

Kerry Littleford – ADCS Annual Conference 2017

A few years ago I helped setup a pilot project that works intensively with women who had had several children removed, and were likely to have more removed in the future. Before the project started we conducted a feasibility study, and I remember it showing the range in numbers of children these women had lost, ranging from 2 all the way up to 9. I remember some people gasping when they heard the number 9, but those that had experience of these families didn't seem surprised at all. That lack of surprise is what shocked me the most. Women having child after child, year after year taken into care had become the norm.

I come from one of those families. I'm the eldest of nine.

I've been the matriarch of my family since my earliest memories – at first looking after and trying to protect my mum, and then one by one, my siblings. When I was 13 I watched as all of my siblings got taken away in several vehicles to new homes and I stayed behind. I had always been the one to protect them, the one to lock them in bathrooms if the house got too violent, or to lie with them at night when they were too scared to sleep. But when they all got taken away and I was left behind everything changed. I had never felt so helpless.

A year later I watched as my new baby brother got taken away. A year after that, my new baby sister. My family had been split and spread as far and wide across our city as was possible. 9 children in 7 different family homes. I say I was left behind, because whilst my siblings were being taken away I was given a very hard and heavy choice to stay if I wanted. I was told at 13 I was mature enough to make my own decision about this. The guilt of abandoning my mum overwhelmed any sense of self-preservation and I chose to stay. That was the wrong choice, and not one I should have been faced with at that age. Finally a year later and another sibling gone I made a decision for myself to leave and a friend's family took me in.

It was at this time that everything I knew about being a family was turned upside down and inside out: it wasn't guaranteed that you'd stay with your mum forever. It was no longer guaranteed that you would even see your siblings. As you will all know, when siblings are fostered, you still get to see them, but for only a few hours a week. There are 168 hours in a week. I went from seeing my siblings 168 hours a week to just 2. Two hours to love and play and be happy, all under the watchful gaze of two strangers in a contact centre. At these family contacts I continued to try and hold the family together but it would get harder each time. My brothers and sisters would draw me pictures and write me letters asking when they could come home again and I couldn't answer them. Watching my siblings become withdrawn and scared was incredibly hard, and being so far away from each other meant that we couldn't support each other in a way we could if we were together.

I think it was the right decision to put us into care. But I think it would have been so much better for us to spend more time together, more than the few hours once a week we were given. At the time we were told we had been taken away because my mum couldn't look after us, but it felt like we were all being punished too. Like we had also done something wrong. Seeing my family as a whole unit would have made such a big difference to us, we weren't just separate parts to be worked with. Decisions were made that conflicted with other family members, and processes were inconsistent from one sibling to another. We spent very little time all together, and when we did it would be in quite clinical feeling settings, our contact centre felt like a doctors waiting room with two strangers watching us.

Having siblings who were fostered was hard, but nowhere near as hard as having siblings who were adopted. I lost a brother and sister to adoption, and it does feel like I lost them because I haven't seen either of them since 2001.

When I talk about this to people I know certain assumptions are made about our family – and some of those assumptions are right. Because we were a typical family where the cycles of deprivation and dysfunction passed through the generations. Where poverty, neglect and violence were handed down like family heirlooms. My mum had been a child in care, and now so were her 9 children. She had been neglected, and in turn had neglected her children.

And we were the typical council estate big family on benefits you can imagine. Yes, we were poor, and I mean below the breadline poor – asking neighbours for food poor. One of my most embarrassing memories is reading a letter from the council when I was about 11 saying the neighbours had complained about us begging for food. I was shocked. I'd never associated my actions with begging before, I just asked the neighbours for some food sometimes because my mum had asked me to, and because we needed to eat.

And yes, we were neglected. We were the family at school who constantly had nits, if you walked around our house with bare feet they'd soon turn the soles black. My mum never did school work with us at home. Risk wasn't a word I think my mum had ever heard – her awareness of risk was, and I would say still is, non-existent. We were constantly put in risky situations. But for me, it was just the natural way of things. Because when you're a child, everything you experience is just normal, whether it's happy or sad, frightening or calm, it's all just normal. And the life I'm describing to you now, it all felt very normal at the time.

So we were poor, we were neglected, and we witnessed and experienced violence. We were being looked after by my mum, and a stream of interchangeable bad men. All of those men shared the same desires of control over my mum by force, and this would sometimes spill over onto us. One thing I realised as I got older was that my

mum had very little control over her own life. All 9 children, although loved, were never planned. Pregnancy was a thing that happened to my mum because the man would decide if contraception was used or not. The man's pleasure in those moments were more important to him than anything that came afterwards, including the heartbreaking moment of having your child taken away. Does anything show a lack of control more than knowing if you get pregnant again you won't get to keep the child, but having no say over whether you become pregnant?

