

Danielle's daughter was turning on everyone – with no exceptions...

**She's**

**STABBED**

**Amelie!**



With Arijana and Amelie



Arijana doted on her little sister



She'd wreck everything in sight

**G**athering up my two-year-old daughter Arijana's toys, I turned to her. 'It's time to go home, love,' I said. 'No, want to stay with Nanny and Grandad!' she cried, shaking her head. 'She loves it here,' I laughed to my mum Sue as I took Arijana's hand. 'No, Mummy!' she snapped, pulling away from me. I managed to scoop her up and strap her into the car, but all the while she was wrestling me. As I drove, she started screaming in distress. 'We'll come back tomorrow, darling, don't be sad,' I pleaded. But her yells got louder and more piercing. Eventually, pulling into our driveway, I turned to look at Arijana. To my shock, there was a puddle of urine and vomit on the car seat. Inside I cleaned Arijana up, then rang Mum. 'Arijana was in such a state, she had an accident and was sick,' I said. 'It's just the terrible twos,

she'll grow out of it,' Mum replied. As a baby, Arijana had been happy and sweet-natured. The only time she ever cried was when someone other than me gave her milk. 'She likes Mummy best,' I'd say. But recently, she had tantrums over the tiniest things. She hated leaving the house, but once she was at a playdate, the park or with her grandparents, she didn't want to go home. And if we were out shopping, she would scream the supermarket down. Then one day, when Arijana was three, we went to a splash park. A baby started wailing, and suddenly Arijana ran up to her and smacked her on the head. 'What type of child does that?' the baby's mum raged. 'Say sorry, Arijana,' I said, my

cheeks flushed with shame. I took her home. 'Why did you do that?' I asked her. But she just shrugged. In time, I had another daughter, Amelie, and shortly after, Arijana started reception. But before long, I was hauled in front of her teacher. 'Arijana pinches the other kids,' she frowned. 'If you don't sort it out, none of her peers will like her.' 'I don't think she's being naughty,' I insisted. 'I think there's something else going on.' But the teacher didn't want to listen to me. Weeks later, a parent accosted me in the playground. 'Arijana hit my daughter,' she



My girl would turn violent

told me, furious. 'I'm so sorry,' I said, aghast. 'I'll talk to her.' But no matter how many times I explained right and wrong to Arijana, she kept being violent. It put my relationship with my husband under strain. 'I can't deal with this,' he'd tell me. 'You deal with it.' I was churned up with guilt. At home, Arijana started having violent meltdowns. She would scream, cry and launch objects at me. And there would be no warning. She'd be playing with her dolls, then I'd ask her to do something and suddenly, she'd fly at me. After these attacks, I was often left with a split lip, scratched eye or bruises. 'Maybe she's unhappy at school and playing up?' I said to Mum, at my wits' end. I begged the GPs for

help. They referred her to a paediatrician, but there was a long waiting list. Then, when a place came up at another school, I quickly enrolled her. But it made things worse. 'I'm sorry, we're going to have to temporarily exclude Arijana,' the head teacher told me. 'She's attacking the children and staff.' 'But she's four!' I said. 'She needs understanding, not punishment.' They said the staff didn't have the extra teachers to support her, so Mum agreed to start going to class with her. For a while her behaviour improved. But months later, she escaped school by climbing over the gate, crossing a road and running home. One day, after another outburst, I held her tightly as we both wept. 'I hate my brain,' Arijana sniffed. 'It's your fault, why did you have me?' My heart shattered and I knew I had to do something. I researched autism online, but Arijana didn't fit the profile. She was articulate, made eye contact and was sociable. Then I spotted it. *Pathological demand avoidance (PDA) is a behaviour*

**'She ran at her sister with a pencil'**

*profile within the autism spectrum*, I read. The article said that sufferers of PDA were driven to avoid everyday demands – such as leaving the house or joining in with an activity – to an extreme extent. Their behaviour, which included physical attacks, was thought to be rooted in an anxiety-based need to be in control. It said people with PDA were often described as 'Jekyll and Hyde' characters, because they were charming when secure, but had explosive outbursts when anxious. 'That's my girl,' I said aloud. I quickly called Mum. 'She has a hidden disability,' I cried. 'She's not choosing to be defiant and I'm not a bad mum.' The website gave strategies for coping, including enforcing boundaries and giving rewards. In time, a paediatrician diagnosed autism spectrum disorder with significant demand avoidance. But her symptoms grew worse and she'd often wreck the house and smash things. 'I want to be good!' she screamed one day. 'But there are monsters in my head.' Next thing I knew, she had

propelled herself over the side of the staircase. I lunged forward and caught her. 'What are you doing, Arijana?' I sobbed. Did my daughter want to end her life? Another time, she grabbed a butter knife from the kitchen and tried to cut herself. 'I don't want Arijana to die!' Amelie sobbed. She adored her sister. I tried to calm Arijana, using strategies I'd read about. Afterwards, she felt so guilty, she hugged her younger sister. 'I'm sorry, Amelie,' she said. Months on, I had another baby, Isla. But the stress of everything caused my marriage to collapse. When Isla was a few weeks old, we had a visit from the community midwife. Seeing a stranger in the house, Arijana went into meltdown and threw a doll across the room. It narrowly missed Isla, who was asleep on her play mat. I quickly moved Isla into a cot and stayed with Arijana until she calmed down. Desperate for professional help, I admitted Arijana to A&E. Curled up on the hospital bed with her, I felt like my life was a total disaster. We saw the mental-health crisis team. But as PDA was a little understood type of autism, no one really knew how to help us, and after two nights in hospital, Arijana was discharged. A few months passed. Then, one day as I was getting ready to take the girls out, I glanced at Arijana and could sense the red

mist descending. Suddenly, she picked up a pencil and ran towards four-year-old Amelie. 'No!' I gasped. I raced over, but it was too late. She stabbed the end of the pencil into Amelie's back. I tried not to raise my voice. 'Amelie, go into another room,' I said as she screamed. She ran away, sobbing. I tried to help Arijana, but she was inconsolable, so I went to see Amelie. The pencil tip had gone into her skin, and a huge bruise was developing. I gave her painkillers and bandaged it up. But what if it hadn't just been a pencil? What if Arijana had stabbed her sister with a knife? When everyone was calmer, I sat Arijana down. 'Did you know you hurt your sister?' I asked her. 'I don't belong in this family,' she cried. 'I'm mean to Amelie.' 'That's not true,' I said, hugging her. 'Next time you feel out of control, take a deep breath and jump on the trampoline.' After, Arijana patted her sister. 'I'm sorry,' she said. 'I love you.' 'I wish you didn't have autism,' Amelie replied. But we now have to face facts. PDA is a lifelong condition and we are only at the start of our journey. Arijana is six, and at another school. She has a trained teaching assistant to help her and is really improving. Seeing her playing happily with her sisters is so lovely. I've also started writing a blog to help other parents affected. If I can prevent other children from being misunderstood, it will make our battle worthwhile.

**Danielle Jata-Hall, 37, Hemel Hempstead, Hertfordshire**



Starting school



My kids were my world



We're working through it together

If you would like to tell your story in that's life!, email [stories@thatslife.co.uk](mailto:stories@thatslife.co.uk). We pay generously for every story printed.

As told to Asha Mehta. Read Danielle's blog at [pda parenting.com](http://pda parenting.com). Danielle has donated her fee to the PDA society. For more info, visit [pda society.org.uk](http://pda society.org.uk)