



Cambridgeshire  
County Council



# POSITIVE OUTCOMES FROM SOCIAL WORK

## Positive Outcomes from Social Work

Social work has suffered, very unfairly, from image problems for many years – mainly because certain sections of the media seem determined to portray social workers as interfering busybodies whose main purposes in life are to remove children from their families and to prevent people from fostering or adopting for silly reasons. We all know that the reality is entirely different and that social workers play a vital role in supporting families and caring for and protecting children.

As part of our Celebrating Social Work initiative, I thought we could redress the balance a bit by collecting together examples of the positive outcomes we achieve for children and families through our day to day work. Colleagues provided over thirty vignettes, any of which could have been worked up into a detailed account – but for reasons of space, six stories, representing a good cross-section of activities, were chosen for an expanded write-up.

Although these stories are quite different, what does come across strongly is the ability of focused social work to make a huge and very positive difference to the lives of vulnerable or needy children and their families. They also demonstrate, in several instances, how well we work in partnership with our colleagues in schools, health and elsewhere.

Reading these accounts again made me feel very proud to be a social worker and I hope they make you feel the same.

The names of the children and young people concerned have of course been changed.

**Sue Knowles**  
**Service Manager**  
**South Cambs and Cambridge City Area**

## A Friend in Need

**Eileen Gordon**, Senior Child and Family Worker, South Cambs and Cambridge, tells us about a 15 year old girl who had a very poor relationship with her mother but who has now been helped to achieve a much more stable and positive outlook on life.

When I first came across Kelly she was living with her mother, stepfather and siblings, her birth father having died when she was young. Mum had a very negative attitude to Kelly, far more so than was justified by her normal teenage behaviour. She constantly belittled Kelly and was also very controlling – not letting her go shopping on her own for instance. Mum was adamant that Kelly was beyond control and that it was our responsibility to put this right – “you have to discipline her”!

My approach centered on befriending Kelly and gaining her confidence that she could trust me to help and support her. This involved taking her out for chats and coffees and generally getting her to be comfortable in my company. During this period, mum got Kelly arrested for fighting with her and for alleged criminal damage (breaking a plant pot). In its own way this led to a breakthrough because it resulted in Kelly breaking down in tears (something that had never happened before) and imploring me for help.

Kelly had taken cocaine in the past and was still using cannabis – all very much as an escape route from the problems with mum. She agreed to come with me to the Bridge Project to discuss her drugs use with them. The people at the Project were brilliant, quickly creating a relaxed atmosphere which encouraged Kelly to ask (very good) questions, the answers to which certainly opened her eyes.

Kelly had kept in touch with her birth father's sister and this was another bone of contention with mum who didn't approve of the contact, especially as the aunt was supportive to Kelly.

Around this point Kelly found a new boyfriend who was an excellent influence on her, especially as he disapproved of drugs – so Kelly stopped to please him. The boyfriend's mother also liked Kelly and indeed began to provide the motherly role model she had never had. Kelly has now in fact moved in with her boyfriend's family and no longer has contact with her mother – whose parting comments, typically, were “do what you like”.

In all I worked with Kelly for nearly five months at the end of which she was attending school regularly and eating properly. She was altogether a happier, more self-confident girl. Since my sessions with her ended last autumn I have heard no more so I assume “no news is good news!” and that she'll start at college in September as planned.

In my experience the key to befriending is to get the young person's confidence, given that they often don't trust adults, particularly social workers. This can take two or three months. You need to avoid any tendency to lecture or to position yourself as the expert. Open, informal discussion is the best way, showing full respect for the young person's views and opinions and guiding them along gently.

The other key to the success of this piece of work was the contribution of colleagues. I've already mentioned the Bridge Project and Marie Fella, the Home-School Liaison Worker with Kelly's school was also brilliant – she has a terrific ability to get on the same wavelength as teenagers and gain their trust. The Head of Year at the school was also an enormous help to Kelly, regularly reassuring her that she was a bright girl, to counteract the negativity from home.

By the time you read this, I'll have taken up a new position in Peterborough but I'll always look back with pleasure on this case given the transformation in this girl's life that I was able to help make happen.



## Supporting A ScapeGoat

**Lisa Cousins**, Social Worker in East Cambs and Fenland Children's Team, reports on how a girl living in risky and unhappy circumstances was helped to rebuild relationships with her family and learn to enjoy life.

