

**Lorna Johnson:** talk given at the Bishop of Sherborne's Rural Breakfast, 13 March 2019

I am one of five in a team of Family Link Workers that make up the family Link worker service that the Dorset Youth Association designed and has been delivering for the past six years - after winning two Dorset County Council tenders for its Dorset Family Matters program.

We have clear evidence that we are making a difference to families including a family's own self assessment of where they are at on a scales of 1 to 10 before and after our work together. We measure reduction in family conflicts, parenting, the family's educational aspiration, mental and physical wellbeing, antisocial behaviour, employability and getting into work.

The project saves almost £3 to the public purse for every Dorset £1 invested in the Family Link Work service. With the creation of the new council we have funding until the end of the year for the this service, but do not know if the service will continue.

As a family Link worker at DYA, I am part of a team of five workers from a mixture of social work, youth work, young offending, child psychology, disability support and family work backgrounds. We help families in their own homes, schools and communities.

This is a privileged position to be in, very few agencies have the time, remit, training and practice to engage in this way. We work in partnership with the Dorset Family Matter key worker, we gain an understanding how the family functions within their home and liaise with other professionals getting extra help if needed. We are very focused on achieving outcomes with the family, working in partnership with the family tow of three times a week for between 6 to12 weeks at a time to get things moving.

I am going to give you some anonymised examples of the work we do.

The first example illustrates the issues of domestic violence coupled with learning disabilities or differences.

I worked with a seven year old girl in a small village in West Dorset, the child had witnessed severe domestic abuse and was severely traumatised and in the primary school playground unknown triggers would lead her to be suddenly violent.

When I arrived, the problems were being blamed on parenting of the single mother who had put herself into care as a child due to neglect and violence at home. Working in the family home I found out that loving boundaried parenting was in place.

I worked with the girl and Mum and school and the special educational needs team to get Mum's voice heard in meetings, previously she had been very volatile in meetings, and get support to secure treatment for the real issues of past trauma and get the child's severe autism diagnosed.

The young girl is now thriving at specialised school and Mum has sorted her debt problems, secured help for depression and is volunteering at the local church food bank and considering going to Weymouth College to take functional Maths English and ICT.

Parenting is another complicated common area. Problems are often inter-generational, parents having not been parented well themselves and other complicating, issues lack of Knowledge and skills.

We say, "You are the experts of your family but, if you want, we can help you try some things other parents say work. Which is basically love and limits and we will walk with you while you give it a go."

We often support them to join a peer to peer evidence based parenting program that DYA put on when we can secure funding. It is called the Strengthening Families Program. It is a six week program where a number of parents and their children attend in the evenings, and using a DVD teaching programs and a course of activities get the motivation and skills to show love, attention, use good communication and apply consistent boundaries in their family homes.

I worked with a family of four children in a picturesque North Dorset town. None of them were following any instructions at home, there were behaviour problems at school, one young man had quite severe anger issues and punched a teacher off their feet, the family felt he took after a branch of the family tree that was "hot headed" and there was nothing that could be done.

We worked with the parents to start joint parenting - one parent had been over strict and never praising or loving, the other over compensated and undermined any discipline that was put in. We helped the under confident strict Dad recovering from addiction to play and engage with the children for lots of love and attention to be given, with TV and gaming devices off more, and for house rules and a behaviour agreement to be established.

I also used a CBT "Anger Gremlin workbook" to help the young lad control his temper. Now when he did something wrong "There is a consequence every time but it is because Mum and Dad love me." Now if he sees red in class he will give teacher a signal and go outside for 10 mins and go to the imaginary den in the woods he has constructed in his mind until he has calmed himself down.

We try and get some small but sustainable change so the journey starts and change is seen to be possible. We try and hook the family into the specialist worker they may need, give practical help like buying mattresses, storage, desks and sports kit, and access to longer term support in the community, such as children centres, Christians Against Poverty, adult Ed, Read Easy, clubs and groups like Guides, Scouts, D of E and the church.

As link workers we are trained to be experts in engagement with the most complex needs families - double line managed so we do not get overloaded - and work safely in un-boundaried family home settings, and share best practice together in our diverse team.

The cross over with pastoral work in the church perhaps is that we look for the good in young people and parents and walk with them as we work out together what needs to happen. It is an utter privilege to walk with families as they have the courage to start to change.