

[0:00:00.0] **Natalie Valios:** Hello, and welcome to this podcast from Community Care for our campaign Choose Social Work. The purpose of the campaign is to champion the profession, encourage the next generation of social workers, and counteract negative media coverage. As part of this, we're talking to those with lived experience of care about the impact that good social work can have.

I'm Natalie Valios, senior content editor for Community Care Inform Adults, and my guest today is Luke Rodgers, founder and now director of strategy for The Care Leaders, a social enterprise that works with children's services providing training and consultancy to enhance the lives of children in care, care leavers and those with a social worker.

Over the last decade, Luke has collected a number of accolades for his work, including the Young Social Entrepreneur Award in 2014 from UnLtd, a provider of support to social entrepreneurs in the UK; and Entrepreneur of Excellence in 2015 from the National Diversity Awards.

In 2018, Luke was recognised in the Queen's Birthday Honours List when he was awarded the British Empire Medal for his commitment to children and families. And most recently, The Care Leaders was shortlisted for the Workforce Development Award from the magazine and website *Children and Young People Now*.

Luke was taken into care at the age of 10. He went to 11 primary schools and was placed in 13 foster homes before being moved to bed and breakfast accommodation at the age of 15.

So Luke, first of all, welcome and thank you for talking to me. I first heard you talking about your time in care at a local authority training day. You made me – and the audience of social workers – laugh, cry and think in equal measure. I was so struck by the power of your story and the passion you have to improve the experience of children in and leaving care that your presentation has stayed with me ever since.

During that presentation you mentioned a teacher – your head of year, I think – who supported and encouraged you. He came to watch you play rugby every Saturday so that you had someone to turn to on the touchline whenever you scored a try. And there's a saying that we always remember a great teacher, which clearly resonates with you. But I wonder whether there was also a great social worker you remember because they had a positive impact on your childhood?

[0:01:26.4] **Luke Rodgers:** Yeah, thanks for having me here. It's great to be able to share some of these stories about social work and be part of such an important campaign.

I think for me there's two social workers. I thought about the question when it was sent through.

There was a social worker right at the start of my journey and there was a social worker right at the end. And, for me, the social worker at the start was somebody that was new to social work. So they were newly qualified, I was their first young person that they'd looked

after. And there was something about, when I later reflect, about the kind of naivety of that relationship because they didn't really understand what it was like to work with children in practice. I had no idea what it was like to be a child in care. And the relationship felt so genuine and open.

And I think social workers after that, especially the ones that were experienced, from my point of view, the relationship dynamic was a little bit different because you could sense the boundaries that were in place. Not that my first social worker was completely unboundaried. There was just this kind of authenticity and genuinity to the relationship.

I remember when that came to an end. I'll never forget this. We were in the car and we were driving, and she braked suddenly at a junction. And every time I think about this story I always think that I had some kind of rally driver social worker, which wasn't the case. And I turned to her and she was crying. And I asked her, I was like, "Why are you crying?"

And she said to me that there'd been a restructure, that she was a child protection social worker, I was in the looked-after children's team, so therefore that relationship had to come to an end. And I couldn't work out why she was crying because I was kind of like, well...for me, I think maybe what I was going through at the time was because of the challenges that maybe I had as a young person, you know, this inability to connect or build relationships, which we know that many young people face. But reflecting back on that later in life, I think it was wonderful to actually have somebody show to me that they really cared.

And I also then started to reflect actually that social workers also go through a lot of the same separations that young people go through because we talk about separation in social work for children and say that young people shouldn't go through separations. We want to create more stability for these young people, we want to help these young people have permanent relationships because it impacts them negatively. And I actually wonder in my own mind how much that also impacts the social worker, because they're the other half of that relationship.

That social worker, years later after I left care, came to family barbecues and stuff. So we stayed in touch.

The social worker at the end was a little bit different, in that she was very experienced but I left care really early. So I left care at 15; well, I didn't leave, I was considered unfosterable. They couldn't find me a foster placement at 15 years old. But in my mind I consider it that I left because I was put into bed and breakfast accommodation.

