

# CHILDREN NORTH EAST: SUPPORTING FAMILIES IN CRISIS

A case study of a Clinks member in the North East

May 2016



# Case study of Children North East: Supporting families in crisis

## Introduction

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It is widely understood that the functioning of the family unit can impact on the potential development of offending behavior. There are many studies that evidence the link between criminal behavior and family dysfunction, whether the behavior is anti-social, or involves substance misuse, violence, sexual abuse or child neglect. Families can get trapped in cycles and practices, which results in intergenerational cycles of offending. If we want to stop such cycles of offending early intervention is important to prevent patterns developing, and high quality family support and intervention programmes are key.

Children North East provides intervention and support to families across a wide spectrum of need through their Families Plus Crisis Intervention service. This includes a crisis intervention service for vulnerable families affected by crime and substance misuse and where there is a risk that children will be removed into local authority care. The Families Plus Crisis Intervention service is currently delivered in Northumberland and Tyneside where it has been commissioned by local authorities.

## About Children North East

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Children North East is a children's charity that promotes the rights of children and young people and counter the effects of inequality on them, their families and communities. Their vision is for every child to have a happy and fulfilling childhood and that every young person has the chance to develop their full potential. They deliver a number of important services across the region including: family intervention and support to vulnerable families; emotional and mental health programmes for young people; mentoring projects; and education initiatives.

*"I wouldn't have my kids if it wasn't for Children North East, simple as that".*

*(Service user)*

## The Families Plus Crisis Intervention service

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The Families Plus Crisis Intervention service specialises in working with families where the children are at risk of being removed into care. The service uses the Option 2 model, which was developed in 2000 at the University of Cardiff, and is based on an American family support model. The support available to each family is tailor-made to address whatever the specific needs or issues are whilst adhering to the fidelity of the programme. The impact of parental behaviours is addressed and a plan to effect and maintain change is developed with the family. The intervention is strength-based and solution focused; goals are set and the achievement of those goals is supported using a range of techniques drawn from cognitive behavioural therapy such as motivational interviewing, as well as drawing on the skills and experience of the Family Support Worker.

Parents are given support to identify their priorities for change, set goals, address specific difficulties and develop their parenting skills so they are better able to meet the needs of their children. Specific resources used may be drawn from programmes such as the Parent Factor (a parenting course aimed at parents with substance misuse issues), Strengthening Families (an evidence-based course aimed at parents of children aged between 10 and 14 years) and Children North East's Families Plus Parenting Toolkit. A key factor in the parenting support offered is helping parents to understand and then meet the developmental needs of their child. Sitting alongside this is more general 'Family Support' which is delivered as part of the same intervention and which will typically identify and deal with debt, housing issues, setting and maintaining boundaries and additional support needs such as disability, health, mental health and domestic abuse.

*"[the support] meant I've got [my children] home sooner ... I don't know if I'd have them yet, perhaps never ... anyway I have them here now".*

*(Service user)*

Attachment theory, developed by John Bowlby in the 1960s, states that the time between new born and three years that the most important bonds form between a mother and her baby; those with an insecure or disorganised attachment have poorer life chances and are more likely to experience dysfunction in their lives, including crime; those with a secure attachment have better relationships, do better in school, and are more resilient individuals.

It also states that whilst attachment types tend to repeat themselves, (i.e. whatever attachment the mother has, then her child is likely to have that too) it is possible to change and improve attachment types. This can be achieved through antenatal and postnatal support from parenting professionals and from services such as the Families Plus Crisis Intervention service.

The service helps mothers and fathers increase and improve their attachment with their babies and young children; whether this is through encouraging skin-to-skin contact, modelling behaviour such as praise, reward, communication and empathy or increasing understanding of a child's brain development. The support workers often talk of 'lightbulb moments' in parents as they realise the effects their parents had on them and their subsequent determination to do things differently with their children. They also talk of mothers who have had children removed from their care in the past, who go on to keep a child because of the support from the service and the development of strong attachment bonds.

An evaluation<sup>1</sup> of the Families Plus Crisis Intervention service in Northumberland demonstrated the following impact:

- **The service improves outcomes for children.** This includes: babies that are thriving (in families with a history of neglect and physical abuse); school-age children who have returned to school after periods of exclusion; improvements in children's mood and behaviour; improvements in parenting techniques; and improvements in home atmospheres. The service specifically focuses on improving the attachment between parents and their babies, which is evidenced to significantly improve the life chances of children and decrease the risk of delinquency and crime.
- **A reduction in the number of children at-risk of significant harm.** The service improved both the immediate and long-term safety of children and reduced the risk of harm. They do this through working with the entire family and in particular in maintaining a drug or alcohol free household. A key outcome of the work carried out is a reduction in the severity of the intervention; in other words, children de-escalated from being on a Child Protection Plan to a Child in Need to being the subject of a CAF (Common Assessment Framework) and ultimately being supported only by universal children's services.
- **A reduction in costs associated with removing children from their families into local authority care.** There are significant cost savings associated with the service. In one local authority area in the North East, a minimum annual cost saving of approximately £670,000 was calculated. These cost savings were the result of children prevented from being taken into care. Not only has there been less children removed into care, but there has also been a reduction in the number of children who are either subject to a Child Protection Plan or who are classed as Children in Need.

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<sup>1</sup>Copies of the evaluation by Barefoot Research can be provided upon a request to Children North East.

