



Andrew

'I came here when I was 20, to learn about independent living and give myself the best chance of being able to live on my own within the local community. I have autism and moderate learning difficulties. Before here, I had lived with my parents in London until I was 16 but I found London too stressful. I moved to Ruskin Mill College, which cares for people with learning disabilities, in Nailsworth.

'At Ruskin Mill College, everything was catered for me but I wanted to be able to make my own choices and do things my way. I already had independent skills but I wanted more, to be fully confident and ready to get out in the community.

'Kingfishers' staff have included me in all the work they have done with me and I prefer to be involved in my learning. From day one I have been involved in producing my own risk assessments. They have worked with me at my pace and I can take my time without anyone rushing me, which is important to me. I have regular support sessions that I arrange and I have input into all the work I do. Everything I do here is to enable me to live on my own and the Kingfishers staff listen to what I have to say and to how I want to live my life.

'Since being here, my confidence has increased dramatically. I have been involved in numerous Action for Children conferences and I often get up and speak at them, which I really enjoy. I am much more sociable than I have been in the past.

'My independent skills have all improved. I can cook a wide range of meals, do my own laundry, look after my own health, and manage my own money and bills.

'I also do voluntary work in a local charity shop two days a week. I really enjoy that and like the environment. I have taken on responsibilities that previously I would not have been able to do.

'Now I am concentrating on moving on and hope to have my own place next year. Once I have moved on, I will concentrate on work – I have an NVQ in Business Administration and would like to get a part-time job or set up my own business.'

Action for Children Kingfishers, Ebley, provides supported housing and intensive independence training for learning disabled people aged 18–25

as long as it takes



Kevin

'My parents split up when I was nine and by the time I was 15, problems were beginning to show. I was stealing money and creating trouble. I blamed my mum for my parents splitting up and I felt I couldn't stay at home any more. I left home and lived in an abandoned car for two to three months. My mum contacted Youth Support Services and they arranged some accommodation for me. However, because I wasn't working, after six months I fell behind with rent payments and they kicked me out.'

'I went to Action for Children and they found me some accommodation through the council in a local bed and breakfast. From there, the project worker put me forward for a place at the Camelia Botnar Foundation, which provides residential training and support for young people. The project gave me emotional support and one-to-one sessions with a worker where we could work through some of my problems.'

'Up to the age of 18, there was a lot of things going on in my head and I wasn't taking real responsibility for myself. Then I grew up. Now I know that if there is rent to be paid, I have to pay it. Action for Children helped me a bit with budgeting.'

'Finally I ended up in Northampton, where life really took a turn for the better. I got involved with the YMCA and got a council flat, where I am living now. I started doing some voluntary work for the YMCA, doing Youth Bank, which involves sitting down with young people and discussing which youth areas need funding and why. I get real satisfaction from it. I want to put something back.'

'Action for Children helped me to get off the streets and, although I was confused and angry, they kept on helping. Having someone to talk to really helped me to get things off my chest and I feel calmer now. They are always there. A few months ago, my best friend was murdered – I did self harm a bit but Action for Children helped me through that and it stopped because I had someone to talk to about it.'

Action for Children Youth Support Services East Sussex helps young people with housing and money issues

as long as it takes



Chris

'I wouldn't be alive without Action for Children. I didn't see anything out there for me and there were no opportunities. I tried committing suicide several times. I went into care aged seven because my parents didn't want me any more. I looked for my parents when I was 17 and they want to be involved in my life now. I'm happy to see them but disappointed because they let me down so much so I'm not sure. When I was 16, I started going to Action for Children Network Brynmawr. They got me involved with activities to keep me going, like bike racing, rock climbing and abseiling. I have learnt a lot and seen lots of doors open. I have done ARTiculation, which I've really enjoyed, and have people I can call friends now. Action for Children put me through anger management classes and counselling. They really have changed my life.'

'Network Brynmawr is like a family to me. The warden in my first home was like a dad to me, although I found it tough when the warden said he couldn't be my "mate" as he needed to remain professional. But he sends me birthday cards with a cheque for a pint each year and we're in regular contact.'