And there's a question later on that we're going to talk about in terms of language and how words are recorded which resonates with this story. Because that particular social worker, we were sat outside one of my family member's house, the idea was that I was going to go back there. The family member was like, "No, Luke's not coming back".

And the social worker then called their team manager and said, “What are we going to do? Because it’s been communicated to Luke that they’re unfosterable and Luke can’t stay with this family member.”

And that manager said, “Unfortunately it’s Luke’s responsibility to find somewhere to stay tonight.” And I remember them sitting in the car and saying, “I want to take you home but I can’t. And I’m going to write down in these case notes here exactly what’s been said verbatim on the phone. Because when you grow up, essentially, I want you to read this and I want you to do something with it because this is not right.”

And to witness again a social worker that’s also been impacted by the system, that’s having to make a decision that they didn’t want to do, and I suppose, the difficulty that that caused them.

What I like about both of those stories is as a child I didn’t really get it. But as an adult when I reflect back, a lot of my work now, a lot of my thoughts are around actually – and people recognise me as being a person that supports the voice of young people – but in a lot of my job, in fact, in every area of my job what I do now is trying to understand also the voice of professionals and adults. Because I feel that the afflictions of the system are affected by both.

So that’s why I wanted to share that story because lots of young people are affected by the system in ways that feel negative. They go through loss, they don’t access services and decisions are made that they feel are unfair and quite rightly. But these decisions that are made are by social workers that also a lot of the time don’t have the resources or the support themselves to make decisions that might be better. So yeah, that’s why I wanted to share those two stories. Two incredible people working within a system that was limiting what they could do.

[0:06:57.8] **Natalie Valios:** That’s really powerful, actually, thank you, Luke. Just so interesting to hear the difference between someone who’s new to the job and someone who’s experienced but they both had a very inspirational impact on you for completely different reasons, and gave something to you.

[0:07:13.5] **Luke Rodgers:** Yeah. Sorry, the thing is as well, I thought really mindfully about the podcast, because I know it’s quite easy and I hear it quite a lot, to bring lived experience into the forefront of the conversation. And one of my frustrations, but I recognise it’s needed, is that where we talk about social work really badly. And a lot of my conversations with lived-experienced people is around, you know, look at the reasons why those decisions were being made. And it’s not often the social worker’s fault.

But I think it’s really important to highlight social work. Not necessarily just positively or negatively but also realistically and say, “Well actually, you’ve got incredible people in this space who are working in a system that’s very challenging.”

And for a social worker it can be very hard to hold onto good energy, be happy when you're working in a system that can't provide the support that you want to give. And for me, care experienced people have a responsibility when they leave care to understand that, because a lot of these decisions that social workers make, their hands might have been tied, and it upsets them as much as it might upset those young people.

[0:08:13.5] **Natalie Valios:** Absolutely. That's a really good point to bring out, actually. And you often talk about how children and young people will remember the people within the system when they're older, rather than the system itself, which obviously, those two examples you've given is something that's happened for you. And in presentations to social workers I've heard you ask them how they want to be remembered. And you challenge them to think about how they can give children the resilience, power and ownership over who they are, so they remember their social worker fondly in later life. Have you got any tips or advice on how social workers can go about doing this?

[0:08:46.9] **Luke Rodgers:** Yeah. I mean, I always say don't personalise the system. So the system comes with rules and regulations that we're told we have to follow. And I can only think of an example with a foster carer. I know it's not social work, but I remember being in care and when I would threaten to run away – which was never a threat to run away, I was just frustrated – lots of people would say, "Well if you run away I have to call the police."

You know, "If you run away I will call the police." And social workers could do the same as well. They could say, "Well if you run away your foster carer's going to call the police." Or, "This is what we have to do if you do that", or, "This is what I will do if you do that."

And for me, again if you look from a foster carer's perspective – and social workers listening you will be able to think of your own versions of this – one foster carer once said, "Please don't run away because you know we have to call the police and we really don't want to."

And for me, there's something about actually communicating to young people that, "Don't make us do this. We don't want to do this. We want you to be safe, we want you to be okay." Which is what that foster carer went on to say. You know, they were kind of saying things like, "Why would you run away? It's cold outside. We'll still be here in the morning."

