

Crystal

Crystal is in her 40's, has three children and is separated from their dad. She lives with her two teenage sons. Her daughter, a young adult, lives far away with her father. Her daughter's baby has recently been removed from her and entered the care system.

Being a care leaver

Crystal's parents were alcoholics, her childhood with them was chaotic and violent. At 11, she was removed from her parents and placed into foster care.

She then had some good homes and some experiences she described as horrific, including an abusive foster father. Being in care was 'a battlefield' and she quickly realised she had to look after herself. She ended up being a 'runaway kid' in foster care and at times lived on the streets.

She recognises that foster care taught her practical things and life skills, but she never learnt how to love.

"I'm broken. I'll always be broken... I got tossed into the care system quite roughly and harshly. You're on your own... You stay very quiet, you become scared, lonely, depressed... you become very lost in the system."



Parenting in the system...

...and the stigma of being care-experienced

As a parent, Crystal first got involved in Children's Social Care at the age of 19: she had her first child and the police alerted social care that her husband was a violent man.

In the following years, she had two sons and all three children were on various plans, both Child Protection and Child in Need.

After she left her husband, he made life very difficult. He filed complaints to Children's Social Care stating she was 'constantly intoxicated', a prostitute and abusing the children. This would lead to new plans and she was even forced to attend AA meetings. Crystal feels the allegations were not investigated sufficiently. Social workers would read her case file, see all the trauma she experienced and make judgements.

"In an ideal world where things are normal, things happen. So for someone that's under social services, with the stress... something's going to happen. But you get [scrutinised] for that, 'oh my god it's another concern'... they're never going to leave my life'."



Children removed and returned

One day, Crystal's daughter covered a neighbour's door with ice cream. Crystal was going through a difficult time and ended up slapping her daughter. A neighbour reported this and she was arrested. Her three children were put on a Child Protection Plan and removed, which traumatised Crystal. She couldn't sleep, stopped eating and was prescribed antidepressants. She boarded up her windows so people didn't know she still lived in the house, and she lost her nursery job.

She was told that if she pleaded not-guilty to an abuse crime and lost, she would never get her children back. So she pleaded guilty, and after 8 months, the family was reunited. Prior to that, she had to take an IQ test and demonstrate she could do things like cook a meal and bathe a baby.

The children were moved to a Child in Need plan. But Crystal's daughter was still very disruptive and ended up moving far away to live with her dad. This devastated Crystal, but eventually meant her two sons came off Child in Need.

"They stayed in my life for many years, because when they remove your children you have to work your way down the ladder."



Fear of Social Workers

Crystal fears social workers because she feels they have a lot of power. She says it led to her developing anxiety and needing therapy and medication.

Crystal described many of the social workers she's had as 'really bad': they were 'out to get her', behaved unprofessionally or were just inexperienced. According to her, one wanted to put her children on a Child Protection Plan because she witnessed Crystal feeding them chips in the morning. At the time, Crystal had no money and could only afford potatoes. Another suggested she should return to her abusive husband because it was 'better than being a single mother'.

She felt social workers were 'watching' her and she had to put on a show at home to avoid her children being removed. Crystal described this pretence as 'stressful', stating it's impacted her relationship with her children and made the home a tense place.

"My house isn't always tidy... but we have to do that [keeping the house looking perfect at all times] because we're so worried that something's gonna happen. That's not the way it should be."



The current plan

Recently her teenage son got in trouble with the police for possessing cannabis. Children's Social Care put him on a Drugs and Alcohol plan and his younger brother on a Child in Need Plan.

Crystal is devastated to have Children's Social Care back in her life, but she feels slightly empowered this time, because her kids are old enough to speak for themselves and she believes she has done nothing wrong.

Over the past 20 years, Crystal has had a lot of involvement with Children's Social Care. She feels that all the plans and engagements merge into one long interaction.

"I've got nothing to hide no more... you've [Children's Social Care] absolutely broke me."



Intergenerational involvement

Not only have Crystal and her children experienced the care system, but now her first grandchild has been removed. Crystal feels that history is repeating itself and it makes her very sad.

She worries that her own experience in care as a child has impacted her children. This includes the stigma she feels as a former 'child in care', but also the trauma she experienced as a child and her difficulties in expressing love.

Crystal is concerned for her pre-teenage son, who is also keen to go and live away with his father. She feels her family is broken and does not see an end to it.

