

Feedback U Can Shine July 2009

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Parent of Reuben Boustead

My son attended the U Can Shine 3 day workshop at the start of the summer holidays this year. Reuben had a fantastic time and he told me "I made friends They liked me". This seems a relatively simple statement but this meant the world to my son, and it is priceless to me!!!

Reuben had a difficult start to life, various illnesses and stays in hospital from birth after being diagnosed with cancer isolated him to a certain extent. Reuben was without any speech until he was over 3 years old and even relationships with his family were affected by his frustration at being unable to express himself. Currently I have a six year old that is a real challenge to handle. He frequently punches and kicks because of frustration and anger or simply tries to run away.

As a result of delayed communication skills, making friends was and still is one of Reuben's greatest challenges. Children quickly realised that they could get him into trouble easily by winding him up. Quieter children who would be good role models for him found him too rough, loud and clumsy; but the children who could handle his behaviour often were the ones who wound him up even more. When he was encouraged to make new friends and walk away from those who were getting him into trouble, he simply didn't know how to. Reuben got into a habit of acting up and being silly because other children laughed at him, he thought this was the best way to make friends.

Fortunately Reuben attends a school where they understand his difficulties and don't see him as just another naughty child. Anger management sessions and support in school has had an affect on his behaviour; but without this support and routine that he thrives upon during the school holidays, he is back to where he was before.

This summer I had a glimpse of how things could be like at home, not just at school. I was very concerned when I enrolled him on the U Can Shine 3 day workshop. His long list of physical difficulties and behavioural problems would be enough for a conventional summer club to say no, and they frequently did. Reuben has no contact with his father and has few male role models in his life including a lack of grandparents. So for Reuben to be around young men and older men at the workshop was a totally new experience.

After three days I saw a different child at the certificate presentation - the confident boy that handed out certificates and waited patiently was my son and I was very proud indeed. He looked relaxed and at ease with himself, he was quieter and calmer. He had been accepted for just being himself; he didn't need to do silly things in order to be liked and accepted. Confidence and happiness shone through. That affect lasted for just over two weeks and I loved every minute of it, so did Reuben. We had a glimpse of what positive role models and encouragement from other people apart from his own family can achieve.

As a professional I see the problems faced by teenagers and parents because I have taught some of the most challenging teenagers in Kirklees. I frequently see that the lack of father at home and poor self esteem affects young boy's - any attention is better than no attention, so they seek it in any form that they can. Frequently when they are also struggling academically, rather than make an effort and work hard to gain attention and praise, they take what they think is an easier option and get into trouble.

My fears are that the love, support and acceptance that Reuben gets at home will not be enough in a few more years. I worry it will not be enough to prevent him making the wrong friends and getting into groups of young people that will get him into trouble. I fear that in order to be accepted in high school he will act up and get into trouble to get attention and be popular in a gang, especially as academic subjects will be a challenge for him. I struggle to find anywhere we can go that could help. The majority of services I have tried to access focus on my parenting skills, rather than increasing the self esteem of my little boy in other ways. He just craves to be liked and just be like everyone else.

I strongly believe that U Can Shine would make a huge difference to his life, if it was a regular feature over a longer period of time. Good parenting is not enough, even though I will put all my energy and expertise into trying to help him; he needs to feel good about himself by having different role models including and especially positive role models in the community like the young men on the U Can Shine workshop.

Reuben might be labelled a naughty boy at the moment by people who don't know and believe in him; but I desperately don't want him to become part of a bigger problem in the community. To intervene at his young age I think would be the thing that will alter his future. It would help give him a bright future. For many families I believe support is offered too late, when the behaviour is a habit they cannot break. Just three days attendance influenced Reuben's view of himself, his self esteem, his attitude to authority figures and his way of making friends.

He just needs a little bit more of it in order to shine beautifully not just for a few weeks but in the longer term.

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