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# LIVING IT

**CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE AND JUSTICE**

Edited by Claire Lightowler, Susie Cameron and Brian Rogers





# Who's got your back?

Young people talk about who has made a positive difference to their lives by **Charlotte Bozic**

**IN THIS** special issue of Scottish Justice Matters, we wanted young people to answer one simple question: who's got your back? We asked them to think of someone who has gone that one step further to make a positive change to their lives, whether through providing extra support during a challenging time, helping to tackle a tricky school subject or job application or just being there with a smile, joke and a hug.

We wanted to hear about those people who refuse give up on a young person because they were difficult or stubborn, someone who is able to look beyond their job description or family obligation, and make the effort to reach out and be there for a young person.

*"I am looking forward to my future now, where I didn't think I had one."*

The words of Jon, aged 16, resonate strongly. This is a young man who admits he was "running off the rails" with an addict parent and no guidelines. He acknowledges that the path he was on could have led to residential care, or worse. Yet Jon was lucky enough to come under the care of R, a worker with youth service Apex Scotland. With her "open and honest, firm but fair" support, Jon was able to move forward from the dark place he found himself in, and now admits he even enjoys school, a place where previously he "didn't do anything".

Jon was fortunate enough to have someone who was determined to help him turn his situation around. Not all young people are so lucky. Whilst many have a lot of people in their lives, from social workers and residential staff to teachers and family, a young person can still feel alone and unsupported, especially if they are in residential or looked after care. With so many youngsters to look out for, and so little time to give, it simply isn't always possible for professionals to give every child the attention that they need.

Whilst we were obviously interested in reading about young people's experiences, we had a wider purpose in mind. This was to recognise and acknowledge the excellent (and often unsung work) that is being done by people, who, despite juggling busy schedules in and out of work, budget cuts and role changes, still take the time to really connect with a young person in their care.

We also hoped that the stories would highlight the most effective way of working with young people. Could these experiences be incorporated into training and professional development? Is it possible to strive for a more consistent approach, so that the young people in our care come to expect and rely on this? It made sense to ask those who know best: the young people themselves.

A simple survey was devised and distributed to young people across Scotland. Whilst the ideal age range was between 12 and 21, entries were accepted outwith this, and anonymity was given as an option.

The response was overwhelming. Nominations were made for staff from Apex Scotland, Barnado's, Includem, Kibble Education and Care Centre, and South Ayrshire Council. Others nominated their mum, and in one case, their boss.

Some responses were short but conveyed more meaning than an entire page could.

*"She fought for me"* wrote Lisa about her mum, four simple words that say so much more. Many told stories of breaking down barriers, with real gratitude and recognition of the difference a helping hand can make. There was also humour, as Zoe told us:

*"He is amazing and is very funny, and helps change our lives and keep us out of trouble!"*

Several themes shone through, such as respect, trust and compassion.

*"When I found out her life had twists and turns it really shouted out to me why she chooses to help young people in the job she does,"* said Jenny.

Another girl wrote: *"I can tell her everything and I think I trust her"*: not an easy admission for a troubled young person to make.

Here are some of the things that young people told us.

*"I started getting in trouble with the police when I was 14, it started to get really bad! P ... told me to think about the things I could lose if I carried on behaving like this! She told me to look at the situations in different ways, working with her reduced the offending a lot not completely but a lot which has made a difference to my relationships with family and friends:-) I don't think I would be in the position I am in now if it wasn't for P."*

"She stuck at me and never gave up on me. She went way past her job stuff and helped me."

"I found myself in a dark place, was either angry or upset. M, my boss, went out of her way to sit with me and talk about and work through the things going through my head. For a long time, nobody wanted to listen but M did, she showed me that not everybody thought I was just another 'bad' one."

"J started working with me at an off-campus building as I didn't want to go to school. In this time she has helped boost my confidence and has helped me get back into school. I am now attending high school and have gone from a part-time to a full-time timetable. My time with J has been fun and helped make a difference"

"He was very helpful. I am grateful for what he did"

"She has been more of a friend than any guardian angel, and is so passionate at helping young people stay on track of their lives in order to make the right choices. She has always been there for me to ask about anything if I needed and I know that she'd happily help anyone in trouble. She needs to be recognised for her amazing efforts and also the fact she is such a generous fun person with hundreds of great qualities!!"

"I thought I knew everything, I was sleeping with different boys and running away from home, drinking at the weekends and getting drunk. I was so low, I really hated myself and I started to self-harm. My mum was a young single parent, we were constantly at each other's throats, I really thought she didn't love me or care about me. When K came along, I just thought she was another worker trying to poke her nose in. She never once asked me any questions I didn't feel uncomfortable to answer, it didn't matter what I did wrong, she always gave me a cuddle. She even phoned my mum to tell how good I was doing and helped me and mum build a relationship back together. If it wasn't for K and my hard work, I wouldn't be at school, my path would have been in prison..."

"S has gave me a lot of advice when I needed it, she's worked on offending work with me to help me realise how stupid all of this was. This has helped me a lot, I took what she said into consideration and now my life has turned around"

As stated earlier in this article, we understand it's a challenge to remain on top of caseloads, let alone take extra time to connect with a young person. However, we intend for this to be a starting point for an open and honest dialogue about improving support for Scotland's young people from which we can move forward together to give young people a better future.

For all the many people out there who are already doing an excellent job, we hope this article will show you that your efforts really are appreciated.

Perhaps the words of Sarah, 16, most powerfully summarise the difference extra help can make:

"Now I have a goal ... to stay on at school, go to college and hopefully end up in a job like K's so I can help young people, just like how K helped me love myself and others."

**Charlotte Bozic** is communications officer for the Centre for Youth and Criminal Justice, University of Strathclyde.

All names have been changed.

# UK Justice Policy Review:

Volume 2

6 May 2011 to 5 May 2012

# UK Justice Policy Review:

Volume 3

6 May 2012 to 5 May 2013

By Richard Garside, Arianna Silvestri  
and Helen Mills

# UK Justice Policy Review:

Volume 1

6 May 2010 to 5 May 2011

By Richard Garside and Helen Mills

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*UK Justice Policy Review: Volume 1* (May 2010 to May 2011), *UK Justice Policy Review: Volume 2* (May 2011 to May 2012) and *UK Justice Policy Review: Volume 3* (May 2012 to 5 May 2013) are now online and available to download from: [www.crimeandjustice.org.uk/project/uk-justice-policy-review](http://www.crimeandjustice.org.uk/project/uk-justice-policy-review)