MYA Choices Knowsley ‘Short Breaks’

The challenges of parenting are familiar to many people, but less experienced, are those of parents of children with special needs. The young people we work with are some of the most funny, creative, kind, intelligent and helpful children and it is a pleasure to be in their company. But for the parents/carers, who provide 24hr support for their children (medical, emotional, physical to identify some of their dependencies), ‘Short breaks’ provision is essential for them to be able to do anything else.

Like in any family, evening and weekends provide an opportunity for quality time spent together, but it is without doubt the norm that parents/carers use some of this time to support their families more indirectly, for example; shopping, cooking, organising finances, washing and all of those other day to day tasks that require children to be independent for a few hours, or attend after school clubs or visit a friend. In times when life is running smoothly, these few hours may be just enough but very quickly a change of circumstances can demand a lot more time away from children; moving to a new house or trying to find a job. So, for parents and carers of children who cannot be physically independent, are isolated from mainstream clubs, who’s challenging behaviour prevents play dates, who’s medical need require specialised training, when do these parents and carers get their time? Aside from running a family unit as previously mentioned, when might they enjoy time well spent with others, be it other children, spouses, friends or in fact time alone? The MYA Choices Knowsley project provides exactly this for the families of our young people. These few hours a week which equip parents and carers with time valuable. Parents and carers often dart out of the door at drop off in a rush to run an errand, or come at home time delighted with achievements like “That was great, got all my ironing done!”. Trivial and mundane perhaps to many but valued by our families for its impact on the time they can then spend together, knowing there is a little less to worry about!

Given the needs of many of our young people, it can be a daunting concept for parents/carers to leave their children under the supervision of others, therefore it is paramount that providers of shorts breaks not only provide parents and carers the time entitlement, but furthermore the peace of mind that their children are enjoying the highest quality provision. In every venue, staff teams ensure that all young people are thriving in a stimulating environment to best support their individual learning and development journeys.

The child led approach to sessions is tailored to scaffold our young people into activities they enjoy, that challenge them and encourage all the socialising they could otherwise miss out on. Working and playing together they become good team players, leaders, listeners and friends. The leads have a thorough understanding of the academic curriculum but arguably more important, they are experts in ensuring opportunities for communication, socialising and emotional development. Sessions are planned to address individual’s needs and targets, perhaps with sensory engagement or Makaton aids. Given their different ages, talents and interests, the young people often manage activities independent of adult support thus really embodying the benefits of a child led group.

The MYA Choices Knowsley project does not consider a young person's progression during sessions in isolation. There is an excellent understanding of the young people's time with us being only a small part of their lives and therefore staff ensure they communicate effectively and consistently with families to support them beyond the four walls of our sessions. Behaviour management is very often discussed at drop off and collection to ensure consistent approaches which proves mutually advantageous for staff and parents and of course the young person. Positive behaviour and attitudes are promoted and praised and children are taught to take responsibility for their actions both in session and at home. Most important of all the amazing things that happen at MYA Choices Knowsley, is the children's enjoyment of sessions. When they attend they laugh, they chat, they sing, they chill, they read, they run wild, they create, they joke, they play and much of the same can be said for the staff; all of which contributes to a happy and safe environment for all involved and great satisfaction and peace of mind for parents and carers dropping them off.

Nicola McDiarmid (Team Leader)