

# babytalk

STRAIGHT TALK FOR NEW MOMS

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# mother's (dangerous) little

It's so addictive

it makes those pills Grandma took seem like candy. Methamphetamine is furiously spreading from rural areas, where it's home-brewed, into our cities and suburbs. Who is vulnerable? Often, exhausted new moms with 24/7 demands. Here's the cautionary tale of one mom-next-door who fell into addiction and then fought her way back

by Elizabeth Fish,  
as told to Lisa Collier Cool  
photographs by Jonathan Sprague

When the police car pulled me over, my first thought was "Why am I getting a ticket?" It was 8:30 P.M. and I was on my way home from Target. My baby girl, Cameren, was asleep in her car seat. After telling me that I was driving five miles over the speed limit, the officer started asking my partner, Derek, a lot of questions. Who was the man who'd talked to Derek in one of the store aisles? We didn't know—just a stranger who'd said hi. Did we have a walkie-talkie? No, I said, getting more bewildered by the minute.

All of a sudden, five more patrol cars pulled up, their lights flashing. The police ordered us out of our car so they could search it. Derek told me not to worry: The police would realize that they'd made a mistake and let us go. But there was something I'd forgotten. "What's this?" an officer demanded, holding up a capsule of white powder from my purse.

I'd never been so terrified in my life. I'd just been caught with methamphetamine. I didn't know it at the time, but the man in Target had been caught shoplifting Sudafed, which contains ingredients used to make meth, and the police thought Derek and I might be running a lab. The officer told me to get into the patrol car with Cameren, while narcotics detectives tested the powder. Soon a female officer got into the car and read me my rights. I burst into tears when she patted me down. How could this be happening? I was barely 20 years old and had never been in any trouble. >





# helper

Elizabeth Fish and her daughter, Comeran



# why moms turn to meth

The drug epidemic that began in rural America has marched into the mainstream. More than 12 million Americans have now tried methamphetamine, and former addicts include celebrities like Jodie Sweetin from TV's *Full House*. Currently, about a quarter of the female clients at the Hazelden Foundation in Center City, MN, are young moms addicted to meth, says women's unit supervisor and counselor Sheila Hermes. Julie Queler, founder of the Orchid Recovery Center for Women in Palm Springs, FL, notes the same trend: "About one-third of our clients are middle- to upper-income women ages 25 to 35, addicted to meth."

The highly addictive stimulant, which can be snorted, smoked, swallowed, or injected, has a particular allure for moms, agrees Judy Murphy, cofounder of Moms Off Meth in Cedar Rapids, IA. "It's a very seductive drug because at first, the payoff seems huge: Not only can it help new moms lose weight after being pregnant, but it boosts their energy so much that they feel like Superwoman. And because meth lifts inhibitions, women may also gain a sense of greater intimacy with their partner, which in turn raises their self-esteem."

There are other factors behind America's meth epidemic: It's less expensive than cocaine and produces a longer-lasting high than that drug does. Typically, the stimulant causes an intense rush within minutes, followed by a burst of energy and a sense of well-being that lasts up to 12 hours. Meth is also easy to get because it's made from legal ingredients, some found in over-the-counter cold remedies.

"Moms can make it in their own kitchens, instead of going to a dealer on the corner," notes Queler. "Their husbands may not even know they're using it."

Eventually the drug turns on you, however: Chronic meth abuse can lead to anxiety, hallucinations, paranoia, uncontrollable rages, heart problems, and even stroke. Meth use also rots teeth ("meth mouth"), wrinkles skin, and creates an intense itching that can result in scarring from scratching. Then there's the psychological toll: "Every mother I've worked with has huge guilt and shame about what she's put her children through," adds Murphy. For more information on meth addiction and treatment, go to [www.orchidrecoverycenter.com](http://www.orchidrecoverycenter.com).

By the time I arrived at Linn County Jail, in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, on that March night in 2005, it was close to midnight. I had to get naked in front of a female sheriff for a humiliating body search; then I was given a green jail uniform, photographed, and fingerprinted. I was escorted to a cell and locked in with three sleeping women. I lay down on a metal bunk bed as quietly as possible. All night long, I shivered under the thin prison blanket. I was afraid I'd just ruined my life—and I nearly had.

## instant attraction

Derek and I had met in June 2003, at a friend's birthday party. He was five years older than me, tall, and good-looking. But what immediately attracted me was that he was the quiet one in the crowd, and I'm shy, too. We started seeing each other every day, then moved in together.

After we'd been living together for three months, Derek, who is now 25, told me that he'd been using meth, on and off, for about a year. I was shocked—I'd never

taken any drugs, not even pot. A few days later, he showed me a tiny bag of white powder. "Want to try some?" he asked. I hesitated, but I trusted Derek. "Just a little," I said.

