

SQUEAKY CLEAN by Karen Dennis

Several years ago I was a busy registered childminder. I once looked after a two year-old girl named Michelle. She was a pretty little thing, with bright blue eyes and silky blonde hair.

I first met Michelle when she accompanied her mother on a visit to my house. The mother asked if I would take care of Michelle while her parents were at work.

During that initial interview, Michelle sat quietly playing with some dolls, while I spoke to her mother. I explained how I ran my business: that is, my fees, what we did on a typical day (not that any two days were ever the same!), the days and times that Michelle would be coming to my setting, and so on.

We also discussed things like behavior management, meal times, allergies and time off due to sickness and holidays. Michelle's mum said immediately that she wanted a full-time place for her daughter to start in two weeks' time. I took a small deposit, which she willingly paid, and we both signed the contract and had a copy each to keep. I had also shown this parent all of my policies and explained about my accident/incident book, where any accidents, like bumped heads or grazed knees, were recorded and signed by both myself and the child's parent. I would also record any existing injuries a child may have, as a way of protecting myself. As I worked alone, I was open to allegations.

The next time I saw Michelle was two weeks later. On her first day with me, her mum dropped her off with a bag containing a spare outfit of clothes, in case of accidents, and a packed lunch. Michelle happily kissed her mummy goodbye and went into my playroom, to join two children who were already playing.

I soon discovered that Michelle had a love of books, as she chose two and asked me to read to her. The books she wanted were about a brother and sister, Alfie and Annie Rose, by Shirley Hughes, who along with Julia Donaldson is my favorite children's author.

We sat together on my sofa and while I read her the stories, the little girl cuddled up to me, feeling relaxed and at home. As it was a warm pleasant day we went to the local park after eating lunch. Michelle sat on the grass next to a climbing frame surrounded with wood chippings, providing a safe landing for any child who fell. Michelle squealed with delight as she grabbed a handful of chippings and threw them into the air, she giggled infectiously as they landed in her hair. I cleaned her hands with a baby wipe and we sat together to enjoy an ice cream. The following week I took the children to a toddler group. Michelle asked if she could do some painting, so after putting an apron on her, I gave her some paper and an assortment of paints. She took the black paintbrush and painted her hand and arm up to her elbow. She seemed to be really enjoying herself, and said to me:

"Look at my very black, messy hand."

A week or so later, we were all having lunch together in my kitchen. Michelle was eating a yogurt, which was part of her packed lunch. Suddenly she let out a yell and pointed in horror at her dress,

"Oh no," she said, struggling to hold back tears.

"It's ok." I tried to reassure her. "I can soon wipe that off."

"But mummy will be cross," she sobbed.

She was now getting distressed. I picked her up, wiped away her tears and told her that I was sure her mummy wouldn't worry about it, but she was still very upset, so I took off her stained dress and put a clean one from her bag on her. I explained that before her mother arrived, we would change her clothes back and after I had wiped off the yogurt, her parent wouldn't know about it. Michelle gave a big sigh, hugged me lovingly and looked as though a weight had been lifted off her shoulders.

On another occasion, Michelle wet herself leaving a puddle on my bathroom floor. Again, she became very distressed and screamed so loudly I thought my neighbors might be alarmed! Again, I tried my best to comfort her, saying that I could soon mop it up,.

" But mummy will be cross," she stuttered between breaths. Again, I calmed Michelle by changing her into dry clothes and sorting out the soiled.

Later after using the toilet Michelle was frantically scrubbing her hands clean, almost leaving them red and sore. When I questioned her about this, she told me: "Mummy told me I have to do this to get rid of all the germs."

I did, actually speak to Michelle's mother about this (out of her earshot, so as not to alarm the little girl). Her mum seemed surprised at what I told her, but thanked me for comforting her child.

Another time, I took the children to a different toddler group, where they held a messy play session. One activity was for the children to flick runny paint from their paintbrushes onto a sheet of paper stuck on an outside wall. At first Michelle joined in happily and seemed to be really enjoying herself - that was until a little blue paint landed on her head.

She let out a piercing scream in sheer panic. The other children seemed to pick up on her fear. To my horror, I witnessed a boy say: "Let's get the clean kid!" I immediately removed Michelle from the situation and told her I would brush the paint from her hair as soon as it was dry. Again, she relaxed and cheered up.

That evening, I began to wonder to myself if Michelle's mum had a problem with dirt and germs, and what effect this was having on her daughter who was already becoming obsessed with cleanliness and decided to help, by letting her feel at ease, while she was in my home.

Michelle spent around three years with me, until leaving to start school. Sometimes I see her, with her mother, she is always immaculately, dressed and spotlessly clean, she often gives me a wave, as does her mother.