

It's Never Too Late to Have a Happy Childhood – Cathy's* Story

Over a quarter of New Zealand children have witnessed family violence; the effects can last a lifetime. Half of the families that come to us for support include children under 18. We try to help them understand what is happening in their lives and homes; who is responsible for the anger and fear; how they can make themselves safer; and to learn what healthy, safe behaviour between people looks like.

The Tamariki education programme is one of the main ways that children can be supported to overcome the violence they have experienced. Apart from the safe space to share and learn, children are given tools and strategies to enhance their safety and build their confidence and self-esteem. But without a doubt, the favourite part of each group session is morning tea!

This is a letter about Cathy, an 11-year-old who is overcoming years of violence. The Tamariki programme has been part of her journey:

“Cathy came to live with us two years ago. She had an acute sense of ‘aloneness’ and was anxious - and at times overwhelmed - when she talked about her life experiences. In her short life she had already had 13 care placements.

“Hearing about your Tamariki Children’s group gave us impetus to seek Child Youth and Family’s approval for her to attend. The application/assessment process was easy and positive, both for Cathy and me as her caregiver. It was also wonderful to have her transport to and from the group taken care of each week, as I have to work full-time.

“From the first session it was obvious that Cathy was totally engaged and, as the weeks went by and she discussed the sessions both with us and her mother, we could see visible changes in her, especially her awareness that she was ‘not alone’ in having a family with family violence issues. That insight brought her a great sense of relief, as did the understanding of how those experiences might have impacted her life. She also grew in her understanding of the issues her mother faced, as well as her mother’s partner.

“Cathy currently faces more challenges relating to ongoing incidents in her family. However, she now has a helpful ‘framework’ through which she is making sense of it all and she understands now whose responsibility it is to make changes. Cathy has even encouraged her Mum to make a self-referral to Aviva!

“Cathy wanted you to know that she no longer worries about her mum so much, and she feels that through the education group her confidence to make friends has grown and she feels more positive and helpful. She wanted the facilitators to be thanked for all the good things they did for the children. I also want to acknowledge their exceptional abilities in engaging the children, as well as facilitating a very therapeutic experience for Cathy. We see and live the benefits of her having attended the group and feel so grateful.”

(* not her real name)