**Bath and North East Somerset**

**Connecting Families**

**A Case Study**

**T’s Story**

**Her History**

T described her early childhood as being generally a happy one. She lived with her Mum, Dad and brother to whom she still remains close. There were issues during that time that did have a significant impact on T which mostly focused around her father and his need to control. T witnessed domestic violence towards her mother. This escalated when she was nine when her father stopped working and it was at this point that he became most violent. He was very strict with T and put her under a lot of pressure to do well academically. This pressure became so severe that T was often reluctant, even scared to go home after school where she knew her father would be waiting to help her with her homework. T recollects feeling resentment about the restrictions he put in place. She grew up with the conflict of these feelings and the desire to please him and gain his praise. Her brother grew up with a fear of his father and to this day has a substantial amount of anger towards him.

The family moved from England to Australia and back again. On the family’s return to England her father found a job that required him to move around the country. He only came home at the weekend which made life less stressful for T. However the increased separation between her parents put their relationship under strain and ultimately they separated.

At twenty five she got married and moved into a brand new house with her husband. Over the next few years they had two boys together. They were not poor as both T and her husband both worked. They had enough money to live a comfortable life and have a holiday each year. In her own words T said the first fifteen years of marriage were stable, but not always happy. Her husband was emotionally controlling which included taking charge of money, which friends she could see and what clothes she should wear. He was strict with the children and punitive in his discipline of them. As a result the children were very well behaved in his company and often afraid of him.

The marriage ended when T husband had an affair with her best friend. She was pregnant with her third son at the time. She found out that the affair was widely known about in the community. Feeling humiliated, isolated and bereft, she decided to leave her home and rent a place near her mother until she could buy another house which she did six months later. A few years on, T moved to Devon after a long term dispute with her neighbours. The boys were very happy in Devon enjoying the county life and all it had to offer but for T it was an isolating experience. These feelings motivated her to move back to the B&NES area where she now resides.

The next twelve years were emotionally exhausting; she had little in the way of self-esteem and struggled to manage three young boys on her own. Her ex-husband took the children every six weeks where he would lavish fun and affection on them, completely undermining any discipline that T was trying to instil. She described trying to compensate for the lack of a father figure at home by showering them with gifts and smothering them due to her guilt she felt about their situation. The boys had blamed her for leaving their home and were too young to understand why this had happened. For a brief moment T took her husband back but it was soon evident that things would not work out and so he moved out. It was at this point that the children switched their allegiance to their Mum, blaming their Dad for splitting up the family.

T constantly struggled with her depression and at times felt so low she could not get out of bed. At other times she would spend lots and lots of money that she did not have getting into deep debt to give herself a quick retail therapy fix. This became something of an addiction for her. T described this as being the darkest of times. She ended up getting into a cycle of downsizing houses in order to pay off her debts but ultimately she ended up with no equity and was unable to repay her mortgage. This resulted in her facing legal action to repossess the house. Moving house was also symbolic of what happened when T was unable to cope, when the boys were not getting on and how the family managed crisis in a “fight” or “flight” sense. The pattern was one of flight and this was something that the boys had learned as being normal. T was keen to provide a more stable life for her family and a place where each of the boys could have their own room and where they could begin having a level of “normality”. Currently she is considering filing for bankruptcy.

Troubles had also emerged with the behaviour of her middle son. T instinctively felt that something was wrong with him and tried to search out support from the Health visitor and latterly the school and GP. No help was forth-coming and T began to despair. She was determined that he needed help and thus began a long and frustrating battle in trying to source it. The school were in daily contact with her regarding his behaviour. Her middle son was not adhering to school rules, was being sent to time out, being caught out of bounds with the school smokers and associating with pro-criminal peers who were known to the YOT, in particular for their drug use, and was frequently challenging authority. He had also been the subject of an allegation from a student at his school which was followed up the Child Abuse Investigation Team. There were no charges made and the original story was retracted and deemed false. Despite this the incident had a big impact on him in that it gave him a negative label and peers were not keen to associate with him.

The crisis within T’s family escalated to the point where she gave up her job so she could be more accessible for her sons, in particular for her middle son who was being frequently excluded from school and for her eldest son as well, who had been suffering with severe headaches and needed T for numerous medical meetings. The Education Welfare service was also trying to take T to court for her middle son’s lack of school attendance. He had also been banned from Sainsburys as a result of being caught stealing. His offending behaviour escalated and he received a reprimand for an offence of criminal damage when he lost his temper and forced entry to his mother’s friend’s property.

The middle son described his life as being dominated by his elder brother and his extreme bossiness. He also identified that his father did not encourage him in any way and that he preferred to give his time to his older brother because he was sporty and outgoing. This left the middle son feeling that he could not live up to his father’s expectations. He also alleged that his mother did not have time for him because she was looking after the eldest son and her grandson. The middle son was unsure of his place within his family and as a result he tried to get attention from his Mum in any way he could particularly through trying to control the situation.