Laura was referred to social care after she had taken overdoses on consecutive evenings. She was living with her pregnant mum and four siblings. It became clear that she had been putting herself at a great deal of risk and that much of her behaviour was out of control. In particular, she had alleged rape by a local youth but wasn't believed; the local community was supportive of the alleged perpetrator and branded Laura as manipulative and even "evil". Both the out of control behaviour and, ultimately, the overdoses were reactions to this scapegoating. All the family's problems were perceived as being Laura's fault, both by neighbours and the family themselves. She was physically assaulted by other young people and by her mother.

Before the overdoses, both the psychiatric services and family support services had tried to get involved and help improve relationships within the family but it was now clear that the situation was too risky for Laura to stay at home or in the local community. For her own safety, she needed to be accommodated.

Unfortunately the emergency placement we found for Laura didn't work out; the carers wanted her to demonstrate a level of commitment to making things work which was just unrealistic in the circumstances. Another placement was needed quickly and I sat with Laura in a classroom at her school one Friday afternoon whilst the search went on. Although she was naturally upset and had her head buried in her hands, she didn't leave – so evidently wanted help.

The only foster parents who could be found were a newly-approved couple who were also lesbians. Laura initially refused to go and instead went back to her mum's, where trouble immediately flared up and the Police had to be involved. I then arranged for a taxi to take Laura to the foster carers. They received her superbly well, making it crystal clear that they were genuinely interested and wanted her to be there. Laura settled with them quickly and happily. The fact that there were no men around meant she could be a girl rather than the "grown up woman" she had been pretending to be.

My own efforts now focused on rebuilding Laura's relationship with her mum – who loved all her children very much and who really wanted to make changes. The whole family turned up to contact sessions which was a very good sign and though the sessions were difficult to begin with, slowly but surely both Laura and mum began to accept responsibility for what had happened previously and to move away from anger and blame.

At Christmas, Laura had an overnight with her family. Originally this was to have been two nights and it was a sign of Laura's increasing maturity that she

could see problems developing and made her own decision to take herself out of the situation for everyone's good.

In the meantime the school was working hard with both Laura and myself. Their communications were excellent and to their great credit they never excluded her despite her often difficult behaviour.

Laura has been in the placement for six months now and is very noticeably more relaxed and self-aware, helped by the calming techniques which her carers have taught her. She has increasing levels of contact with her family and both she and her mum are better able to see things from the other's point of view. With the help of the Family Support service, mum is building up her parenting skills and in February all the children were taken off the Child Protection register.

Laura will soon reach the point where she will be able to live independently but once this happens she won't be on her own now that her family bonds have been so effectively strengthened. The many of us who have worked with Laura are all delighted for her.



## Transforming A Life

**Joan Blenkinsopp**, Senior Child and Family Worker, South Cambs and City, tells us about a case where a young girl's life was totally turned round thanks to the dedicated support of a range of people.

Kim first came to our attention before she was born – there were concerns about mum's mental health during the pregnancy. Once Kim arrived, a lot of input went in from the Health Visitor, family support and mental health services. Mum's parenting was good enough at the time so the services withdrew.

However, every few months or so, further concerns would emerge, though nothing serious. Mum became pregnant again at which point dad (who tended to be the main carer) left home. He did return after the birth of Tom but left again after six months, at which point it was clear that mum wasn't coping with the children. Both were placed on the Child Protection Register under emotional abuse and neglect.

For another six months we tried our best to work with mum. She was often aggressive and at one juncture assaulted a worker. In the end action had to be taken to remove the children with a view to adoption; Kim was now three and a half and Tom one.

They were placed with a Foster Carer. Within a week, Kim began displaying highly sexualised behaviour and it became clear that she had been a victim of significant sexual abuse. The Foster Carer was absolutely brilliant, seeking all the appropriate support, working with the Plan, attending all appointments and, most importantly, giving the children the love and care they needed.

At the same time the Mental Health service continued to work very well with mum. However it soon became clear that her contact with the children was creating significant problems for Kim and a Court Order was obtained to cease contact with her. Tom continued to have contact for a further three months but mum then stopped this herself.

Reviews were held every three months and we were fortunate in having especially good Review Managers who really kept things moving along.

Regarding my own involvement, this was my first Looked After Child case and therefore a major learning experience. My main role was to support the (wonderful) foster parents, carry out the statutory visits and compile the long and detailed placement and adoption reports. I was (and still am) a student social worker at the time and this was a great case to work, especially because of the positive, can-do attitudes of the foster carers.