So there's lots of things that I would encourage social workers to look at and to question, the things that we inherit. So things like looked-after children's reviews, for example, is maybe a good example. This is a system that existed before the social worker worked in this role.

We have this idea that actually that's the space that young people should communicate their views about the important decisions that are being made in their life. That's an agenda-ed meeting, it's got a time limit. The dynamics there are difficult, especially if the child's parents are there because they're going to want to talk to them and to see them. For me, they're not spaces that are necessarily or can necessarily even be young person-centred. So social workers to recognise that and to find spaces to communicate with young people outside of it, genuinely.

Other things that social workers, I think, can do is when you said about the teacher I always make the joke, I just say, "Well that's how you make a difference is you give up every single weekend and go and watch your children play sport."

But the idea is going beyond your job role, isn't it? And for me, in conversations with young people is where you can do that for a social worker because you're only going to see them a limited amount of times over the year. You're going to see lots of young people and young people might say things like, "I really hate moving foster placement". And I think, from a social work perspective, we've got a duty there to redefine that narrative.

So we call it the three Rs, which is to recognise, to reassure and to redefine. So if someone was to say, for example, "I hate moving foster placement," we can recognise it. We can say, "I recognise that it's unsettling for you. I recognise that you're saying that moving foster placements is hard."

Reassure them: "You're safe now, right now in this moment. We care about you", and so on and so forth.

And then redefine it and that's after a period of pause. So say to someone, "Do you realise that in the future you'll be exceptional at changing jobs, you'll be exceptional at starting something new?" And they'll be like, "Well how do you know?"

And you can go back to them and say, "Well how do you know because it's in the future?"

And for me, the mindset of a social worker is that the system is impermanent. That's what it should be. We get into this conflict where we talk about, "We need to find a forever family. We need to find permanency and we need to find stability." But the system is inherently unstable, it just is. We can't provide a forever family because foster carers have got a time limit. And it's not permanent because it comes to an end.

So, social workers then can often feel like they're failing if they don't find these things that can't be found anyway. So for me, it's in the moments that you have with young people and in those conversations where a young person explains something to you like that, and to try and redefine it in a future context, because this young person's going to become a young adult and look back on their life. And they will remember what's said and they'll remember the people that said it.

So be someone that says something different. Be someone that says something from a place of compassion. And even though it's a difficult thing sometimes to say to a young person, "Think about this experience differently", in a compassionate way, when that young person becomes a young adult and does the work that lots of young people will do, they find their own healing. In those conversations that they have in those therapy rooms or with friends and peers around them that they find and grow to love, they start to talk about social workers and people in the background that have these conversations that encourage people to think about their experience differently.

And to be honest with young people. Care in itself, from my perspective, the system is its own trauma and it's not easy for young people and we want to take that pain away from them. So we communicate in that way. But actually, can we take that pain away? Or can we just give young people really meaningful experiences now so that when they get to a stage in their adolescence when they're going to work to overcome their own trauma and they can look back at these conversations and they can be huge tokens to really help them do that.

So really think as a social worker, you have a limited amount of time with a young person. The relationship isn't going to be there forever from a systemic point of view; it can be if you choose it to be. So what can you say to them so that when they grow up to be that future adult they look back with that future adult mind and then they start to realise some of the things that you say, and have got narratives to redefine what can be considered as trauma in a positive light.

[0:14:15.8] **Natalie Valios:** That's really helpful and great advice, Luke, thank you. And as well as working with practitioners you work with many young people. Have any of them told you positive stories of their social worker that stand out for you?

[0:14:28.5] **Luke Rodgers:** Yeah. I mean, the thing that connects them all together – and this is how I explain it, and it's a follow on from the previous comment – any care-experienced person (and I'd challenge anybody to prove this wrong), any care-experienced person that now can communicate that they're okay, you know, can say in whatever language that they say, "I've been through care and now I'm okay," can always name one person in their history that has influenced them.

And that person might have in the moment that they tried to influence them, felt that they made no difference whatsoever. And what you get is care-experienced people saying, "Oh you know, that social worker tried to tell me X, Y and Z and I didn't listen to them." And we've all got a story from the past that's done that. And I think we need to talk about it more because, you know, it's really important the interactions that we have with people now and how it goes on to influence them when they're older.