"It's history repeating itself"

"Being a foster child raised in the system... you're always protecting yourself... I don't cuddle my children. I tell them I love them, but I've never been taught how to cuddle... and it's sad. In a way it's affected my children."



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Gemma

Gemma is 17. She lives with her toddler in supported housing. Her mum and her aunt live close by and Gemma's daughter was placed with her aunt for a time when she was a baby.

How it all started

When she was pregnant, Gemma found out through a phone call that someone had referred her to Children's Social Care 'behind her back.'

Gemma's daughter was put on a Child Protection Plan from birth as Gemma was only 15 and her partner was considered a risk due to violent behaviour (emotional harm was also mentioned). She didn't really feel listened to or part of this decision at all. She felt professionals acted like they knew best, because she was a teenage mother.

"I didn't know the person who referred me to social services ... that was behind my back."

Kinship care with her aunt

After some time, difficulties arose and the local authority removed Gemma's baby and placed her with Gemma's aunt for 8 months. Gemma was requested to spend time with her daughter twice a week, but she went every day.

Now Gemma and her daughter live together, while her aunt is still part of the Child Protection Plan and spends time with them a few times a week.

"They said I need to visit her [my daughter] twice a week... I was going everyday, all the time."



The Child Protection Plan is a lot to manage

The plan included attending school, sorting out housing and childcare for her daughter, attending meetings, completing courses in domestic abuse and doing a parenting assessment. This was a lot to manage and organise.

There were clashes with school hours that needed to be sorted out. Despite securing a nursery place, it took 9 weeks for childcare benefits to come through. Thankfully her aunt could provide some childcare in the meantime. It also took a long time to secure the right housing close to her family, so it could provide ongoing support.

Gemma had to do the parenting assessment twice. She found the course boring and useless both times.

CSC seemed satisfied with Gemma's following the plan and her daughter came back to live with her.

"I never had time in my day to do what I wanted to do... courses, college, my daughter... If I needed to go shopping I couldn't do it."



Children's Social Care for a young mum

Gemma has had four social workers over two years. Two have been good and two she described as horrible. The switching of social workers has a negative impact and makes Gemma feel like she's not being listened to. She also had one social worker not picking up her calls or replying to her texts.

Gemma has frequently felt judged for being young. She feels decisions are often made for her rather than with her. At meetings, she has no opportunity to speak or be heard.

Social workers sometimes visit her unannounced and she has felt judged about home tidiness or other minor issues.

Gemma appreciates her latest social worker, who understands she needs to be a young person as well as a mum. This social worker encourages her to make time for herself and socialise with her friends in college lunch breaks, instead of seeing her daughter.

"I think social workers should listen more and people should be able to give their opinions... with younger parents they try to make the decisions for them."



The value of a support network

Gemma is not sure if the Child Protection Plan is actually helpful, but she does see the value in supportive relationships and more people being involved in her life since the plan was put in place.

Notably, she received support from her aunt and mother as part of the plan. Initially her support network was not invited to core meetings or case conferences, but this changed after she requested it several times and her mum intervened. Gemma feels better having someone from her support network at meetings. She really values her latest social worker along with a worker at a local women's charity.

"[The social worker] said she invited my mum but she didn't, I had to ask again and again."



Madalena

How it all started

When Madalena was pregnant with her first child, Children's Social Care quickly got in contact and put in place a Child Protection Plan. She's not sure who referred her, but it could have been the police as David, the baby's father, had a violent past.

Madalena and her ex partner were in a relationship at this point and Children's Social Care wanted to risk assess him, but he resisted - despite multiple attempts.

It was clear that the referral was about David's violent behaviour and a need to safeguard the baby. But the actions, the plan, the involvement was all her responsibility.

"Back then, our relationship was bad, worse. They had good reason to be concerned."



The Child Protection Plans

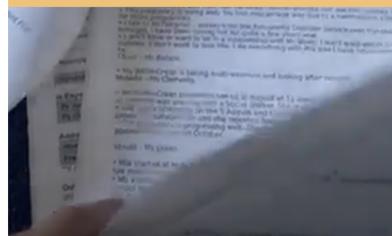
At the start, Madalena found the involvement from Children's Social Care hard. But she thought she had to work with them to keep her children.