'They supported me in my education – I've been to college and done a multi-skills course in bricklaying,

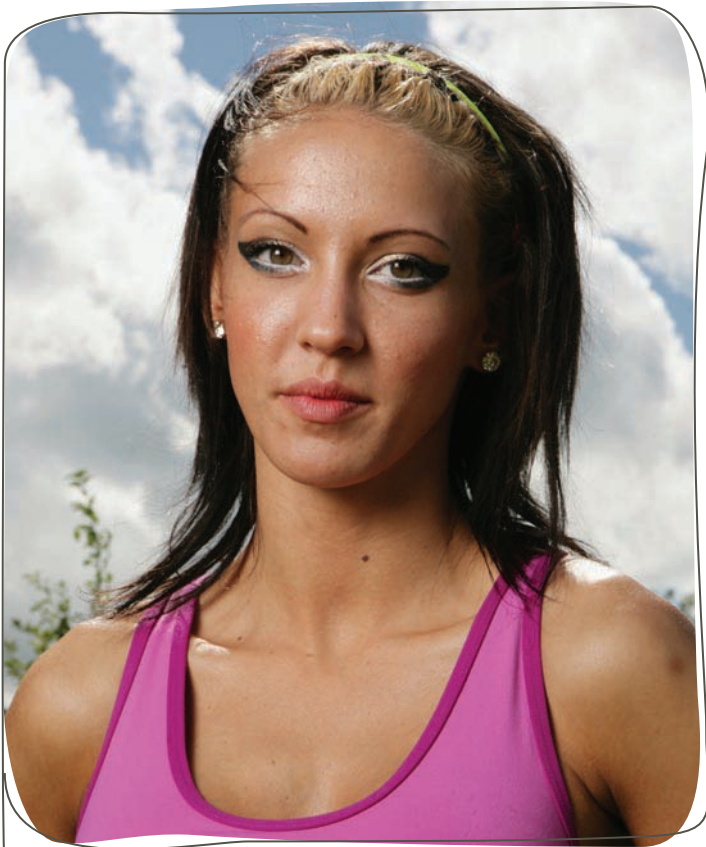
plumbing etc. I also have a security licence, fork lift licence, first aid licence and fire emergency licence. I've had a lot of jobs too – factory work and construction (forklift truck work and building walls).'

'Action for Children also got me into my own place. At first Network Brynmawr put me in a flat with fellow care leavers and the warden gave us practical training in things like how to maintain a property, budget etc. They helped me when I was in danger at one point when a former friend had mentally deteriorated and started smashing windows. Action for Children moved me somewhere safe. Then I moved into my own place.'

'The only thing is it would be better if the support didn't all stop at 21. I still need their support, especially as I've just become a dad for the first time. I can still pop in but it officially stops in November, which I'm really gutted and upset about. I don't think there is anything more that they could have done for me. Now I want to get a job and have more kids.'

Action for Children Network Brynmawr provides advice and support for care leavers aged 15–20

as long as it takes



Katie

'I've been in care since I was 11 when my mother died of a heroin overdose and I didn't have any other family members to care for me. When I was 15, my uncle took me out of care but he couldn't cope with me. I was missing school, smoking and drinking and stuff. When I was 16, I was put in touch with Action for Children Rotherham Bridges. Action for Children was totally different to the foster carers – they were always nice and supportive and always listened to me. Now I'm a different person. I would have done alright without Action for Children but they pointed me in the right direction.

'Ever since I went to Rotherham Bridges, I started thinking about things like college. Before that I had casual jobs in pubs and such like – I've had loads of jobs but none of them were that interesting.

'I started getting qualifications when I was 18. I'm a qualified nail technician and have a degree in beauty therapy. I am now training to be a social worker and started Level 3 this September. I am keen to help other people as when I hear people laughing about someone's awful situation I feel compassion and want to help them get their life back on track.