When I was thinking about that question, that's it. It is really when you're with that young person what can you say to them? What can you say to that young adult within them, because it's difficult? When you're talking to a child they might be moody or they might have something going on inside. They might not be able to talk to you on a level that you feel you want to lean into. We'll then reserve what to say because we're like, "Oh, well this young person's not understanding. They're not listening", or whatever.

There's a few things going on for them. If you're showing love and care they might not be ready to accept it because that also comes with the idea of pain and the fear of loss. But it doesn't mean we should stop doing it. But it's quite difficult, isn't it, as a social worker or anybody?

I always use the example of a meal. You know, if you make a meal and you give the meal to somebody else and they say, “Mmm, this meal’s delicious”, you get instant gratification. You’re like, “Oh cool, my meal’s good.” And we need that as human beings. We need validation you’re doing a good job. You know, in social work what is good and what makes a difference is statistical, we’re looking at young people in employment, stability, education and so on and so forth.

So we often – and we’re communicated often a lot that we’re failing – so I think that social workers are often burdened by this idea of constant failure and therefore it can be quite difficult sometimes to hold on to that spirit and to that hope, and to think that the words that you’re saying are making a difference, because you’re not getting instant gratification.

For me that’s delayed for a lot of young people. It’s really in those moments that you communicate, you hold space for them and you talk to that future adult. Because even though their child mind now might not be able to pick up or to process what’s being said, that child mind turns into an adult mind and it has memories, and those memories with the adult mind can then be processed in the way that you want it to, or you want them to.

So really as social workers the stories that I hear, is about people saying things to young people in a space where they might have had an interaction that they felt made no difference whatsoever but the child revisits that when they’re an adult and recognises what was being said.

So talk with intention, talk to that future adult. Social workers listening to this, you know if you’re talking and you’re putting love and care into it and you’re being genuine. And you also know whether or not, because of what’s happening within the system, maybe workloads, maybe stress, you might not be as attuned to the emotional centre that’s needed to be able to have these conversations. So if that’s the case, social workers really need to look after themselves, because you can’t pour from an empty cup.

But know that your words now will have power in the future. And that’s what young people tell us, or care experienced people tell us.

[0:17:53.1] **Natalie Valios:** Well that leads nicely into the next question because it feels like everything’s about language and words. And I was going to say that language and the use of words seem to be very important to you. You came up with the concept of ‘care leader’ rather than ‘care leaver’, and in the presentation I saw you talked about the language that’s often used in statutory documents that labels a child at a particular moment in time, and they’re often traumatised and in crisis, and you’ve alluded to it already today.

So when you read your own case file as an adult you saw that you’d been described as disengaged, having issues with attachment, displaying disruptive behaviour, you were an underachiever. It must have been really hard to read that, and clearly you’ve proved them wrong in a huge way. So what do you think social workers should stop to consider when writing reports so that young people have a better experience than you did if they choose to look at their case files in later life?

[0:18:43.3] **Luke Rodgers:** That's such a big question and when I read it I was like, oh, this is going to be a short podcast, maybe we should just jump straight to that question, because I've got a lot to say!

I don't think changing words is going to change worlds. And there is so much work done at the moment around language, and I think that it could do with a little bit more thought in what we're trying to achieve. Because looking at language in general, when we're trying to change words we're trying to enable young people to access better services, which predicates around communicating to them in a way that's more authentic.

So just as a word of warning for any social worker that's being told to change words or is actively trying to do it, it's the meaning that needs to change within them. If we change 'care leaver' to 'previously looked after' because a housing provider doesn't offer houses to care leavers or that's what they suggest, you know, changing the word 'care leaver' to 'previously looked after' is not going to change that.

And also when it comes to words as well, if we're going to change words we really do need to challenge our colleagues around us. The amount of times I sit in meetings where we've changed LAC [looked-after children], for example, but then somebody senior will say it and it goes unchallenged. So what it then creates is this kind of, "Well, you know, this has got no value to it."