He poured the meth onto a piece of foil, held a lit match underneath, and inhaled the smoke. Then it was my turn. The rush was immediate. I was filled with energy and felt like I could do anything. Soon, I was doing meth a few times a week, staying up all night, cleaning the apartment and having intense conversations with Derek. When I took meth, shyness disappeared; I could talk for hours. It was like life had become one big party.

I began needing more meth to get the high I craved. I gave up my dream of becoming a makeup artist and quit school. I avoided my family. That is, until the day I found out I was pregnant. That changed everything—I was so afraid it would hurt the baby, I quit cold turkey. I had no withdrawal symptoms and didn't even crave the drug.

## weary—and weak

Cameren was born on November 23, 2004, healthy and beautiful, with blonde hair, big brown eyes, and dimpled cheeks. I set out to be the perfect mom. I used hand sanitizer before I touched her, and boiled her bottles. But

Cameren was waking up every two hours and I was worn out. I knew just what would perk me up—and I started feeling that familiar urge.

I felt guilty when I started smoking meth again, but I also told myself it was helping me be a better mom. A few puffs gave me the energy to clean the apartment, do Cameren's laundry, run some errands, and still be wide awake whenever she cried. I was very careful, though, never to smoke around Cameren. I'd wait until Derek got home, and the two of us would put our baby down securely in her crib, turn on an air purifier to keep smoke away from her, and go downstairs to light up. I somehow managed to convince myself that by doing it this way, I could take care of my habit—and my baby.

Then I ended up in jail. Because I had such a small amount of meth, I was charged only with a misdemeanor. I was given a court date and released without bail. A few days later, a caseworker from the Department of Human Services (DHS) arrived at our door. She told us that we



had until midnight that night to show up at a nearby hospital for a urine test for meth. We were terrified.

Later that week, the caseworker returned, with a police officer. "We're here to remove Cameren from your home," she announced. I ran to the crib, screaming, "Why are you doing this?" Derek started yelling that they had no right to take our child. But we both knew what had happened: Our drug tests had come back positive. I was hysterical, crying and asking to hold her one more time.

For five frantic days the only thing I knew was that my baby was in foster care. Then my mother was given custody of Cameren, and I was allowed to visit her a few times a week. It was a relief, but I hated leaving her and coming home to an empty crib. I'd hold her toys and cry, wondering if I'd ever get her back. She got so attached to my mom that there were times when I visited that my baby didn't even want me to hold her.

## crash-and-burn time

Still, I kept on smoking meth. It was crazy: The drug was what had caused all the problems, yet I turned to it to take away the pain. On the bad nights, I stayed up, talking to my mom on the phone, and aching from missing my baby.

My parents helped me find a lawyer, who negotiated a deal: I would enter a drug treatment program, perform 20 hours of community service, and pay a \$550 fine. For six months, I'd be on probation, and if I stayed out of trouble, the drug charge would be cleared from my record.

But we still wouldn't get Cameren back. In fact, DHS assigned us a new caseworker. She immediately suspected that I was still on meth, and warned me that if I didn't get my act together, I could lose my parental rights permanently. That scared me enough to say, "Just tell me

what to do." The caseworker felt it would be easier for Derek and me to get sober if we didn't live together, so he went to live with his parents, and I moved in with my grandmother. She also told me about an Iowa self-help group called Moms Off Meth. I took her advice and went.

At my first meeting, on May 25, 2005, I was high. When it was my turn to talk, I was surprised at how emotional I got. Tears were streaming down my face as I shared my story about being arrested and losing my daughter. I was overwhelmed with the guilt and shame of admitting, for the first time, that I'd become an addict—and was in danger of losing Cameren forever.


Then other women told me that they'd all been down that road, they'd dealt with it, and they'd stopped using. Nearly every mom in the room had seen her child put into foster care thanks to meth addiction. I looked at these moms and thought, "If they can do it, by God, so can I."

Withdrawal made me feel miserable this time. You want to lie in bed, you're very tired. You sweat. You feel nauseous. But every Wednesday, I went to Moms Off Meth. It was inspiring to hear what the other women were doing to stay clean. And I told them something that worked for me. One night the craving got so bad that I called my mom in tears. "Why don't you come over?" she said. Although it wasn't one of my scheduled visits, she figured that the caseworker wouldn't mind. How could it be bad, if seeing my daughter helped remind me of why I had to stay sober? I played with Cameren, and hearing her laugh and coo helped so much. I put her down to sleep and lay down next to her. "I love you," I whispered. Getting my child back would be better than any drug, I thought. By the time I left that night, the craving had vanished.

When Derek saw my success at staying off meth for several months, he joined a treatment program, too. We began dating again, and helped each other stay sober. In September 2005, I went back to college. The next month, I completed probation—and rejoiced when the drug charge was officially wiped off my record.

Soon I had much more to celebrate. On January 20, 2006, Cameren moved back home with me. If I stay clean, I'll regain full custody later in the year. That's a challenge I'm up for: This whole mess made me realize that I need to be with my daughter. Getting a second chance to be Cameren's mother is the greatest gift of all. ●

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