

When a child is diagnosed with diabetes, parents want to 'fix everything'. **Deborah Condon** talks to **Betty Fennell** about her experiences



Pictured above is Betty Fennell's daughter Aoife when she was diagnosed with Type 1 at age six

Coming to terms with the unknown

For parents, a diagnosis of Type 1 diabetes in their child can be scary and overwhelming. Betty Fennell's daughter, Aoife, was just six when she was diagnosed almost two decades ago and Betty admits that fear of the unknown meant it was difficult to come to terms with.

Aoife had been feeling very unwell and was extremely tired, to the point that her teacher noticed she was falling asleep during class. She was also

drinking a lot of fluids and going to the toilet more often.

Betty says when Type 1 diabetes was diagnosed, she actually felt a bit relieved as she was concerned it could have been cancer. However, the reality of the diagnosis soon set in. Aoife had to spend a few days in ICU and was in hospital for a total of two weeks.

Help from diabetes nurse specialists

"It was a very anxious and overwhelming time. The diabetes nurses specialists

were fantastic. They made me practise injecting on an orange and then I had to go into Aoife and show her.

"She said she didn't want to be injected, so I had to look matter of fact and say, 'you are sick Aoife and this is what we have to do', but inside, my heart was breaking. I kept it together in front of her, but when I left the room, I burst out crying," she recalls.

Betty says that initially, she ended up watching her daughter constantly

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for fear of what might happen in her absence.

"I was looking for lows, looking for highs, taking her bloods quite often, not allowing her to live without me being there. But then I realised something had to change. She was getting upset that mammy was always with her. Even if she was just playing with her friends, I had to be able to see her.

"I also realised I couldn't ignore my other daughter, there had to be some balance. Diabetes has to be part of your life, but not be your life," she says.

Nothing to hide

Betty points out that the diabetes nurse specialists were "always there" for her.

"They explained everything to me. Looking back, I must have hounded them because I was always calling with questions, but they never made me feel like I couldn't or shouldn't call," she notes.

Betty says there were times that were particularly hard. For example, at around the age of 11, when Aoife was in 5th class, she said she hated life because she just didn't feel normal. However, she was always very open about how she felt, something that was encouraged by her mother.

"I always told her there was no need to hide her diabetes, so she didn't. She wouldn't hide away to inject or check her bloods for



A grown-up Aoife at age 24 is in her final year training to become a play therapist

example," Betty recalls.

Sport was another area that proved challenging. Aoife loved sports such as hockey and soccer and had a particular interest in canoeing.

"We had to keep a close eye on her bloods depending on what sport she was doing, and sometimes even within the one sport. For example, if we had planned for a match, but then that was cancelled and there was training instead,

Aoife's bloods would be different. Or if she was playing hockey, her bloods would be different if she was in goal compared to out on the field. We had to figure it all out," Betty explains.

She says that as Aoife's mother, she found canoeing particularly challenging because Aoife would "be out on her own in the water".

"However, her sister eventually took it up and now we all do it. We did a lot of work on coming together as a family unit and we are very close," she notes.

Now aged 24, Aoife is a piano teacher and is in her final year of training to be a play therapist. She wanted to work for herself as she felt this would better allow her to work around her health.

Stress and relief

Over the years, she has found that stress affects her bloods.

"When she was doing the Leaving Cert, she was capable of honours maths, but her bloods were always high after class because she found it so stressful. She wanted to keep it up but we said, you don't actually need it for what you want to do, so why put yourself through it. So she eventually changed to pass maths.

"Similarly with piano, over the years we realised her bloods were always good after playing because it was calming for her," Betty explains.

She acknowledges that as a parent, a diagnosis of diabetes can be daunting, but there is so much more information out there now and new technology, such as insulin pumps, have made life easier.

"You have to change your life to be aware of it all. But try to focus on today. I kept looking ahead and thinking oh this will happen to her kidneys and this will happen to her eyes. But thinking like that will eat you up, so live for today. I think we project too much into the future.

"Your life will get easier. It's just scary in the beginning because this is your child and you don't want to mess up. And don't beat yourself up if something goes wrong. Parents want to fix everything to make it perfect, but nothing is perfect," Betty adds.