Kim's school has also been brilliant and has put very effective strategies in place. When she first attended, Kim was lonely and isolated so the school

arranged for her to have a “special friend” each day to help her get to know the other children. This has really built up her self-esteem. The school has also been quick to seek advice from CAMH about dealing with Kim’s behaviours.

Kim has also benefitted hugely from weekly psychotherapy sessions since 2005 which CAMH have provided.

At the age of 8, Kim is a transformed child from the one who was so frightened and watchful when we first knew her. She is happy, feels safe and is confident. She was initially two to three years behind at school and is now only about a year behind and is still making progress.

The great news is that both Kim and Tom will shortly be adopted by their foster carers. Considering that when we first knew Kim we didn’t think it would be possible to place her with a family and certainly not with Tom (who was always considered “adoptable”) this is a great tribute to all who have worked with her, especially the foster carers.

For Kim, the future looks good.



## The Magic Answer

**Debra Powell**, Senior Child and Family Worker, Huntingdonshire used a very effective technique developed in America as part of her work with a family where one child's behaviour was creating serious problems.

Ben Hall is eight years old and has a diagnosis of ADHD. His behaviour was causing his mum and step-dad enormous problems – trashing his room, threatening to jump out of windows, generally acting in an out of control manner. A Sessional Worker tried to help out but it became clear that more intensive support was needed which is when I became involved.

Having visited the family, I quickly realised that Ben was being allowed to “rule the roost”. When he misbehaved his parents would threaten sanctions but never followed this through so Ben would just carry on.

123 Magic is a discipline management programme written by Dr Thomas Phelan, himself a parent of child with ADHD. It's really a very simple process. You count a child for bad behaviour – so if, for instance, a five-year old child gives you back chat, you say “1”. They do it again, that's “2” and again you say “3, take 5” The child then serves a “time-out” of 5 minutes, usually in their room (the length of time depends on the age of the child – one minute for each of their years). The programme also contains strategies for situations which need more than a time out response. The key message is that, as a parent, you must be consistent about consequences.

With the Halls, 123 Magic was really effective. The parents were open to trying it and found it easy to use (it comes in a DVD format) and to tweak as necessary. A crucial aspect of the programme is that it uses and develops the parents' own skills rather than just telling them what to do. Step-dad was soon informing everyone at work how great it was!

The work itself was reasonably intense with 10 sessions over our months but lots of phone calls and other contact in between.

Ben's behaviour is never going to be easy because of his illness but it has improved by at least 80%. He now goes regularly to school, has stopped trashing his room and is doing fun things with his parents and siblings. When I called recently, mum had been decorating; she laughed and said they would never have decorated in the school holidays before as it would have been decorating away and had bought Ben a new bed because he has stopped destroying his room.

So far as my own role goes, I saw the top priority being to establish a relationship with the family and not to come across as judgemental or “the expert”; it's the parents who are potentially the experts in parenthood and my job is to help them learn the necessary skills. Helped by the programme, I put a lot of the onus onto the parents to solve problems for themselves and thus

feel proud of the solutions they came up with. Sowing the seeds of ideas in their heads was sufficient and the results have really built up their confidence and self-esteem; they now realise that they are good parents.

The happy ending is that, in May, I was able to close the case. The Halls feel equipped to handle Ben's behaviour and are confident they'll be OK. The magic has clearly worked.



## Work in Progress

**Ricky D’Arcy**, Student Social Worker currently placed in the Cottenham and Swavesey Locality Team, describes the work he and colleagues are carrying out to support a lad who has found the transition from primary to secondary school very difficult.

I became involved with John when the secondary school to which he had recently moved became concerned about the marked changes (for the worse) in his behaviour. Both the In-School Support Teacher who is part of our team and myself started working with John.

I’ve had experience in previous work and training with people who are on the autistic spectrum and John’s behaviour suggested to me that this could well be an issue here. The switch to secondary school had obviously disrupted the school routines he was used to. Also, as in many secondary schools, this one now has two-week teacher rotas so again there was much less routine than before.

Although a lot of people were involved with John at this point, no single person was proactively taking a lead on planning and delivering a strategy for him so I agreed to take this on. As a first step I arranged for all concerned, including John, to meet up to identify and discuss the issues and problems. By now John had been excluded four times so issues there certainly were. The school regarded the position as untenable and permanent exclusion was very much on the cards. Referrals to various out of school providers had produced nil response. Although an Educational Psychologist had been consulted she did not believe that he had special educational needs (John is academically bright even though he was unable to cope well in the school setting).

