

SOCIAL WORK

Laura Aspinall has been a child social worker for nearly three years, but has been working with children and young people since an early age.

“I’d had personal experiences of people with physical disabilities and people with terminal illnesses,” she explains. “That, along with the work I’d been doing with children with challenging behaviour in a respite care home and with young offenders meant that I could recognise the gaps in the system. It sounds corny to say it, but when you work with people you want to try to make a difference in their lives.”

It was still a big step to take to decide to train as a child social worker. But Laura feels secure enough in her profession now to laugh away those earlier misgivings. “Of course there was a lot of fear!” she admits. “I was influenced by the press, and I knew that there would be a lot of difficulty working in child protection. But I’m passionate about people’s rights and inclusiveness. I wanted to get the skills and knowledge to enable me to help people. And I have to say I’ve never looked back.”

Now Laura would encourage anyone who wanted to work to help children to

follow her lead - and she has recently taken on a student social worker, giving them advice, guidance and supervision.

“You’ve got to have a passion for children,” she advises. “You’ve got to be determined to meet their day-to-day needs, which are often very complex. The biggest challenge is to convince the children that I’m on their side, because in most cases, in spite of the neglect and the abuse, children will want to stay with their parents.

“Although I did have one case who was very influenced by Tracey Beaker,” adds Laura. “She thought that being in care was going to be fantastic, she thought she was going to be allowed to do whatever she wanted all the time!”

While negative media reports usually focus exclusively on the difficulties and stresses of the job, Laura is quick to point out the positives. “The best thing about my job is seeing the outcomes. It can take weeks, months or even years until a child is heading in the right direction. But when that happens you know that now that child has much better chances in life, and that’s really satisfying.”

A foster carer who has regular contact with Laura says, “She’s just brilliant at her job. She always puts the children’s interests first, she’s always friendly, always communicating and interacting

with them. She always stays calm and collected - and I feel very supported by her as well.”

Laura has good working relationships with foster carers, police officers and teachers, all of whom she liaises with in the course of her work. One of the primary school teachers she meets regularly at multi-agency meetings also feels able to work with her more informally.

“She’s very approachable,” she says. “I can phone her at the drop of a hat and she’ll answer my queries right away. At the moment we’re working together to help a child at my school. There have been a lot of changes in him for the better, so I try and keep her informed.”

Of course there are always going to be difficult times for a social worker. “The worst was when the team diminished to almost nothing, and the caseload was really huge,” says Laura. “Then you just have to prioritise. I always make sure that I keep on seeing the child, keep up the face to face contact - writing it up is another matter.”

It’s really important not to take the work home, says Laura. “Having a life is very important! I’m lucky that my husband works in a similar field, so he can tell how I am when I come home from work. And in the end, the job is about the kids I work with. You can’t help but bend over backwards for all of them.”



Laura Aspinall

UNISON

Speaking up for social workers and the people they help

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We are all horrified when terrible things are done to children and appalled when it is at the hands of the people who should care for them the most.

Social workers have to deal with these realities every day. People are quick to blame social workers when things go wrong but the thousands of children and their families they help every year go unnoticed.

Research shows that violent child deaths have fallen by nearly half since 1974 - and this has happened in large part due to the efforts of social workers. At UNISON we represent more than 40,000 social workers who make a real difference every day to the lives of the most vulnerable people in our

society. Despite having to work under enormous pressures from underfunding, understaffing and too much paperwork.

We’re asking you to support our social workers because they do one of the toughest jobs going - grappling with problems most of us would rather not think about.

To find out more about social work go to www.unison.org.uk/socialwork

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