And then the reason as to why we are changing those words. So for me, when we're linking it to case files I think there are a few things to consider because young people will read what's been written about them. So I always say write to that future young person. If you've got to write something that's difficult and challenging then give rationale.

And there's nothing stopping us, there's no policy around adding an anecdote on your note to say, "Dear Luke, if you're reading this in the future I just want you to know that I really care about you, and why I've written it this way is because it's really difficult to access services and I really want you to access this service. So I have to write it in this way because if I don't write it in this way that service won't consider supporting you. The reason why I want to support you is because you deserve it."

Spending the time to obviously justify to that future young person, that future adult, about why we're writing – and I know that social workers listening to this will be thinking, "This guy's crazy! I write my case notes in car journeys between crises. I can't think to that sort of level of depth". But young people deserve it. They really do. And we've got to think about what they're going to feel when they read it.

But then also just to take the bite out of the fear around young people reading case notes. If we're trying to change language because we don't want young people to feel that we've said things about them that we later go on to regret or that can cause them pain when they read their case files, we often say, "Well we need to change the language because they're going to read it when they're older."

What else they read in their case files is what happened to them before they came into care and the reasons that they came into care. That in itself is a significantly difficult thing to read. And when you compare that to maybe some words that have been used by social workers, you know changing those words isn't going to remove the pain that a child's going to feel when they read their case files about what was said in court, about why they came into care. That in itself, when you look at the pain that people experience when reading case files, is significant.

So for me again, changing the words and changing the language, it's important for sure, absolutely, but if we're doing it because of young people reading case notes we need to do something more. I believe that if young people read and access their case notes we have a duty as a service to offer them therapeutic support. If they put in that SAR [a subject access request to find out what personal information an organisation holds about you under data protection law] and they request all of their case files, I believe that social care needs to say, "Okay, if you're going to do this we also offer you support through therapy", and assist them to read this with somebody else so that you can process that.

And I think sometimes we can be unfair towards social workers around language. I mean, some things we should absolutely not write. So we shouldn't write without contextualisation. Writing 'issues of attachment', 'disengaged', we can just challenge.

Is it that I was disengaged or is it that what was being provided to me wasn't meeting my needs? 'Issues of attachment', what does that mean? Am I over-close? You know, do I hold onto your leg and not let you go? Or do I push you away?

'Disruptive behaviour', why am I being disruptive and what does that mean? I had quite a difficult life. Everyone in care has a difficult life, care itself is difficult. Decisions had been made about me without my say-so. Not because people don't want to listen but because there's limited services available. So it's kind of, "this is what you can get and we can't navigate outside of that". So that's going to feel difficult for me.

And for me, more compassion in what we write, you know? More contextualisation in what we write. And it's a call to action really, I suppose, to anybody reading case notes because the problem it creates for children now is judgment. If I read all of this stuff I create a particular image of a child, and that's going to influence how I respond and behave towards them before I meet them.

So my call to action is if we know that language needs to change and we're doing so much work and conversations to change it, then why don't we ignore the majority of it first and just actually meet young people where they are? You know, while the language is being changed we recognise it's not the right language, therefore we recognise young people not being perceived properly, therefore as practitioners and as adults and as humans, you know, we can choose ourselves to ignore all of it. With the exception of obviously very specific things that you'll know that you can't ignore. But we can ignore the majority of it and just meet that young person where they are and offer them unconditional welcome. And just

turn up and think, “How can I be unconditionally welcoming to this child?” And you’ll get a much different response because children know when they’re being judged. Everybody knows when they’re being judged. It’s not something that’s difficult to spot.

[0:24:28.2] **Natalie Valios:** There are so many great points to pick out of that answer, Luke, really that I’m sure social workers will find very helpful. Just the thought of writing to them as if they’re the future adult, or the contextualisation of labels or terms they might use, the compassion. You know, there’s so much there that I think people will find really helpful.

[0:24:49.6] **Luke Rodgers:** Just on that, because I think it’s hard for social workers. And again, I mean, being care experienced, I’m not social work qualified, but there is so much pressure on social workers to change this language that they’ve inherited that was completely fine until yesterday. Do you know what I mean?