The thing you have to understand about my mum is, she has a good heart, and for the most part, she was a good mum. We were washed, dressed and at school most days. She accepted help where it was offered; from teachers, from people at church. But she was incredibly isolated, and that contributed hugely to the dissolution of our family. Her siblings and parents had very complex relationships with histories of care, violence, alcohol abuse, and my mum ran away from all of that at 15 and continued what she had always had to do, and that was look after herself. But she had never been prepared for it, and she had never been prepared for starting a family.

I essentially put myself into care at 14, but I had been on a risk register for neglect and emotional abuse from the age of 4. That's 10 years of social care involvement where all of the issues that my mum had continued; 10 more years of dangerous adults surrounding me whilst I did my best to protect my brothers and sisters. And over those years my mum continued to have children whilst falling further and further into chaos, with no real work ever being done with her to build her self-esteem, to learn how to parent or just to be more confident in the skills that she did possess.

People tend to learn from mistakes and experiences, and most people look at ways to improve their lives and the lives of their children. This has never seemed the case

with my mum, although she always says she's proud at how well we're doing, she never did anything to make it so. She doesn't seem to recognise the mistakes that she's made, so she never learns from them. She's accepted her lot in life, so she never challenges it. I've never seen my mum cry. And I've seen her being horribly beaten up, and have all of her children taken away from her. But I've never seen her cry. And she wasn't one of those mums who told us we shouldn't cry, I've just never seen her do it. I don't know a lot about my mum's childhood because she never talks about it, but I know, in my gut, that it was bad.

What I've described to you so far is a family in the throes of dysfunction and deprivation, the cycles of which we see copying as we move down generations. A woman who was in the care system, having her children taken into care. A woman who watched her mother suffer violence at the hands of her drunken father, suffering that same violence from the partners she chose. And every one of us here knows that these intergenerational cycles continue, here today in 2017. And everyone of us here knows that they need to be stopped because not only do these families suffer poor outcomes, but so does society. People often ask me if it's really possible to break these cycles – and I'll say this; if you don't think they can be, then you're in the wrong job. I'm a testament that they can, but am often noted as an anomaly. And if that's true, if I am an anomaly - then our care system is still broken.

I truly believe that if the right intervention had come along for our family at the right time then the dysfunctional cycles could have been broken much earlier. But I also believe in the power of the right care at the right time, and done in the right way. I was very fortunate to have an incredibly loving and positive experience in care, and here I am now – speaking to those who can make all the difference. For my other siblings, their experiences were as complex and varied as it could get, and unfortunately some very negative experiences carry with my siblings even now.

That pilot project I mentioned earlier some of you may have heard of, it was called the Pause project and is now happening all over the country. They will actually be speaking to you tomorrow about it. When I started working on that project I remember the group right at the beginning talking about how 'these women are often alone, trying to bring up their children but failing. They are then surrounded by professionals, eventually those children are taken away and the mother is left on her own again. And all the issues going on for that woman remain until she becomes pregnant again, and then once again she is surrounded by professionals until that child is taken away. And once again she is left alone. So why aren't we working with these women to try and solve some of those problems before they get pregnant again, but mostly why aren't we working with those women to prevent more children going into care?'

And I thought back to my life as a child and it all made sense. We had all been surrounded by professionals trying to put things in place to make her version of parenting work, but once we were all gone she was left to fend for herself. Until she became pregnant again. There was never any on-going work between those times to try and solve some of those issues to prevent what was becoming a very predictable, and a very destructive, pattern for my family.

That was actually the first time in my life that I really thought about the fact that there could've been a different path for my family – I too, like my mum, had accepted the way of things. This was how the world worked – these women were doomed to follow patterns, make mistakes and lose their children. But that's not the case, and it never had to be.

I think the experiences my mum had as a child meant that she would never be cut out to be a mother without guidance and support. And I mean intense guidance and intense support. How are people supposed to know how to do something they've never been taught, or even how to do something they've only watched being done badly? I often think what would have happened if a project like Pause had been around whilst all of this was happening. Would it have worked for our family? Would my mum have become a better parent, a stronger woman? Would she have built the confidence to have a career or start relationships with good men? Would we have been allowed to go back to her? Would she have had as many children, and if not, I start to think about what it would be like not having some of my siblings. That thought is unimaginable now.

There is one thing I think she would have gained, and that's some degree of control over her life, and the ability to make her own choices.

I haven't spoken about the financial implications of this, although we all know the savings made by these women not having children taken into care, versus the money spent on them being taken into care – but I really wanted to focus on the difference the right intervention at the right time can make for people, for their lives and their futures. Not everyone gets the same chances in life, not everyone gets the same amount of choice. We have a duty to take care of those who are vulnerable, who need that extra support, who were never given the life chances so many of us got, of which we built our foundations. We need to work together to get in as early as we can to break these cycles and to give these women and families the chances and the choices that many of us were so lucky to have.

Thank you.