'I work as a volunteer at Rotherham Bridges as part of my work experience to become a youth worker and also run a mums and babies group.

'I got pregnant when I was 18 and had a daughter, Lucy, who is now three. Rotherham Bridges supported me throughout my pregnancy and helped me sort out my childcare so I could go to college and came to look at the crèche with me. They also paid for the kits for college and for driving lessons and my test, while I saved up to buy a car.

'Rotherham Bridges helped me with housing since I was 16 and arranged permanent housing for me when I was 18. Now I want to be a youth worker so that I can help others who have been through difficult times to get their lives back on track.'

Action for Children Rotherham Bridges provides support to looked-after young people and care leavers

as long as it takes



Irene

‘I went into care when I was nine and left my last foster placement when I was 18. I was then put in contact with Action for Children Street Level in Dundee. It was a big challenge moving from care to supported accommodation on my own and learning how to budget and such like. Street Level really helped and have given me a lot of advice. I don’t know what would have happened if I hadn’t had Street Level. I wouldn’t be where I am today. I received help with things like budgeting for shopping, cooking and keeping the house clean. This was really important and I don’t know how I would have coped in the flat otherwise. It also helped with sports development, which helped me become fit and healthy.

‘I did Action for Children’s arts initiative ARTiculation, which really helped to boost my confidence. It has helped me want to do more. I can speak to people more now and ask questions. Through ARTiculation, I’ve met new people, made friends and gone to places and done things that I’d never done before. I’m a

buddy for others and I go to organisations and tell them what Action for Children and ARTiculation means to us. I’ve been to London twice, to Stratford and to Birmingham, promoting Action for Children and ARTiculation.

‘Action for Children also helped me with getting the right forms for college, where I studied Introduction to Care for two years.

‘I now live with my boyfriend in my own flat and I’m going to have my first child soon – I’m really excited. I would also like to go on to work with children with disabilities.

‘My case is closed now with Action for Children, but I can go back if I really need help. I think they’ve done really well for me but I don’t think it’s fair that support just stops when you hit 21.’

Action for Children Street Level Dundee provides supported lodgings to young people leaving care

as long as it takes



Rachel

'I came to Action for Children Kingfishers when I was 19. Before that I went to the Fortune Centre of Riding Therapy for three years and then back home to live with my family in Hampshire and attended Ruskin Mill College, which cares for people with learning disabilities.

'At Ruskin Mill College, I was not allowed to out on my own or to use cashpoints. When I was with my parents, they wouldn't let me go into Gloucester on my own either. Here they have supported me and trained me so that I can catch buses and go shopping on my own. I also travel home to see my family on my own.

'Kingfishers have taught me that I am not that vulnerable, which makes me feel like I have more freedom and I have much more confidence. I felt really nervous before, but Kingfishers has really helped me

with my independent travel skills. I never imagined that I'd be able to go to the shops on my own and I am very excited that I can now. My family are very proud of my progress and say they can see a big difference.

'The staff at Kingfishers have also helped me to manage my money with budget sheets and to work out how much things will cost. They've helped me go onto a contract phone, instead of a top-up one. It has also supported me in starting ballroom dancing lessons. I go once a week and if I don't go, then I go swimming or riding. I work in stables once a week and have just got a horse care qualification. My dream is to teach people to ride as I love horses.'

Action for Children Kingfishers, Ebley, provides supported housing and intensive independence training for learning disabled people aged 18–25

as long as it takes



Kelly

'I became pregnant when I was 18. I was four months into a relationship and it wasn't planned. At eight months, my baby, Ricky, started showing signs of challenging behaviour and things became quite a struggle. Ricky can't cope with routine change, such as not watching a certain television programme at a certain time, and he also has problems concentrating. This makes him upset and frustrated and his behaviour becomes difficult, with a lot of tantrums.

'I had received an activities list from Action for Children Seagulls Children's Centre in the post and thought I'd give it a try. Seagulls were really good with Ricky. They gently encouraged him to do different things at different times in the nursery and he went along to craft sessions. He gets his own time and attention from people three times a week. And I get some time for myself and some support.