It’s like we’ve been writing in this way, but now all of a sudden you need to change it all because you’re terrible that you’ve written in this way, which I don’t think is fair because it’s been accepted for such a long time that we actually need to have a much more compassionate approach with social workers when trying to get them to change this language.

Because to change language means to change culture, and as someone that works in step change, cultural change management is the hardest thing to do, and the thing that fails the most. So you know, there is a space where I don’t think social workers in a lot of cases should be demonised for writing in a way that has been accepted up until this point. I have a compassion and an empathy for social workers in this space because they’re having a really hard time at the moment around this language.

But like I said, at the same time we’ll change words and I’ve sat in meetings where seniors have used the language that they’re telling social workers to change. So it becomes conflicting for them at the same time. So you know, be compassionate, write to that future child and write with intention.

[0:26:07.2] **Natalie Valios:** I imagine for a young person one of the key elements to being a good social worker is that they’ve taken the time to build a relationship but that can be easier said than done, particularly with children who have experienced a lot of trauma. How would you suggest a social worker goes about doing this?

[0:26:22.2] **Luke Rodgers:** It’s a big question. It’s difficult for social workers. The system is predicated around this social work relationship being the most important. And you know, absolutely to build a good relationship but to try and understand and to define what we mean by that good relationship. Because what a child needs in their life is they need a consistent relationship, somebody that is there on a daily basis which the social worker role isn’t that. I would like to see a system where social workers work to become less active in a child’s life because they’ve found that significant other in a family or in a placement for that child, where the social worker can step out and allow the family life and the normality, I suppose, whatever that is in that family life, to exist.

But there is this kind of predication that social workers should have the most important relationship. And I think it's difficult because the structure in which that relationship is being built is difficult. So let's look at the conditions of the relationship.

You know, you're only going to see a child essentially just a small number of times over the year, because that's what social work is. So make those moments memorable. You know, really every time you see a child – and again I feel as though social workers will be shouting at this, "Yeah, you said you're not a qualified social worker. You don't know what it's like. This is a stressful job", which I completely get and I can't deny that. I can't deny that social work is a really challenging space to work in. But that doesn't mean that therefore what children need is to meet you every single day and to feel care, love, warmth. To be held accountable as well, you know? To be firm. And for you to put your all every single day into every single young person that you meet, however difficult that is because of the condition of the system and social work, and that still doesn't detract from that's what's needed.

So for me, if social workers want time to build good relationships they really need to look after themselves and not to feel guilty doing it. And the amount of people that I speak to that feel guilty about going on holiday because what are their young people going to do, and all that kind of stuff. To build good relationships with other people, which the boundaries of a social worker's relationship is a number of isolated events over a year, those events need to be really, really meaningful. So really listen to young people, be honest, hold them accountable.

One of the things that I'd avoid is, if a young person misbehaves, for example, is to be like, "Oh, because of your life we really understand why you behave like this", because we're giving them an excuse to behave like that.

There's something else we can do. We can say, "I recognise you're in pain", or "I recognise there's something happening for you and that's why we're here". There might have been a placement breakdown, let's say, "I recognise that there's something going on for you. I want to offer you support or I want to seek support for you". So deal with the reason first, don't go straight to the behaviour.

And then talk about it, "But what was going on?" "When you were feeling that way, why did that happen?" "In the future what can we do to ensure that this doesn't happen again?" And separate reason and behaviour and engage in constructive conversations like that. I think social workers are skilled and attuned to doing that. But to recognise that you're not going to be that person that is permanently there every single day, which is what a child needs from my perspective.

And the second thing which is a bit more controversial is that, you know, a lot of social workers want to maintain relationships with children when they leave care but are told by their seniors that they can't. Well, you can. I mean, you really can. If a child leaves care and it is reciprocal, both of you want to have a relationship beyond care, it's not inappropriate.

It's certainly not inappropriate when the system itself says, "We're looking for permanency, we're looking for forever families, we're looking for relationships." They don't end at 18 when care comes to an end.

And the reason why I say that and why I want to finish a little bit on this – I know there's another question – is that how many of us have got Facebook requests or Instagram requests or other social medias that are young people that we used to take care of or support have reached out to us and tried to add us as a friend? And what we tend to do, we don't accept it and we don't deny it. We leave them completely in limbo land.

