

Case Study: Lucy's Story

At the age of three Lucy was taken into care by social services. She had been discovered living in a house which was being used as a base for trading in drugs and sexual relations. As a result of living in this environment Lucy had experienced severe emotional neglect as well as physical and sexual abuse. Lucy's behaviour had become so disturbed that she was found to be eating off the floor with several dogs which were also inhabiting the house.

Prior to admission to the Mulberry Bush School, Lucy was placed with foster parents. In week 1 at the foster home her behaviour included wetting, smearing, self-harming, aggression, insomnia, inappropriate affection to strangers, extreme controlling behaviour and cruelty to animals. Her insomnia resulted in one or other of her foster parents having to stay awake all night with her. Attempts at schooling failed as her behaviours were so aggressive and uncontrollable, she was therefore also severely underachieving. As an early intervention to help her make sense of her chaotic life Lucy started play therapy sessions, her therapist described her as being in complete emotional turmoil. During the sessions she was described as being highly aroused, tense and exhibiting signs of physical and sexual abuse she had experienced, she showed no understanding of keeping herself safe. Her therapist commented 'she brings chaos and destruction into everything she does'.

At the Mulberry Bush School Lucy, now aged seven, was placed in one of the four care and treatment households living in a group with other children of primary age. A dedicated staff team lived alongside the children creating a reliable daily routine. The structure of this routine included close supervision and support through all aspects of the day: mealtimes, playtimes, bedtimes, transitions to school etc. They managed and resolved the frequent behavioural breakdowns, arguments, rivalries and the general anti social behaviour of the group of children. With time Lucy responded to this re-education in relationships and started to understand that she could be helped to engage with normal and respectful social living. Through this daily routine the care staff gave Lucy opportunities to help her think and talk about her confused, betrayed, and angry feelings. She started to find alternative ways of interacting and little by little started to come to terms with the injustices in her life.

In the education area Lucy joined the foundation stage where she was helped to enjoy learning again. Alongside an introduction to the National Curriculum the children are encouraged to play with pre-school equipment, listen to stories, sing, dress up and work co-operatively. After a year Lucy moved to the second tier class where expectations of behaviour, application and learning are higher. She was still a noisy child, readily distracted and easily led into others misbehaviour but she made good progress and was able to move to the top class a year before she left the school. During this last year she successfully participated in a weekly visit to a local mainstream primary school, supported by staff from the Mulberry Bush.

During this treatment process at the school, periods at home with her foster parents were still difficult with Lucy exhibiting her previous testing and challenging behaviours, however the school placement offered some respite for her exhausted foster carers who were able to recharge their batteries during term time. With time the foster carers also noticed an improvement in her behaviour, Lucy was becoming more articulate about her needs and started to display more loving and affectionate feelings. The carers began looking forward to a time when she could come and live with them full time, and attend a local school with teaching assistance. After three years Lucy was able to make this transition and return home to her foster parents. She is currently doing well and the placement remains stable. She is successfully placed at a local school for children with moderate learning difficulties and despite being quite demanding is no longer unfosterable nor unacceptably disruptive in school or other social situations.

Case Study: Danny's Story

This is an anonymised case history of Danny who was placed at the Mulberry Bush School.

Danny's parents could not provide the consistent care and supervision he needed, and as a result of this he was often left alone at home. One day Danny was at home in an upstairs bedroom with his baby brother asleep in his cot. Finding himself on his own again, and with his Mum's cigarette lighter, Danny set light to some material, this burnt faster than he had expected, he had a glass of lemonade with him, and although he tried to extinguish the blaze with it this was not enough. Mum, Mandy and Danny managed to escape from the house, but the blaze became an inferno, and his baby brother died in the fire.

Today, Danny talks of feeling a terrible guilt for his actions, he has said that he wishes the lemonade had been in his own words 'a lot of water'. Because of the absence of mature and caring adults in that place at that time, he is left with this burden of guilt and shame for life.

After this event, whilst an inquest was taking place, one of Mum's boyfriend held a knife to Danny's throat and told him that because of the incident he did not deserve to live, he also incited Danny's Mum to kill Danny, although she refused, both adults and his sister lay all the blame on the now six year old Danny. As a result of the incident, the inquest identified Danny lacking appropriate care and supervision. He was taken into care and placed with foster parents and attended a local school. By now Danny was so badly traumatised that his behaviour oscillated between being cut off and withdrawn to aggressive attacks on other children, adults found him to be deeply mistrustful and avoidant of relationships.

After several foster placements Danny was referred to the Mulberry Bush School for specialist therapeutic care, treatment and education. At school he was quiet at first and fairly compliant. However his 7th birthday saw the end of this 'honeymoon' period, he could not enjoy his birthday celebration and trashed the whole experience for himself, from hereon he became very controlling of the adults around him and any experiences involving food and mealtimes. His behaviour deteriorated again before this last half term when he became more defiant and aggressive towards adults.

His keyworker commented on how he started to entice other children to misbehave, as though to get them to enact his hurt and despairing feelings. He also started to copy the chaotic behaviour of other children, as a way of communicating his own low self esteem and a way to dispel his sense of betrayal and anger at adults. His teacher talked of his reluctance to talk about feelings, and how this led to outbursts of violence with no apparent trigger or motive.

In a recent meeting with the schools consultant psychotherapist the staff team talked of the feelings of despair and deep sadness they carried for Danny in their day to day contact with him. His keyworker commented that like parents the staff involved with Danny felt the overwhelming desire to want to take the pain and burden of guilt away from him. The painful realisation for the team is that there is no magic wand to wave, and the staff too will need ongoing support to help them manage these feelings. In this sense an important aspect of our work with children is to offer stability of placement, and a continuity of concern and understanding, to carry hope for the child through those times when they are in touch with their most desperate feelings.

We hope to be able to offer Danny three consistent and stable years alongside mature and caring adults. Danny still has a lot to learn about how to get on with people and to be able to learn in a classroom situation. He responds well to praise. We hope that as his personality strengthens and his self-esteem grows, he will, little by little, be able to leave the pain and chaos of the past behind, for a brighter and more productive future.