

NEW WRITING

White Lodge Centre Family Link and Befriending Scheme

Catherine Thurston



Catherine Thurston is married and has an older sister with cerebral palsy. Catherine works within the fundraising department at White Lodge Centre, Chertsey as Fundraiser and Publicity Officer. This is her first role within the charity and not-for-profit sector.

Prior to this she gained a BA (Hons) in Graphic Design from The Arts Institute at Bournemouth and has worked for the past 10 years as a graphic designer for medium-sized design and marketing consultancies. Key to Catherine's role at White Lodge Centre is a thorough knowledge and understanding of the services that the charity provides to disabled children and adults, their families and carers.

Summary

This article discusses the importance of short breaks to families with a disabled child. It gives an overview of the Family Link and Befriending Scheme which was established 13 years ago at White Lodge Centre in order to provide local families with a short break service. The article provides information from the perspective of volunteers to the Scheme, for example, why they should want to become a volunteer and the recruitment process they must go through in order to become a Family Link carer.

I work at White Lodge Centre which is based in Chertsey, Surrey. We are a charity that was established 46 years ago by a group of mums who had children with physical disabilities. Today, we provide a range of activities and opportunities for disabled people of all ages, for their families and for carers. My older sister, who has been going to White Lodge Centre for the past 17 years, has cerebral palsy. She needs 24-hour care, 7 days a week, 52 weeks a year. I feel very passionate about the essential services that White Lodge Centre provides. Amongst these are our Family Link and Befriending Scheme.

The challenges that a family with a disabled child faces are as unique as the child themselves; no two families are the same. These challenges can include a strain in the relationship of the parents, disruption of sleep patterns and siblings vying for their parents' attention (guilty, on many occasions!). The most requested service amongst parents of disabled children in the UK is short breaks.¹ The Family Link and Befriending Scheme exists to support families with these challenges by linking them with local volunteers who can take care of the disabled child (or young person) for regular and planned periods of time. The duration of the link depends on the needs of the individual child, the family and the volunteer. For example, the child could visit their family link volunteer for teatime once a week, for a day trip at the

weekend or a monthly overnight stay. Angela, one of the people who uses our Scheme, looks after her grandson Toby, he has Global Development Delay, ADHD and possibly autism. For her the short breaks are invaluable:

I was very anxious about leaving Toby for the first time with his family link, but because he got on so well, he was happy, so I was happy. I was surprised, I didn't think he would actually interact with them, but he proved me wrong. He loves them and they are a really good support to me.

The Family Link and Befriending Scheme at White Lodge Centre has been running for approximately 13 years. In its early days it was a much smaller community-based scheme offering a comparatively limited service with minimal volunteer checks required. Today we have 20 family link carers and befrienders who offer support to 24 children in the local area. White Lodge Centre works under the fostering regulations and all volunteers are thoroughly checked. As a result, we are very specific in matching the suitability of the volunteers with the needs of the child. Consequently we are able to offer support to children with a range of complexity of needs.

Demand from families and volunteers alike means that the Scheme is growing constantly. As a child I used to relish the thought of the school holidays when my big sister would be back home from specialist residential school. Having my sister back home was so exciting for me and the summer holidays together felt like a lifetime. In hindsight, I think sometimes they felt like a lifetime for my parents too! Of course they loved having her back home with the family, but by the end of the school holidays they really needed a break. I now understand the depth of my parents' love, care and support during those times and really appreciate the impact that my sister's disability had on their lives. This is not to say that my sister is a burden – she was (and still is) a bright, enthusiastic and loving person. I think she would have benefited enormously from the Family Link and Befriending Scheme. Let's not forget that not only does the Scheme give the parents a break it also offers wonderful opportunities for the child. They get to make new friends, grow in confidence and

independence and take part in activities – whilst the parents are reassured that their child is in very capable hands. As Angela explains:

It's lovely for him too, he's doing a lot more now and his speech is better. I think it's good for him not to depend on me so much.

The volunteers on the Scheme come from all walks of life, but all have a genuine interest in caring for children and a willingness to learn new skills. Volunteers can be single, married, divorced, widowed, young or not so young, employed, on benefits, retired, unemployed, students or families with children of their own. The link is exceptionally rewarding for the volunteers and enables them to give something back to the community. All volunteers are thoroughly assessed and receive ongoing training and support. Lyn, her husband Alan and their two children are Family Link volunteers to Toby, she describes the recruitment process:

I think it took us about 9 months, filling in the forms, getting our checks from the Criminal Records Bureau, getting references, then having the house checked out for health and safety and then it all going to a panel to be agreed. But it is well worth it – you just hang on in there knowing that it will happen.

The Link between the family and the volunteer is also assessed annually to make sure that everyone is receiving the correct support and that the needs of the family and the disabled child are still being met.

Angela urges other families and parents of disabled children to use such schemes and not to be afraid to ask for help, and more importantly, not to feel guilty about needing a break from their child:

It gives us and Toby something to look forward to once a month. You've got to think that you shouldn't feel guilty for seeking help. I wasn't too sure to begin with, I was probably a bit overprotective, but they've proved to be the right family that actually

***gives Toby all the love and support
that he needs and also to me.***

White Lodge Centre are always looking to recruit volunteers to their Family Link and Befriending Scheme. In March 2009, Shared Care Network chose White Lodge Centre as the short-term breaks centre where they would launch their national Share The Care - Big Breaks Campaign. The campaign aims to recruit enough short break carers to double the number of children receiving breaks to 20,000 by 2012.

References

1. Shared Care Network:
<http://www.sharedcarenetwork.org.uk/dynamic/scn80.jsp>

About White Lodge Centre

White Lodge Centre provides a range of flexible and creative activities and opportunities for disabled children, young people and adults, for their families and for carers across Surrey and the surrounding area. Our specialist Children's Centre offers such therapy services as physiotherapy, hydrotherapy, occupational therapy and speech and language therapy. We also provide nursery education to young children with cerebral palsy and physical disabilities of a neurological nature. Family support services are provided for children and young people who have a wide range of physical and learning disabilities. These include Play and Youth Schemes, the Family Link and Befriending Scheme, and day and overnight activity breaks at Treetops (our centre offering short-term breaks) or in the family home (domiciliary care). Our Adult and Community Support Service supports physically disabled adults in developing their interests and achieving their individual goals by offering services including therapy services, creative arts, leisure and life skills, information technology, supported volunteering, support in finding employment and in accessing other local facilities.

For further information please contact White Lodge Centre on 01932 567131 or visit www.whitelodgecentre.co.uk
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