Over the past five years, Madalena has had four plans. The pattern is: there is an incident with David, a Child Protection Plan is put in place and then it's deescalated to Child in Need, before coming off the plan. Then another incident would occur, which would start the cycle again.

The main requirement in all the plans has been for Madalena to stay away from David. She thinks this demand is fair but support does not really follow. She attended courses on Domestic Violence and Child Abuse, both of which she found useless. She would have preferred to be provided early on with one-to-one counselling to understand David's violent or narcissistic traits and why she should leave him.

Other requirements included taking her daughter to an eye test, dental care and a health check - all of which Madalena complied with despite finding some pointless. The optician said he couldn't do an eye test on such a young child. And Madalena thought the high BMI of her daughter was due to both parents being tall rather than a health issue.

"They hold your life in their hands... you have to do what they say."



Madalena is in her thirties and lives with her two children: a baby and a preschooler. Their violent father is not allowed contact with the three of them. Madalena works with special needs children, running after school and holiday programmes. Her home is just five minutes away from her mother.

It's all on the mum

Madalena recognises that Children's Social Care had to be involved because her ex-partner was violent and she made a mistake in going back to him. But she has found the experience draining and much of it unnecessary.

The conference meetings were very intimidating at first and she felt unsupported.

She found it really frustrating that David had to do nothing while she had to deal with Children's Social Care throughout the whole process. She is expected to stay away from him, but feels no-one is telling him to stay away from her and the children. She sometimes saw him waiting at a nearby bus stop and was once moved near his friends, who found out where she was living.

Children's Social Care worked with a housing association to move the family three times, to get them away from David. Madalena is tired of moving and hopes it won't happen again.

"I go through all this because he's done wrong. Maybe they should be sending the police around to his house everyday saying: 'You need to stay away from her'. They put a lot on the mother."



Children's Social Care taking over her therapy

Madalena has a behaviour disorder and was seeing a therapist prior to her first child's birth. But with the Child Protection Plan, the therapist started attending conference meetings and the therapy changed. She felt the therapist seemed more concerned with addressing the plan than with her behaviour disorder.

Since the birth of her second child, Madalena has stopped seeing the therapist as she no longer finds it helpful.

"A lot of the work [therapy] changed to be around social services and their dad... so I didn't even feel like I had the help from her that I needed."



The power of the social workers

Madalena had two or three different social workers for each of the four plans. She found the frequency of change exhausting and feels social workers are not committed to families. New social workers read notes and believe they can understand complex situations, but she feels they don't.

Madalena has felt threatened by the amount of power that social workers hold. At the start, she used to worry that she would have her children taken away from her.

Over time, she developed a good relationship with Children's Social Care and did not feel threatened anymore.

"I used to worry that I'd go and pick up my daughter from school and she wouldn't be there... it got me panicked."



The future

Madalena currently has no involvement from Children's Social Care and she hopes not to again. But she doesn't feel very hopeful of this.

Madalena states that in the final report from Children's Social Care she was informed that her daughter's school is 'keeping an eye' on her. She finds this stressful as her children are young and there are many years of interacting with the school ahead. She knows that if the school reports anything, Children's Social Care will be back in her life.

She also knows that if David comes over and she phones the police as instructed, it's likely she will be back on the Child Protection Plan for at least three months and then Child in Need for another three months.

"It's going fine for now [avoiding the children's father] but then it's like [me] calling the police [if he comes by] and what does that mean? Oh social services are back..."



Wilson

Wilson, in his thirties, has four children, from toddler to pre-teenagers. The three eldest, from the same mother, are in foster care. The youngest is from Wilson's new partner and the three live together. Wilson works as a gardener and handyman. He likes learning new practical skills, is writing two books, and is volunteering in many projects to improve public services.

How it all started

Wilson was 20 when his first child was born. He admits he was a violent man back then and had a volatile relationship with his partner. They fell out and he ended up in prison for stabbing someone. His violence, including domestic, led to Children's Social Care involvement. The child was put on a Child Protection Plan and he was not allowed to see him.

He felt that services weren't there to help him, but to watch him and be negative. So he ended up hiding things from them, like his relationship with his child's mother.

Wilson had two further children with her. Both were put on a Child Protection Plan from birth.

"Services aren't there to help you... they're so negative."