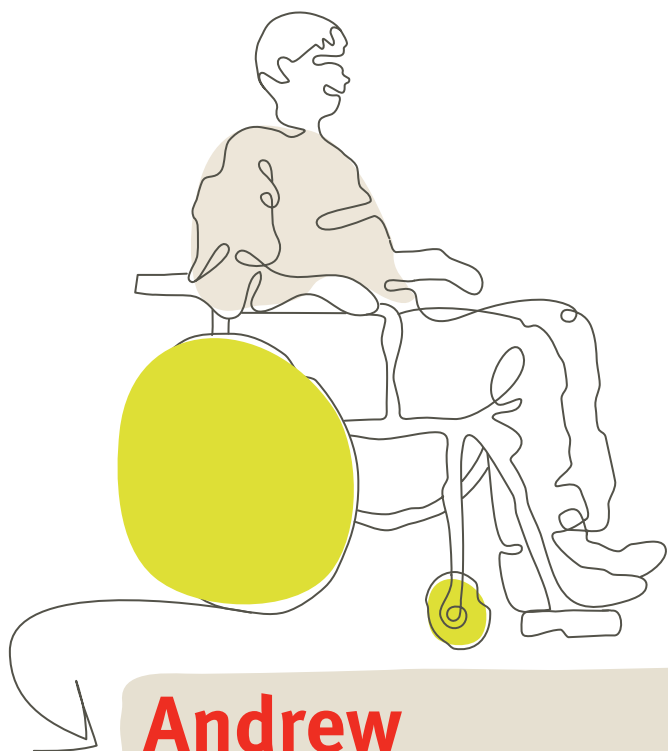
'I had a real lack of confidence. I joined the Feel Good Group at Seagulls, which worked on my low self-esteem and taught me how to cope with the stress of having a young baby with challenging behaviour. I started to feel better about myself and didn't struggle

as much as I had in the beginning. I also took part in a parenting group, which allowed me to talk to other mums and dads going through similar things. I learnt methods to deal with motherhood. More than anything, they were good listeners. Sometimes you don't need to hear anything, you just need the chance to talk and be listened to. It has really helped our family overall.

'My partner and I argued a lot after Ricky was born, but we have overcome that and barely argue now. In spite of our son's problems, we are a happy little family. My brother has special needs and I've always wanted to set up a day centre for children of all ages with challenging behaviour. Having my son has made this seem even more important. I currently work part time as a care assistant for people with disabilities and have Level 2 in Health and Social Care so I'm getting good experience under my belt.'

Action for Children Seagulls Children's Centre supports parents and children in their local community

as long as it takes



Andrew

‘Andrew was born with multiple congenital abnormalities and is severely disabled. He uses a wheelchair, cannot walk or speak, and is dependent on 24-hour care. When he was about five, he went to a school that catered for people with severe disabilities. But there was no respite care in the area. If you wanted any kind of respite, the only thing available was the children’s ward in the hospital, which was not a good place for someone like Andrew because of what he might pick up. Other parents had been lobbying for some time for a local care respite and when Andrew was eight, Action for Children and the local authority built a respite care centre.

‘To start with Andrew would go for one night, once a fortnight or once a month. It then built up over time and he would go for four nights a month and for a week in April. This gave me a break and a chance to go out with friends or have time with my daughter, who was 15 at the time. We could go to the cinema and I could give her some time. I had a life that wasn’t revolving around Andrew all the time and it gave him some independence away from me. They took him to

do things like bowling and swimming, which I couldn’t do on my own.

