



Children's social work was my calling

Melissa Tupling, Children's Social Worker, Barnsley Assessment and Joint Investigation Team

Melissa is a children's social worker. She qualified in 2016 and shortly after got a job in Barnsley's Assessment and Joint Investigation Team where she is today. She loves her job, working with and helping children, but it wasn't what she wanted to do when she started out.

Melissa started out working in adult social care in different sectors including the NHS, voluntary and the private sectors. Over time, helping adults with learning disabilities became a key focus of her work and when she reached a point where she felt she'd got as far as she could go, she decided that she wanted to be a social worker. She did an access course at college and then got a place at Sheffield Hallam University to do a social work degree.

"When I started the course my clear intention was to be an adult social worker. At the time, having been aware of a number of the children's serious case reviews, such as baby P and Victoria Climbié, I didn't really feel that working with children was an area I wanted to get into or where my strengths were. But, my view completely changed when I did my second work placement.

"My second placement during the third year of my course was in Barnsley in the 'looked after children' team. Up until that point I was adamant that I wouldn't work with children but the experience in the team changed this – I absolutely loved it. I think for me, what opened up my eyes was the journey the children went on with the help of the team and the positive outcomes. I loved every aspect of my placement and got to see how the system helped move these children away from or change situations that they shouldn't be in.

"From there I got an opportunity to apply for a job in Barnsley, which I got. I didn't know where I would be placed and was hoping it would be back in the 'looked after children' team but it was with the assessment team instead. The thought of working on the frontline was very daunting at first but I soon got into it and love it now. Having experienced working with looked after children, the assessment team work opened my eyes to the earlier part of the journey that children and families in care go on. At assessment you have an opportunity to positively influence and map out a path that can really help children. Seeing the difference this can make and seeing children begin to thrive is what it is all about and why I love it.

"Although social work is challenging, I like and find it really rewarding working with people, children and families, and being able to make a difficult life situation better. Even the small personal things make a difference. Like when you're in a family conference and see the

penny drop with families on where they can turn things around. Or like I had the other day, when a parent goes out of their way to say thank you and express how grateful they are for the help you've given them.

"There are challenges. Much of the resistance we come up against when engaging with families is due to the common misconceptions about social work that still exist. People don't understand that our aim is to keep families together and that we actually don't have the legal power to take children out of a family home unless there is a court order. Only a judge and the court can make this decision or the police in certain circumstances if they feel there is a high risk of harm/danger to a child. In practice, building a relationship often means letting the family vent their feelings to start with and then explaining our role as social workers and that our main interest lies in safety and wellbeing of the children and that we are there to provide support and help them. This requires patience, persistence and being open, which are key for building trust and a working relationship with the family.

"Unfortunately, TV series like Kiri don't help our cause. The way the media tend to portray social workers reinforces stereotypes and misconceptions of what we actually do and how we work.

"Social work today is a constantly changing profession and on a day-to-day basis involves many things. As such, you need to be adaptable and accept that you'll always be learning about how to do the job better. You have to be self-aware and mindful to do this in your daily activities. For instance, you need to be able to adapt your approach, language and even appearance to who you are dealing with and in what environment e.g. visiting a home for the first time versus going to court are both very different experiences. Working with children requires a lot of skill and patience – it can be very unpredictable. A key skill is to stay calm and in control of your emotions and not look alarmed when a child says something that you we're not expecting. It's also important to be open with families about what you are there to do and being mindful of how they might be feeling - being compassionate and not being judgemental.

"Social work is hard and challenging, working as a team is essential. My team are my anchor. We have great social work teams in Barnsley. Even though we're all busy, everyone supports each other. Senior staff and management are visible, approachable and connected with the work on the ground. When I started, the team were there to guide and support me through my first steps with families, and when caseloads are getting on top of you or you've had a particularly hard visit or case, they're there to listen, encourage and give support.

"My advice to someone considering a career in children's social work would be to be open minded and not be put off by the negative stories and stereotypes. Seek out as many opportunities as you can to experience social work and work with as many different children and people as you can. You'll learn lots on the way and lots about yourself but hopefully you'll experience the positives that I have and love it just like I do."

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