

Giving children a stable loving home

Often the lives of the parents of the children we meet have spiralled so far out of control that they have been unable to provide the nurturing home life their kids deserve.

In the four years before we met nine-year-old Ben he and his stepsister, Mia, had had no stability or security, moving home countless times. It all started when Ben's mum's boyfriend Matt, a builder, lost his long-term job and the family were forced to move closer to the city so that he could find work. Uprooted from the town he'd lived in all his life, and earning a far lower wage than he had previously, Matt fell in with a violent crowd, who spent all their time in the local pub and were the perpetrators of several local robberies.

Matt was an unhappy man and even unhappier drunk. He would stumble home from the pub and the slightest thing would cause him to burst into a violent rage. He never touched his own daughter, six-year-old Mia, but Ben and his mum Jenna lived in fear.

Soon Matt moved the family on again – and then again. Fearful that the police would catch up with him, at the end of each school term, when their landlord would be chasing the usually unpaid rent, the family would disappear from town and start again somewhere else.

Eventually the authorities stopped Matt in his tracks. He was arrested and sentenced to several years in prison for armed robbery.

After Matt's arrest Jenna moved the young family to an area where she had a few friends hoping to be able to provide the kids with a more settled life. However, it quickly became obvious that Ben in particular, would find it harder to settle. He behaved aggressively towards his teachers, and was frequently caught skipping school. When the police found him wandering the streets one day the family were referred to Barnardos.

Our workers know that being able to form friendships at school and have access to teachers and peers as role models is one of the most important ways children and young people feel connected to their community. After moving around so much at a vital time in his young life when he should have been making friends and learning to read and write, Ben was way behind his peers both educationally and socially.

In 2006 15% of children aged 14 or under lived in jobless families². Joblessness is highly likely to result in financial stress, and to create tension and hostility within the family³. Studies on the effects of unemployment on the family unit have identified relationships between parental joblessness and family conflict, family breakdown and child abuse⁴.

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Children deserve a safe and stable environment in which they are able to learn for the future. Helen, our worker, quickly realised that Ben didn't see the point of making friends or settling into school as he had no reason to expect they would be staying for very long. The first thing the family needed was a home of their own. They were all sleeping in one bed at a friend's house as Jenna couldn't afford to rent on her own, so Helen supported a referral to the housing association for access to community housing. Through the support of our corporate partners, Barnardos was able to help the family with furniture, linen and household essentials. In particular Ben now has his own room where he can shut the door for privacy. He has his own bed, games and books that are helping to provide the stability and security in his life that has been missing for so long.

Helen also helped Jenna establish routines for the family that have helped Ben to feel more grounded, and she has taught her to become the reliable consistent parent she needed to be to help him develop. Ben now goes to bed at a set time, gets up at the same time each morning, and travels on the same bus to and from school – creating regularity and responsibility in his life. The introduction of the controlled routines for Ben are helping him to adjust to the changes in his family, to understand right from wrong, develop his social skills and enable Jenna to discipline him effectively and consistently. As a single parent, and now that

Mia has turned seven, Jenna will need to adjust to a range of new responsibilities including complying with government requirements for an Employment Pathway Plan and returning to the workforce.

Within months of setting up a more stable home, Ben's teachers started to see an improvement in his behaviour and his attendance at school became more regular. One of our volunteers tutors him every week to help him catch up and thanks to one of our generous partners he is now taking swimming lessons which he loves.

Now it's sunk in that he's going to be at his school for more than one term Ben has tentatively started to make friends. He is still struggling to cope with the violence he witnessed and the abuse he experienced but the regular sessions with one of our counsellors are helping him to come to terms with the past and start to put it behind him.

In 85-90% of violent incidents in the home children are present. In 50% of those cases the children are also abused.¹

¹Queensland Domestic Taskforce, 1998; Cleaver et al, 1999, cited in Fleischer, 2000)
²ABS Census of Population 2006
³Shonkoff & Phillips 2000
⁴McClelland 2000