T’s youngest child developed a fear of being without his mother. He was scared of sleeping upstairs without his Mum or their dog. At other times he was reluctant to leave her side. This had such an impact on him that he would not stay with friends or visit his father. He would stop eating as the thought of separation filled him with severe anxiety. He slept with his mother until he was about eleven and avoided school to stay at home and be with her. School described him as “shy and timid”. This behaviour increased and latterly they described him as “more withdrawn and once he would arrive at school he would blend in like a chameleon”. Despite this his natural flare for sports was noted as being his strength and something that would stand him in good stead and help him to make new friends.

T’s oldest son developed a history of severe headaches at thirteen years of age. They had been investigated but the results came back as inconclusive. T pushed for more tests and after a scan it was discovered the headaches were a result of a lesion on the brain. The eldest son was kept off school for six months during which time he was very reliant on T to meet his needs. She described him as being possessive and at times desperate with her. He kept the house in darkness to ease his pain and the family lived like this for most of his recovery. The boys even now like to keep the curtains drawn in daylight hours. More recently he had an accident and was receiving support from CAHMS as his head injury had left him hearing voices. During his recovery period he became a father at fifteen. T had significant input into bringing up her Grandson. Most of her weekend was taken up with looking after him leaving less time for her own children. The siblings fought each other to vie for her attention. This was easiest for her oldest son as he was able to step into the role of the father figure and support his Mum in disciplining his younger brothers. This was not happily accepted by them as they were hoping for a more mature and positive male role model.

T reflected that her home was an unhappy one. She described times when she was feeling low and moody and the children reflected this emotion in their behaviour. In the same way if T became hyper the children did too. The whole family was embroiled in each other’s searing emotions. T was open in saying that she could not cope and that the strain on her family often led her to “close the door to everything”. T was clear about the patterns in her life; the controlling father, husband and currently her two eldest sons. She feels that this is because she was not assertive enough with her sons at crucial times and to an extent she blames herself for allowing things to have gone on for as long as they did.

**Intervention**

T’s Family key worker described her as being very willing to help herself to make changes and this was a significant strength. Her open attitude enabled a realisation of her situation and a responsibility for it. This led to the desire to make change. That said, T was literally stuck in the middle of the chaos that surrounded her and did not know where to begin. Social services had completed an initial assessment on the children but nothing had come of it. The family were at risk of breakdown and homelessness. At about this time the oldest son moved in with his father and got himself a job. There was an initial expectation that T would care for the grandson. Having reached crisis T was relieved at finally having the support she needed to give her the external push that gave her permission to prioritise the needs of her children. A core team of support was drawn together around the family. This included Project 117, Parenting Support, Mentoring Plus, Housing, YOT and the school.

It was during this time that T developed a deeper bond with her father after a long and difficult previous relationship with him. He could see that she was trying to make real change in her life and stepped in to support her through the process. He was able to help reinforce the need for T to meet her own needs first. He also helped her decorate her new home.

The middle son was assessed and diagnosed with ADHD. The Education Welfare dropped all legal action at this point and the school made consistent efforts to support the family. The family key worker felt that they could have given up on him some time ago but they stuck with him and progress was made in finding strategies to manage the situation.

She said that her pride had made her reluctant to accept help at first as she did not think anyone could tell her anything she did not already know in bringing up her children. However she did accept the help offered and was prepared to do what was suggested. She says she now thinks before she speaks and considers her responses to her children. It did not happen overnight but with hard and painful graft. Slowly, slowly it came together.

T was keen to pass on her experiences of life before intervention and the subsequent help and support she received. She hoped in doing so she might motivate other families in crisis to help them feel less reluctant about accepting support so they did not miss out on the opportunity to grab what is offered, turn things around and feel positive about life and all it has to offer.

**Current Outcomes**

Other positive changes were noted:

* The family began to have more resilience and have started to solve their own issues together
* K is starting to become more assertive at school. He is involved in football and has won awards. He has also taken up gymnastics. He has a natural flair for sports
* T was recognising the impact of her depression on the family and is more able to recognise the signs of onset and be proactive in managing it
* T is better at meeting her own needs rather than focusing on everyone else’s
* T has gym membership as does R
* T is considering losing weight
* The boys now bring friends to the home (previously the house was in too much of a state)
* T has a wider network of support in her family and a few key close friends nearby who have been through similar situations that she now confides in
* T is more open to the possibilities that life can offer
* T is about to undertake two courses in medical administration and book keeping
* T is looking at support she can access once the FIP intervention comes to an end

T’s key worker felt that her success came from her willingness to talk even when things were at their worst. This has been a major factor in contributing to the successful outcomes of the case. T stated that her life has turned around. Last October she had no home, no job, no possessions and no idea about where she was going. Her depression had left her anxious and isolated. She said that her pride had made her reluctant to accept help at first as she did not think anyone could tell her anything she did not already know in bringing up her children. However she did accept the help offered and was prepared to do what was suggested. She says she now thinks before she speaks and considers her responses to her children. It did not happen overnight but with hard and painful graft. Slowly, slowly it came together.

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