a bicycle. Over Joelle's objections, he took the training wheels off last weekend, and she is getting around just fine in the church parking lot. Even Milo didn't do that until well past age six. Her soccer coach says she runs faster than any kid on the team, and that she can kick the ball when it's moving. However, she frequently runs roughshod over the other kids and doesn't seem to realize it.

At their first parent-teacher conference, her kindergarten teacher told Joelle and Mark that Kira wants to be with other children, but she often bulldozes her way through group activities, and the other children don't like it. Kira seems oblivious to their reactions, but is concerned when her teacher explains this to her. However, she forgets when the next opportunity for exuberant participation presents itself. The teacher tells Joelle and Mark that Kira doesn't "pick up on social cues," but clearly wants children to like her and doesn't steamroll in order to exert power; she just gets enthused.

Kira also enjoys coloring and painting. She is a lefty and is most adept with her inch wide chalk sticks. She recently made an expansive chalk drawing of "clouds and sun and raindrops covering everything in the whole world" that covered the better part of the driveway to the family's garage. Joelle has been working with her on letters and numbers, but she seems uninterested, and Joelle isn't sure it has clicked for her that these graphics represent sounds and numbers.

Jack, 13 months

"Jack, our Sprat, could eat ALL the fat," says Mark. Jack is 33 inches and 28 pounds. Jack is an outgoing, babbly baby who jabbbers most of his waking hours and communicates his needs effectively using a series of monosyllables (baaw, ummmm, ehhhh,) facial expressions, gestures, and various pitched cries. He loves peek-a-boo and tickle threats. He is cruising, but not yet walking. He scoots around on his bottom and crawls with great speed. Kira loves playing with Jack; he seems to be able to take her rough and tumble approach. He squeals her name as something like, "Kikikikiki." Their favorite toy is a set of wooden spoons, which Kira gives to Jack, and then says, "Gimme, Jack, gimme the spoon!" Jack whacks her with the spoon, and they both laugh uproariously and carry on, repeating this endlessly. Joelle puts a stop to it by dinner time—it is hard enough getting Jack to sooth down and fall asleep by 8 p.m.