

Monthly reflection, June 2014

Time for smiles

I bought the Big Issue at a train station a couple of years ago on New Year's Eve. On the back page there was an advert from The Children's Society featuring a woman who was a voluntary Independent Visitor to a child in care. She described how she met fortnightly with a 12 year old boy to take him on outings for a few hours so that he could experience different activities and have someone outside of the care system to talk to. He was sullen and awkward at first but after several months he opened up and learnt to trust her once he realised she would be there for him, without fail, every other weekend. I made a New Year's resolution to become an Independent Visitor.

Six months later, having discussed it with my 16 year old son who (maybe wanting more Mum-free hours!) thought it was a great idea, I found myself completing two excellent training days delivered by The Children's Society caseworkers. I learnt about the care system, safeguarding and various local activities for children to do on a tiny budget.

My first child, Kelly, was a 15 year old girl who was shy and unconfident. As well as making sure she experienced new activities, I was asked to develop her interpersonal and practical skills to prepare her to leave the care system. On our outings I had her ordering food and drinks in cafes, purchasing bus tickets and asking locals for directions - all of which had previously petrified her.

My current girl, Maia, is 11 and I am her third Independent Visitor in three years. In the last year we have played ping pong, badminton and pool, been to an animal park and fed goats, carved pumpkins for Halloween, painted pottery, danced and shouted at the Christmas pantomime, played dominoes and cards in cafes and watched movies at the cinema. She writes about our outings in a book, each time we meet, and pastes tickets stubs and photos alongside.

At first I found her argumentative and ill-mannered. She did not seem to enjoy our visits and moaned at every suggestion I made for our next time. I discussed this with my caseworker at The Children's Society who reassured me that Maia enjoyed our visits and urged me to tackle her negative behaviour. So I did. She started to push back at me less and we have now progressed to her thanking me - without prompting - at the end of every visit. Just this weekend I asked her what she liked about our outings. She replied 'we have fun' and 'we do lots of different things'.

If you like children, being an Independent Visitor to a child in care is a very satisfying form of voluntary work. Helping Kelly to have more confidence in social situations and working with Maia, to reduce her negativity and improve her manners, seems like a useful thing to do for a few hours on a Saturday afternoon. One of the top ten moments of my life was when I took Maia bowling and she scored her first strike. She spun round, arms uplifted in triumph with a megawatt smile on her face. I felt privileged to have helped her have that moment and I hope to help her have many more.

Caroline Davies is a full time civil servant who volunteers with The Children's Society in Lancashire.

Find out how you could get involved with volunteering at www.childrenssociety.org.uk/volunteer.