And I think for so many reasons which I won't get into, they're those conversations that I'm talking about, those things where kids have become adults and they're saying, "You said something that I remember and I want to have a conversation with you about it. I want to thank you", or "I want to say you were right". And then social workers miss that really smug ability to go, "Well I told you so!"

And for me, there's a lot of this work that goes beyond care. So for me again, to consider when a child leaves care as well that you can have a relationship with an adult in society. That's okay and that's allowed if both partners want to do that, if you and that previously looked-after child want to do that. So for me, relationships in social work requires a lot more conversation because it's a tricky space and with a system that's predicated around it being the most important relationship I think that there needs to be some change in that area.

And again, having social work in a child's life is something that I believe we should look to remove. Not because there's anything wrong with social workers. It's just that a child deserves to have a family and that deserves to be working so well that social work intervention shouldn't need to happen. So that's a convoluted way to answer that question.

[0:31:50.9] **Natalie Valios:** No, that's really important messaging. Thank you. So finally, what qualities and skills do you think a young person will remember most about their social worker?

[0:32:00.3] **Luke Rodgers:** I wrote down one word because I thought there's so many, but honesty. And what I mean by that is we often are scared to be honest with children, particularly around things where we might have to deliver difficult messages. In our minds we will think, "Oh, I don't want to cause further harm. How do I say this?" So we can skirt around stuff. And that in itself is damaging.

These young people have been through things that they do not deserve and they are exceptionally resilient because of it. And I know people will curl their toes at that word, but they are. You know, you go through something tough, you're here today, you're in care. These kids are pretty resilient. They can deal with honesty. They can really deal with difficult messages and you're not going to cause further harm if you facilitate that conversation honestly, whether that's a difficult decision that's been made, you're not going to cause

further harm if you're being honest and if the decision that you make is genuinely and communicated in the best interest of that young person.

What you will get in the moment that you facilitate and deliver that honesty might be the representation of pain through behaviour. At that point, hold it. Recognise that that might happen, recognise that things might be said that will be later gone on to regret. Recognise that pain will present itself to you and hold it. Because when that child grows up they will really thank you for that.

And that requires mindful practice. It requires, "Okay, this is the message that I'm going to facilitate or to share with this young person that's difficult, and I'm going to do it honestly. I'm going to recognise that they're not just going to shatter and turn to dust because they are resilient young people. They can deal with it. But what I will recognise is that from delivering this message and sharing this message it might trigger some pain, at which point I need to brace myself to hold that pain and to not do anything else but hold it."

And like I said, in the space of separating reason and behaviour, that's where you can say, "I can see that you're angry, I can see that you're upset. But using these words we may need to think of different things to say because, you know, that can be painful for me to hear." And to brace that space. And eventually things will de-escalate.

And again, they're the moments that children are going to look back on. What we know young people complain about all of the time, care-experienced people, is that decisions were made, they weren't included, they weren't discussed, they weren't told to them, it just happened, all that kind of stuff. And it all predicates back to this, I'm not going to say dishonesty but inability or fear to share honestly because of that fear that you're going to cause further harm. You're not. Honesty will always win. And care and love and all of that sits within that space.

So for me, biggest, biggest, biggest quality is honesty in sharing difficult stuff, knowing that that young person is not just going to crumble but they will present pain. So I suppose your second quality is to hold the outcome with that young person, recognising that something that has been said to them has been painful but they're going to overcome that. They will overcome that if it's facilitated honestly and, you know, communicated from that space. I hope that was helpful.

[0:35:20.1] **Natalie Valios:** That was, thank you. That's a really great note to end it on. And it all seems to come down to communication, language and words. And as always, your words are really inspiring and I'm inspired by them. I'm sure everyone listening will be too. Thank you so much for doing this and being part of our campaign to drive the message that good social work really does make a difference.¹

To find out more about our campaign to champion the profession and the brilliant work that social workers do follow the hashtag #choosesocial work on social media or go to www.communitycare.co.uk. Thanks so much, Luke. Thank you for listening. Goodbye.
