



YORKSHIRE & THE HUMBER

Supporting children and families living with disability – a senior children’s social worker’s perspective

Denise Green, Disabled Children’s Team, Barnsley

Denise is a Level 3 social worker and practice educator working in the Barnsley Disabled Children’s Team.

Denise’s journey into social work began over 20 years ago. She started out after school as a cook in the army but within a year she’d met her first husband, got married, left and had children.

Unfortunately, the marriage was not good and eventually she managed to break free from the relationship and accompanying domestic violence. During the bad times she had approached social services for help but it was not forthcoming so she joined a women’s group for support. This led her to take up work with Homestart to help and support other vulnerable people in need of support. At that time, as a single mum in her 30’s, she wanted to see what else she could do and after some research she completed an access course to higher education with a view of progressing to study social work. Denise went on to complete a Social Work Degree at Sheffield Hallam University and qualified in 1996.

“Looking back, I liked my work at Homestart supporting families and wanted to do more. A career in social work came up as an option when getting advice about my access course and I decided this was for me – it would allow me to take things further than I’d been able at Homestart and give me the opportunity to give support to others in the way I felt social services should have given me when I needed it. I did quite well on my course, much better than I expected, and this enabled me to get into university to do my degree. Over 20 years on I’m now also a practice educator which means alongside my social work duties I support social work students with their learning and development.

“When I qualified, I went to work for a social work agency and had a number of different jobs in Batley, Sheffield and Barnsley. I then got a permanent job in the ‘cradle to grave’ Community Learning Disabilities team in Barnsley. When this split into separate children and adults teams I stayed with the adults until 2005, when I took up a vacancy in the Disabled Children’s Team, which is where I am still today.

“Over my years in social work, things have changed a lot. Teaching methods and approaches have changed as has practice too. Most significantly, the older serious case reviews prompted much closer supervision and support, which really changed things for the better – better practice, better team working, and ultimately, better care and outcomes. However, the underlying focus on how people are, how they and their children can be developed, and what can be done to help them, remain at the core of everything we do. Teamworking and support

for each other is central to our operation. In Barnsley, our stable, experienced and supportive team, from the top down, really makes a difference.

“Although my job is stressful and challenging, like my colleagues, I really enjoy my direct work with families – working with them to establish the best way forward to promote positive change and to create supportive care packages where we can. Working with children with disabilities doesn’t necessarily mean there is always a safeguarding issue. In many cases the focus is on how best to support the family live with and manage the child’s disability. On the whole this means families are welcoming and very appreciative of our support. Where we’re involved in cases with safeguarding issues obviously we are often less welcome.

“Working with children with disabilities can be very wide ranging and emotional. At the beginning of a case a lot of the work may be about helping the children and families come to terms with the disability and that they may have to live with the impact of it or provide care for the rest of their lives. In other cases, it can also be particularly emotional for those children who have a very limited life expectancy – either way it is about trying to give both disabled children and their families the best quality of life possible.

“For example, there was one case where the child, a very little boy, was born with a severe brain injury and was on a ventilator to keep him alive. With a lot of effort we managed to put together a care package which enabled him to live at home with his family. Although it was very sad, there was also a positive side in that he managed to live for another three years at home with his family, rather than in hospital, before he passed away.

“A quite different example was when I helped set up the ‘Keyring’ housing scheme in Barnsley where we persuaded the housing department to rent out ten neighbouring flats where nine would be occupied by people living with a disability and the tenth would have a support worker living in it to be on hand to support the others. This turned out to be life changing for the disabled people who took up the places and one lad who I helped get a place and have a more independent life ended up getting married to another member of the scheme and I went to their wedding!

“Aside from the challenges that go with the job, the two things that I get particularly frustrated with are: the discrimination that people with disabilities suffer; and the negative representation that the media still portray about social work. I don’t think that organisations give enough consideration to people with disabilities – it seems the Disability Discrimination Act is pretty ineffectual – I like to strongly challenge discrimination wherever I can and give disabled people a voice. When it comes to understanding what we do as social workers, general perceptions are still very negative, people still feel that the main thing that we do is to split families up – in most case this is far from the reality. The media should be more responsible and make the effort to present the full picture of what we do including some of the positive outcomes that we get.

“Obviously, there are lots of challenges with this job that can get you down but when you can have a positive effect it is very rewarding, particularly when you get a thank you or acknowledgement from your clients. This could be a phone call, flowers or just a child’s drawing.

“My advice for anyone considering or starting a career in social work is to be open minded about the role you want, even if you have a good idea of which area you want to go into. It’s always good to try different roles to build up and broaden your experience. Understand that working with people can be very unpredictable and therefore there will be ups and downs. Be an active team member – the collective support for each other is essential. Unsurprisingly, you’ll need to develop a thick skin and be persistent – to break down barriers and build relationships you’ll need to balance tenacity with tact. And, above all, listen and don’t judge.

“If you’re passionate about helping others and want to make a difference then like me you will find a career in social work very rewarding”

This case study has been captured as part of Children’s Social Work Matters campaign [‘Improving Lives’](#).