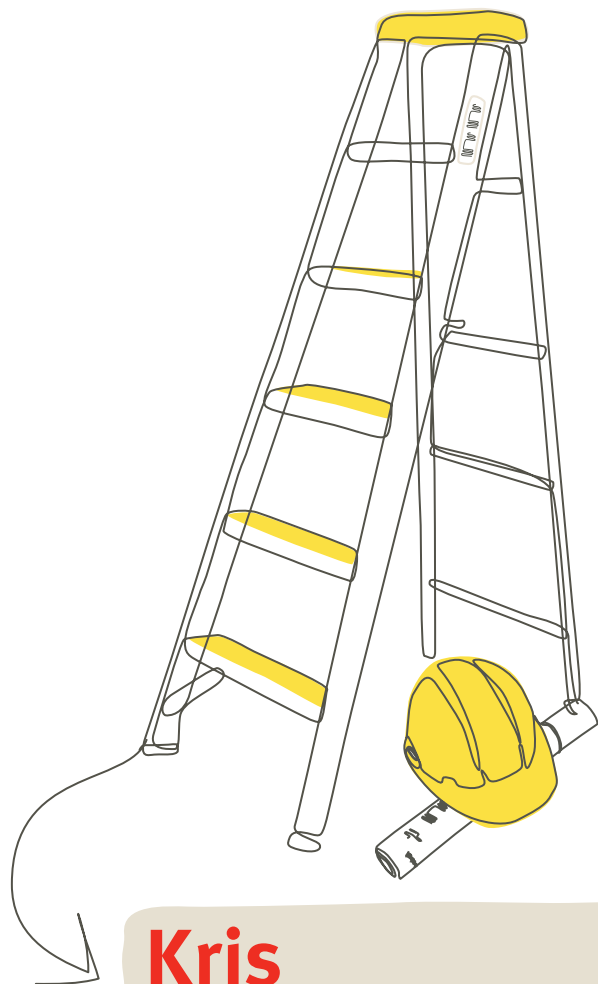
‘My husband and I split up about the time that the respite care opened, so I really needed the support. It meant I was able to find some time for myself.

‘Action for Children gave Andrew a range of support and therapy to help him develop. The staff learnt to understand his non-verbal wishes. When he was 15, his specialist school closed and he had to move to a new, non-specialist school, where everything was unfamiliar. Action for Children helped him through this difficult period by developing his communication passport, which was a folder full of pictures and symbols that Andrew could use to express himself. It has made a big difference to his life – for the first time ever, Andrew was able to “talk” to people and make choices on his own.

‘I have no idea how I would have coped with Action for Children – that thought is a big, black hole.’

Andrew and his mother, Theresa, at Action for Children Family Support Service, Falkirk, Scotland

as long as it takes



Kris

'If it wasn't for Action for Children, I would still be in my bed, not doing anything. After leaving school aged 15, I had a number of work placements, none of which led to anything. I had a lot of stress and was depressed, anxious and lacking confidence. I didn't feel my life was moving forward and was just sitting around the house all day, feeling sorry for myself. I was signing on and feeling particularly down when someone in the job centre told me about Action for Children Youthbuild. When I was first told I had an interview with Action for Children, I really didn't want to do it but they were really nice people and made me feel really welcome.'

'I have always been interested in construction and I enrolled in Youthbuild in February 2007. I did training in power tools, health and safety and electrical safety. At the start, it was hard because I wasn't used to the kind of environment I was working in – I had no confidence and found it hard to trust people. The staff at Action for Children helped me. They were brilliant, as was the advice and support they gave me to help me through that. They didn't make any promises they couldn't keep and they made me feel part of the team.'