*“They’ve done things like relationships with me and made me realise what my life was like ... now I’m stronger, I won’t let [domestic abuse] happen again”.*

*(Service User)*

### An example of a report from a Family Support Worker: case closure

The family worked within the agreed plan and as of December, the children were no longer subject to a Child Protection Plan. Mum has secured new employment and there were no issues regarding alcohol misuse. Changes within the family have been sustained and there is no longer a role for us. The family is now supported by universal services.

- **The service has improved the mental health of family members:** poor mental health can have devastating impacts on families, which can ultimately lead to the removal of children due to safety risks. There were a number of reports during the evaluation from professionals and parents that the project helped improve the mental health of both parents and children.
- **The service has resulted in families being able to stay together:** it was recognised by families that if the service had not intervened then the children would have been removed into local authority care. This is the main objective of Option 2 and it appears that Children North East has been successful in achieving this aim.
- **In cases where family breakdown has been inevitable, the project has managed the process to ensure satisfactory outcomes for all:** in some cases, family breakdown is inevitable as the problems experienced by both parents have been so intractable that reconciliation becomes impossible and the only option is a clean break. There have been a small number of such cases and the intervention of the service has meant that splits have been amicable and the best outcomes for the children have been achieved.
- **There has been a reduction in the incidences of domestic violence:** a number of families (mothers and their children) have been the victims of domestic abuse. The service’s intervention has both physically separated the abuser from the victim and has worked with

women to increase their fortitude, self esteem and worth and empower them not to return to abusive relationships.

- **A reduction in drug taking and improved outcomes for adults:** the intervention has in most cases stopped drug taking and alcohol consumption and in others reduced usage. There were reports from both parents and professionals that drug taking and alcohol consumption would have continued without the support of Children North East.
- **There has been a preference for the Families Plus Crisis Intervention compared to other service interventions:** families interviewed reported that the type and style of this approach was much preferred compared to previous interventions and was consequently felt to be more effective than that of other agencies.
- **A sustainable and preventative impact:** it was noted by Social Workers that the intervention not only impacts on the children who are present in the family but also on future children. One Social Worker reported “*it’s unrealistic to think that families just have the one child or two ... they’ll often have more. Children North East improves the outcomes for all the children, not just the ones here now*”.

## Case study: Danielle

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Danielle\* is in her mid-30s and was a heroin user for 10 years. She has previously had two of her children taken into permanent care. She was in a violent and abusive relationship with the children’s father and also suffered from mental health problems. She had a very poor experience of being parented, with substance misusing parents and domestic violence in the family. She became pregnant, split up with her partner and started a methadone programme. She was referred into Families Plus Crisis Intervention by Children's Social Care who were concerned about allowing her to return home with the baby. This was only permitted if she agreed to be part of an Option 2 intervention. For the first eight weeks she received 20 hours a week of intensive support from Children North East which covered areas including safety plans, coping with drug triggers, consequences, the impact of drug taking, relationships and domestic violence, taking her to appointments and intensive one-to-one work. Now she is seen twice a week for approximately four hours. She is now happily living with her seven month old daughter.

*"I had two kids taken into care and the Social Worker said I had to have some help ... but I knew I needed it. I'd had a nervous breakdown and I was scared of coming home with the baby, I didn't think I'd manage. I was worried that I wouldn't bond with the baby, that I'd get depressed".* She continued *"if I didn't get the help I wouldn't have come so far. They've given me faith in myself that I didn't have before ... I'm a lot better, happier, stronger".*

*(Danielle)*

\*Not real name.

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## Case study: Michael

Michael\* is in his early 40s and has a history of heroin use and custodial sentences. He is a single father to three year old Jay\* who has physical and mental disabilities. Michael and Jay were made homeless when Michael's partner threw them out of her house. After being allocated emergency accommodation by Children's Social Care Michael was referred to the Families Plus Crisis Intervention service. The Support Worker visits three of four times a week and spends roughly 10 hours with the family. They have done work around triggers and consequences and safety planning, coping strategies, general support, evening routines, dealing with stress levels, making a room for the son and looking at perceptions and anger. The father says that the support has *"made me stronger ... sometimes I've wanted to chuck the towel in, but they've brought us round. Everything could have been a lot worse ... I don't think I'd have Jay if it wasn't for Children North East"*.

\*Not their real names.

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## Conclusion

The work of the Children North East Families Plus Crisis Intervention service has been shown to be effective at breaking the intergenerational effects of crime and contributing to the desistance process. By concentrating on the child, they focus on what is most important to families, which in turn helps with issues around drug and alcohol misuse, offending, and domestic violence. Through working with mothers and fathers before and after birth, they improve and strengthen attachment between children and their parents. Secure bonds predicate improved life chances and outcomes for both children and adults. Commissioning family intervention services is not just a long-term strategy, but it yields very immediate results in the cost savings from preventing children going into care. For example, Children North East's Gateshead Crisis service prevented



113 children and young people from becoming looked after children in 2014/15, saving Gateshead Council £5,778,305 (government figures<sup>2</sup> show that the average cost of a child being in care for one year is £52,676). Desistence from crime also has its own cost savings, for example, using the Home Office's guidelines, which estimate that an individual problematic drug user is responsible for economic and social costs equivalent to approximately £44,000 per year, the Families Plus Crisis Intervention service led to cost savings of £1,056,000 in Northumberland over a 12 month period. The social and economic arguments for the service are very convincing.

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<sup>2</sup> New Economy 'Unit Cost Database v.1.4' – part of The Cabinet Office Centre for Social Impact Bonds toolkit [www.neweconomymanchester.com/stories/832-unit\\_cost\\_database](http://www.neweconomymanchester.com/stories/832-unit_cost_database)

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