Interacting with Social Workers

As a parent, Wilson found it difficult to engage with Children's Social Care, due to his lifestyle of drugs and crime, and poor mental health. Social workers didn't trust him, lacked empathy and looked down on him. After prison, he turned his life around, but felt social workers were still judging him and treating him badly.

Wilson describes having had three 'good' social workers and four 'bad' ones over the years. The 'good' ones were generally older, experienced, honest and supportive. They took joy in his kids and helped contact meetings with them. At worst, the bad ones were bullies, judgemental and accusing. Some provoked him, making him anxious and aggressive before meeting his children. Others accused him of being a heroin addict, which he says wasn't true. Wilson reacted defensively, but got told he was being too aggressive.

Wilson wanted Children's Social Care to support him to improve, rather than just thinking he shouldn't be around his children.

"[Social workers] come [at a contact visit]...and they try and work me up... 'Oh you look a bit hot, you look a bit flustered. Are you a bit aggressive today?'... 'And I'd be like: 'Why are you doing this?'... I started shaking my hands and sweating and my kids were walking through the door."



The meetings

Wilson found conferences and meetings quite intimidating. At each conference there were around 12 professionals he didn't know and no introductions. He would have found it helpful to meet people beforehand, especially given that a lot of the things discussed were really personal.

In the early days, a Children's Social Care professional told Wilson not to speak in meetings. He admits to not trusting the system and not wanting to engage at the time, but he did want to be a part of his children's life. Children's Social Care didn't agree to that because of the violent lifestyle he led at the time. He felt ignored, excluded, and that no one was supporting him to improve as a parent.

More recently, he has turned his life around and engages with Children's Social Care, but he still finds the meetings intimidating.

"I wanted to be a part of my kids' lives, but they wouldn't agree on any of that. There was no agreement in place where I could be a dad."



Not seeing the kids

Wilson feels some important decisions are either unfair or not explained.

At one point, something happened to his ex-partner and his three eldest came to live with him for 5 weeks. A charity was supporting him to set up a family home, so he could get his children back permanently. But someone reported him as a heroin user and dealer. Wilson said this was false and there was no evidence of this, but he was never tested for drugs. His children were taken away from him and never returned.

Over the past 5 years, Wilson has been to every contact with his children, except a couple of them due to illness. He used to see them 6 times a year, but because his ex-partner was abusive in public, both hers and his contact were halved to three times a year. Wilson questioned this, but was not given any explanation.

He is trying to be there for his children, but contact is supervised and he feels they haven't got space to talk and be open. They don't want to share because others are listening and, at times, social workers told him to avoid certain topics.

"I can't talk to my kids about anything. Anything in general apart from my work, I'd be shut down by a social worker... I would like to speak to my kids about my feelings, but I can't do it."



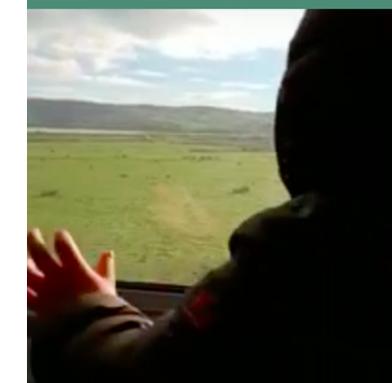
A new start, another plan

Wilson has turned his life around and moved away from drugs and crime.

He had a fourth child a couple of years ago with a new partner. The health visitor referred them to Children's Social Care because of his past. Wilson understands they are simply doing their job and he feels he has nothing to hide. However, the experience has still been intimidating. He's had to gather references, prove attendance at courses with certificates, show evidence of running a business and demonstrate membership of a church. He appreciates his new social worker and they are very honest with each other.

Wilson's new home and family is peaceful, kind and loving. It's a different lifestyle to what he had before with his eldest children. His toddler was moved from Child Protection to Child in Need and has now come off the plan altogether.

"She said: 'Can you prove anything that you've done that relates to your positive side rather than your negative side?' So I've said there's a list of things..."



On going judgement for past actions

Wilson is trying to play an active role in the plans for his children and be a positive voice in their lives. He enjoys contact with his three eldest children, but this is supervised and limited. He feels that Children's Social Care still see him as a risk, even though he has demonstrated that he has turned his life around.

He wishes he could be more of a father to his eldest children and hopes one day they'll come back to him.

"Basically ... history shouldn't be used against somebody... I was a violent person and all that... I'm not that person no more, why should I be labelled as this person?"



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