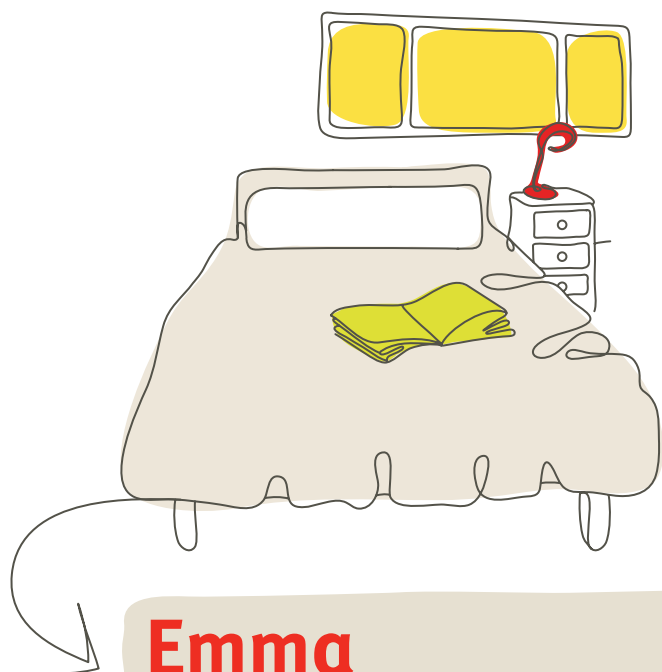
'A couple of months into the 10-month programme, I got a job with my work placement as an apprentice plumber. I've been doing that for a year and a half now and I really enjoy it. I love the job. I'm a lot more confident, I get along with everyone at work and I'm learning new skills. That's me set for life.'

'During my time on Youthbuild, I found that they supported me with any issues I had, took time to listen to me and help me deal with my problems. I could always talk to them, even over the telephone if I couldn't make it in. They were very flexible.'

'Things have turned around now and I don't have problems getting out of bed anymore. Last year I had very little – now I have a career in the construction industry and a future to look forward to.'

Action for Children Youthbuild helps young people aged 16–24 train and find jobs in the construction industry

as long as it takes



Emma

'My older brother has cerebral palsy and attention deficit disorder. Because of his illness, he was often violent and hard to manage. He received so much attention from school, social services and [disability charity] Scope that I rarely got a look in. I couldn't do any of the things I wanted to do because my brother was a priority. My mother suffered from depression and, when my baby sister arrived, my caring responsibilities increased further. I started going to Action for Children Conwy Young Carers when I was about four, stopped for a couple of years and then started again when I was eight.

'No one could do the shopping except me and I was always late for school because I had to drop my sister off and had to leave early to pick her up. At one point I was really fed up and my support worker asked me when I could get some time and I said my lunchtime. She picked me up and we went for a walk on the beach and had a bag of chips and that was great. The project workers were often my shoulder to cry on when I was fed up and I could offload onto them. They listened to me when I was sick of looking after my baby sister because my mum was down. They never looked shocked when I told them about my life at home and they never judged, which was something I loved. Everybody else seemed not to care.

'Conwy Young Carers also gave me the chance to talk to other kids who were going through similar things and who understood where you were coming from. And I liked the sessions which we did, such as learning to cook new things, and arts and crafts that I could take home to do with my baby sister.

'When I got older and started getting into mischief, they really helped. I could sit down with them and talk about my problems.

'Just after I turned 16, when my mum and I really weren't getting on, we had a big row and she kicked me out. I disappeared for about a month and I ended up in a violent relationship, taking drugs and homeless. But the day I was made homeless, my project worker rang me up. She had managed to track me down and she picked me up and got me a bed and breakfast place. She took me to see a homelessness officer and got me into women's housing. I dread to think what would have happened otherwise.

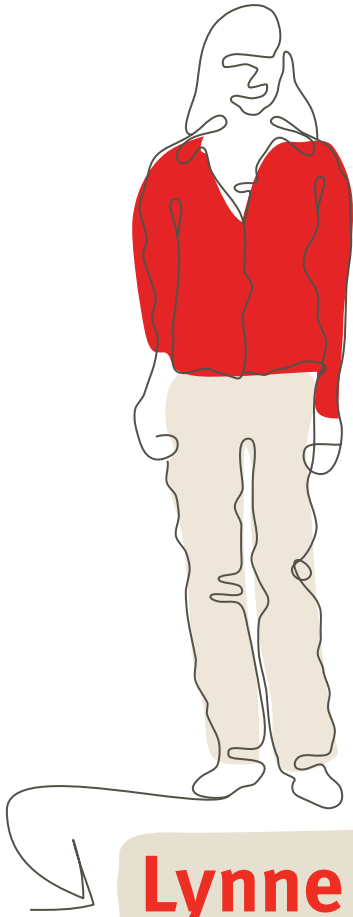
'When I was at Action for Children, I loved working with other kids, partly because it got me out of the house for a bit. I was a buddy to a couple of kids with disabilities. When I was 18, I volunteered in a school in Poland for six months, which was great. Now I work as a teaching assistant at a primary school with a lot of children with behavioural problems. I have been married for two years – my project worker came to the wedding – and want to have a family.