The main element of the support package which I planned was to take John out of school at key points in the week. These outings, which involved external educational services as well as a colleague and myself, had two main objectives – to burn off some of John’s energy (of which he had a superfluity) and then to embark on personal counselling e.g. working on his family tree. Both these strands have proved helpful to John in calming down and making him more reflective.

I’ve also worked closely with John’s parents. At first they were confused by his change of behaviour and found it difficult to deal with. Some of their responses, such as grounding him for several weeks, were counter-productive, especially in terms of energy-burn. However we now have a great working relationship and I have encouraged them to seek an independent special educational needs assessment for John through the Parent Partnership Service.

At the time of writing the end of the summer term isn't far away. I'll continue working with John until then whilst over the holidays I hope to be able to put in place some in-school support for when he returns in the autumn. In the meantime, although there's still a way to go, things generally are looking up for John. His place at school seems increasingly secure. Although he can still be a "social hand grenade" at unstructured times, he's great on a one-to-one basis and his social skills will hopefully improve. The priority is to keep him in school until the formal SEN assessment is carried out then take it from there in the light of the outcome.

As a student this has been a really good learning experience for me, particularly in terms of working with colleagues from health and education. I've also learnt that even if you don't always agree with those colleagues (as was the case here with the Ed Psych) that doesn't mean they won't respect your views and continue contributing. Between us I'm confident that we can help John stay in mainstream education which is where he wants to remain.



# Social Worker Appraisals – Young People Have Their Say

**Aidan O'Reilly**, Team Manager – Children Looked After, South Cambs and Cambridge, describes how children in public care were given the chance to be part of their social worker's annual appraisal – and the very gratifying results.

Our Participation Strategy tells us that we should “ensure children and young people's participation is a core part of work force development. “Easier said than done but our Team decided to pilot a scheme which allows young people to contribute directly to their social worker's appraisal.

When the idea was first floated, there was some understandable nervousness amongst colleagues. Being in care is something that a lot of young people aren't happy about so would this be reflected in what they had to say? We discussed as a team the sorts of questions we wanted to ask and this helped reassure people that the outcomes from the exercise were unlikely to be wholly negative.

We designed a simple form which asked young people to tell us:

- three good things about your social worker
- three not so good things
- answers to specific questions such as how easy it was to contact the social worker, how well they listened and whether they did what they said they'd do.

We didn't send forms to all the Team's looked after children (e.g. they didn't go to anyone currently subject to Orders or proceedings) but we achieved a good coverage. Amazingly, 90% of the forms came back which is a very high percentage for a postal survey.

So, cue a catalogue of moans and grumbles? Absolutely not. Without exception, the comments were positive and highlighted many aspects of the social workers' interpersonal skills and attributes (things which can often get overlooked). Here is a sample of what the young people had to say!

“Caring, trustworthy, respectful, kind, funny – she is fun, humorous, friendly.”

“She is easy to speak to/talk to. Good to be around. She really understands how I feel when I talk to her. She respects me.”

“She does things straight away. She gets all my forms filled out when I need them unlike my old social worker. We got her mobile number. She rings me right back.”

All the young people felt listened to by their social worker and some chose to write more:

“She listens to what I have to say and knows how to have a joke.”

“She meets me in town. She is at Just Us which I attend. She is good fun.”

Two young people said it was sometimes easy to contact their worker, but the others said “always”, Most had contact via phone and e-mail though texts are clearly being increasingly used.

On the “three not so good things” questions there was a nil response except for one who stated “she is perfect in every way”!

I discussed the feedback with the team who were, needless to say, pleased with the results. We agreed to do it again albeit in a more planned way – in reality the forms went out too late to enable sufficient input to the actual appraisals. We might also have a variety of forms tailored to different age groups. We also need to give the young people feedback about what happened with what they wrote.

My own view is that this was a useful and informative process. Young people were clearly keen to give us their views and the fact that these were so positive was great for staff morale. Some specific work practices which young people prefer were highlighted e.g. being able to communicate by text or email. As a manager I was able to learn more about the strengths and training needs of individual staff members and about different practices e.g. in terms of outings.

The success of the project means that next year it will be rolled out countywide. We also learnt a lot from the pilot and there will undoubtedly be changes to the forms and the process. Our survey for instance only targeted 11-16 year olds and it would be good to broaden the age range – and also to include children with additional needs (which is being looked at).

One final comment from a young person:

“She should have a pay rise for all her hard work and effort she puts into helping me with everything.”

**July 2008**