

Olivia Croasdale

Mum & Youth Worker

We had the absolute honour of interviewing Olivia Croasdale: a youth worker. Olivia is a very intelligent, caring person, and amazing Mum. She is always looking for ways to develop and further herself, and has clearly brought a lot of comfort to children in need, in her years as a youth worker. Here, you can read her incredible, insightful answers.

1) What are the 3 main obstacles you feel children are facing, today, as they grow up?

As a youth worker for over ten years, I have witnessed many young people being faced with multiple obstacles as they navigate from a child to a young person to a teenager. The majority of the young people I work with would have more than one challenge they would be facing at a given time, this therefore added to the pressures of normal life and being young in itself.

The young people I worked with were almost always in a vicious cycle of poverty. Which comes with numerous challenges in itself such as, lack of opportunities, low expectations, being surrounded and sometimes involved in crime and a smaller margin of employment and education. Often parents own educational or employment background would influence the young person's attitude to learning or work. The poverty trap is difficult for parents raising children to get themselves out of for many different reasons. Many low income households have a stay at home parent as they cannot afford childcare, this therefore creates a problem in itself as this parent is out of work for a period of time missing out on valuable experience, qualifications and reducing their own confidence.

The young people I worked with were seen as 'naughty or 'disruptive' or 'attention seeking'. When in most cases many of the young people I worked with suffered from some kind of mental health or learning need. Due to the sheer number of young people affected by either one or both of these struggles the support was either not there or had a waiting list of over a year. I found this was the case when referring young people through for mental health support. Unless parents went through private services which of course in most cases they could not financially afford young people would either be forgotten, move house, or schools or be on a waiting list of a year before they even had an initial meeting with someone all the while issues still present but receiving no support.

Another obstacle young people are faced with at this present time, would be social media, something that not many young people would agree with if asked. Their world is now both online and reality, which can be amazing for some and open doors that we could never have dreamed of when growing up. But for many there is another side that can link to causing serious mental health problems. When young people are exposed to such a never ending, infinite world of information this can be dangerous for many reasons. Unfortunately not everyone uses the internet and social media sites aimed at young people appropriately and actively seek vulnerable young people and children for exploitation. Many young people find themselves being blackmailed into sending pictures online which can spiral out of control and end with serious consequences. Some young people are severely bullied online from their peers, adults and people they do not even know. Instead of the bullying starting and ending at school it has the capability to carry on into the evening and all night in their bedrooms. Again, in some cases it has ended in serious unfortunate consequences. Many of the young

people I would work with were classed as vulnerable and seen as at risk, this therefore made them a target for online grooming.

2) Do you feel children are being taught healthy emotional development, or can access the information themselves?

At the beginning of my youth work over ten years ago there was most definitely still a stigma surrounding topics such as self-worth, or emotional development. Because many young people had been surrounded with adults who did not discuss how they were feeling or asked the young person how they were feeling themselves, this therefore had a negative effect on the child as it was only their behaviour; most of the time negative, that was looked at instead of what may have caused this. Over time I found that positive interventions were always in my work with any young person, body confidence, healthy relationships, self-esteem and self-worth exercises. All building up the confidence of the young person and allowing them to sit and reflect on all they have to offer the world. Unfortunately many of the young people I worked with did not often hear anything positive about themselves and struggled to name just one point they could be proud of, this is something that we would work on throughout our time together and hopefully would stick with the young person.

A common emotion that would present itself in almost all my one on one work with young people was anger. Young people were not being taught how to manage their emotions effectively, or why they may have these feelings in the first instance. CBT was the main method we would use with young people looking at any triggers, emotional and physical responses and then ultimately the behavioural outcome. Without organisations, charities, teachers, parents or carers breaking down these emotions and providing advice on how to break the cycle many young people would be left with their own emotions unexplained and causing negative outcomes.

3) Which two difficult topics do you feel we should talk more about with children?

Healthy relationships would be a key topic that I would work on with all young people, tailoring the interventions to be age appropriate and specific to the young person and their experiences. Most young people unfortunately lacked healthy role models in their life or may have witnessed or was involved in domestic violence. Young people from an early age would learn what a healthy relationship was from their household which could be very chaotic and change frequently, this could be due to social care involvement resulting in moving home and therefore schools, parents changing partners and introducing new children to the family. Some young people would unfortunately find themselves living with many different carers and foster parents in their short life and some living in care homes. I worked with a young person who from the age of 5-16 had found himself in six different homes through a series of very sad and unfortunate circumstances.

This lack of stability in a young person's life when they need it the most in order to flourish and grow into the person they deserve to be can have a huge negative impact on the young person and their outlook on what a healthy relationship is. Without young people being taught or witnessing healthy relationships, either with friends or relationships they form their own opinions and ideas either through what they have witnessed or watching or reading information online without any context.

Without repeating myself social media, managing emotions and self-esteem work would all be topics that I would always try and include in any work with young people. Unfortunately

in my time working with young people grief and loss became a prevalent topic also. Many of the young people would be in care homes or with foster parents or carers, each case would be specific to the individual and most of the time complex. There would almost always be an element of loss or grief in a young person's life that hadn't been taken care of. A surprising amount of young people were young carers, most of the time nobody would know this and they would be referred through to our service for being absent from school, the reason behind this was because they had a parent to care for or a sibling.

4) What is the biggest change you would like to see for children?

Increased understanding and funding in the role of prevention based intervention. Much of my work with young people has been prevention based, which is working with the young person before they have been criminalised. This should in theory allow you to reach the root of any struggles the young person may be facing before it is allowed to escalate and have a negative lasting impact on their life moving forward. I was lucky enough to work within a role that in some cases allowed you to be in the young person's life for up to a year, a large amount of time to carry out positive interventions and refer young people to appropriate services. Young people need time to trust you as an individual and a service, many of the young people I worked with have been in and out of the system referred through to different key workers, social workers, carers, foster homes mostly ending in negative outcomes. Another new face takes time to trust and to develop a relationship, enough to begin real positive interventions.

I also strongly believe that it is vital for any professional working with young people and children to always remember to listen to the child's voice. When I was paired up with a young person I would receive a large case file of all the information ever documented about the child, their family, education, carers, social care reports, police reports, sexual exploitation information and much more. It was important after reading this and speaking with professionals that before I met the child and even whilst working with them I didn't form any preconceptions. One person's 'troubled child' may be another person's 'victim of abuse', this label given to the young person can often determine how they are treated. Therefore it is important to listen to the information you have regarding the young person but ultimately your work and interventions going forward should be what is best for them as you meet them and listen to what they need.

5) Do you feel that children are basing their self-image on positive or negative experiences?

Unfortunately no matter where you look or where you are even as an adult you are almost always going to be surrounded with unrealistic images of people. Young people are no different to this at a pivotal time in their life where image is everything to many and their bodies may be changing through puberty they see adverts on television, edited pictures online, they may hear their parents speak negatively about their own body image. Taking a look back at social media, where image is absolutely everything on sites such as Instagram and Tick-Tock, only a small caption under a near perfect image or video that is highly edited and staged. Young people are online for hours of the day scrolling through these images and subconsciously comparing themselves over and over and always trying to create that perfect picture to receive the most 'likes.' This negatively affects young people's self-esteem, how they see themselves and others around them.