'My project worker encouraged me to get back in touch with my mum and we have quite a good relationship now.

'I can't say that Action for Children did all this for me, but they made me want to do it for myself.'

Action for Children Conwy Young Carers supports young carers in their caring roles

as long as it takes



‘After my son was born 11 years ago, I had to spend a couple of months in a hospital for the mentally ill. Fortunately, my son David was able to come with me too. After I came out, my social worker suggested the Action for Children Clooney Family Centre. They have really helped us.

‘My son was quite difficult when he was younger, partly because I wasn’t setting any boundaries. He could have been swinging off the lights and I would not have been bothered. For a time, he also used to cry a lot and thought he was going to lose his daddy, who has had multiple sclerosis for the past four years. It has been rapid MS and he has been in a wheelchair for the past two years. David thought his daddy was going to die and that I was going to die, but the fears David had about the future of his daddy and me are not there any more.

‘We have had family therapy, where we talked about ourselves, what we would like to happen in the family, and it has really helped us to sort it out. We are able to see each other’s problems in a better light. For two years, when my husband got MS, he wouldn’t come out of his bedroom – he just lived in there. We wanted him

to come out and join us. He is now involved and can talk and take part properly. The family therapy helped us to talk about our feelings.

‘I also went to meetings for families about handling children’s behaviour. They helped us to look at our child in a different light. I began to see how much discipline he needed.

‘Action for Children brought me to a level to cope with my child. I had this child and this child was my responsibility. And it taught me that there’s more to life than being depressed. Before I didn’t really care about my family but they gave me the heart to care about them, which is the greatest thing I could have. They gave me hope when there wasn’t any.

‘David is a good boy now and very settled. He is a happier boy than I would ever have imagined and very open about talking about his problems. He has just got an Action for Children mentor, who we hope will be his friend.’

Lynne, mother of David, 11, at Action for Children Clooney Family Centre, Northern Ireland

as long as it takes



Monique

'I went into care when I was 12 and Action for Children's Coventry Aftercare have helped me since I was 17. They supported me in shared accommodation when I came out of my children's home. They helped me find somewhere to live when I needed to move house because the friend I lived with had attacked me a couple of times and tried to stab me. My aftercare worker was very supportive then and helped me with my next transition.

'They also supported me when I was moving on to college. They helped me find and select a course and with buying the books. College was an hour and a half's journey each way and they gave me bus pass money. I got an NVQ in Health and Social Care.

'My main focus now is to help promote better outcomes for looked-after children. I have just got a job at Coventry Council as a participation and user involvement officer so I'm very pleased about that. I also did some work experience with the Action for Children media team in November 2007, which I really enjoyed.

'I've got better goals now, whereas before I was just getting by with work. Action for Children helped me to get there. They provided support and helped me with clothes to go to interviews and to get my passport and British citizenship. I am a really independent person but just needed a bit of help.

'They have also helped me financially to buy my horse, Ruby, who is really important to me. Looking after her provides a real focus for me.

'I have left the service now but I'm still in touch with my key worker. The relationship I've had with my care workers has been very consistent – I've had three over five years. The only thing I have been disappointed about was when they were sorting out my leaving care grant. It got difficult and I got less than I had been promised and they kept moving the goalposts and telling me different things. It made it hard to budget.'

Action for Children Coventry Aftercare provides support and advice for young people up to the age of 21 who have been in care or need support

as long as it takes