



Open Learn: Learning Space Case Study

K315_1: Becoming a social work practitioner

Case study 5: Relationships: Sarah, Karen and John

For this series of case studies, we have adapted transcripts of conversations and interviews recorded for the K315 Open University course.

John gave up a job as a panel beater to become a social worker four years prior to the recording. He then took over the case of fourteen year old Sarah, who became involved with social services two years earlier, when her mother found herself unable to cope.

This transcript is taken from contemporary interviews between with John, Sarah and Karen.

Interviewer

What's your relationship been like with John over the years?

Sarah

There's been some rough patches. There's been some bad patches and, you know ... we haven't had that many arguments. We've been through some, but it's been more good than bad at the whole time.

John

Do you think our relationship has changed over the years since I've been working with Sarah? Or how do you think it's changed?

Karen

We understand each other a lot now, than we did. There was a lot of quarrels ... lots of ups and downs. But I think the relationship ... it's got better. It's got better and ...

John

Having a good relationship, maintaining that good relationship is crucial. The onus is on this social worker to try and build that relationship. You know, you need to be respectful of people. So it's the way you communicate with people, you know, the way speak with them. And you just have to ... generally, just try and relax around people, because people do pick up on your mood and, you know, more often than not, you go into people's houses and sometimes they try and intimidate you. By me not sort of becoming defensive, or sort of take issue with the fact that somebody might not like me, or might not want to work with me because of ... because I'm a social worker, that doesn't really bother me.

Karen

Right.



John

Yeah, but I must ... I must admit though Karen, you know, I found you sometimes to be sort of very defensive. You was ...

Karen

Yeah, look what I've had to go through with all the Social Services, and through life ... what they've done.

John

Yeah, but...

Karen

You know, my son had to grow up without a father because of the Social Services, so don't go down that path.

John

Yeah, but you could have ... This wasn't about what happened before Sarah.

Karen

Yeah, but now ... when I've had a spoonful. I was losing again. In my mind I didn't want to lose her any other way. And I wasn't going to let that be put in ...

John

And it's really strange, because I can ... that conversation we had in your ... in Myra's kitchen ...

Karen

Yeah.

John

... about me saying to you, she will always be your daughter, and nothing will change that.

Karen

Yeah, yeah, I know that.

John

I mean look how far we've been. We've been almost around the world and back, and she's still with you.

Karen

Yeah. Yeah, I know. Well, see, I told you so.

John

No, I told you so.

Karen

Oh all right.



John

You have to respect and accept that you're a stranger, yeah. You're a social worker, you're a stranger. You know, and you cannot come between a parent/child relationship and you shouldn't, yeah. That's my number one rule. You shouldn't. Because for some young people it doesn't matter how terrible their parents are treating them, they will not have you say a bad word against them, so just don't go there.

Can you remember when ... when were the most difficult times for us?

Karen

I think the secure ... the lock up was the worst.

Sarah

And when they were hassling you ... when they come knocking on the door asking you where I was.

Karen

Yeah, the worse was the lock up and the police.

John

I don't judge people. Years ago, during my training as a social worker, I worked ... I did some voluntary work at Bristol Drugs Project, and that was one of the first things they taught you, not to be judgemental. And that kind of stayed with me. And I think it's probably there in my subconscious all the time. I can remember, in Sarah's case, I picked her up one day and she had a phone call from somebody, and I kind of picked up that she's dealing drugs.

I would say to her, "Look, you don't do that in my company". You know, because obviously ... you know, I ... it's no point me looking up to her. And said "No, don't do it, it's wrong" ... because that's ... that just don't mean nothing to somebody like Sarah, you know. But you have a responsibility to show them the right way, so to speak, and that's as best as you can do.

So during that time then, Sarah ... when things was, like, really up in the air, you'd been in Easton and didn't really care about yourself or anybody else. I mean what did you think I was trying to do? Did you sort of ... what did you think of me at that time?

Sarah

I knew you were trying to help, and I knew you were only trying to do good ...

John

Mmm ...



Sarah

... but, the only reason why it was quite irritating was because I were dedicated to that. That was like my life, and someone was just pulling me f*****g out of it. Do you know what I mean? It was so ... they were on my back too much. I didn't ... well that's what I felt anyway. And then, like now, I put myself in John's shoes, I look back and I think how hard it must have been for him, to look at me like that. And I think, you know, "Get that in your head," but in a nice way. You know, "Why can't she just understand this is so dangerous".

John

Each individual is different and, you know, you may catch them at the particular time of the day when they may not be feeling so great. So therefore their ability to engage with you might not be so good. You have to be sensitive, and it may mean that you may have to go back and tackle that issue at another time. I think one ... one of the ... the really interesting things

I found working especially with teenagers, you know ... one day they can have a blazing row with you and they can say ... they can tell you to eff off, they don't want to see you no more, and they spit at you, and all these things, you know. And you ... they walk away from ... you walk away feeling: oh my God, you know, what a failure, you know, how can I rebuild this relationship? And then you see them the next time and, "Hello, how are you?" You don't go straight in, you know, "I need an apology from you because of what you did yesterday".

As time goes on, then you can bring them back and say, you know ... perhaps, you know, what happened that wasn't very nice and, you know, I don't relate to you that way, so it's not very nice for me. And then you sort of move it on from there.

I look for the good in people. I believe in people, and I believe in giving people chances.

**This case study has been adapted from recordings made for the
OU course DVD for K315 'Critical Social Work Practice'
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