

Mile in My Shoes: Emma's story

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People think that when children grow up in the countryside, they have a great life and for the most part they do. But for some children and young people, especially those who may have a lot of complex and issues going on at home or have additional support needs such as with their mental health, then there just aren't the services there to support them.

I'm Emma Pears and I'm the founder of SELFA Children's Charity, based in Skipton in North Yorkshire. SELFA is a children's charity for those right up to age 25 and we support children and young people with a range of needs, from those who may have profound and multiple disabilities, to those who are having emotional and behavioural needs.

Craven District where we are based has more sheep than people, so you can imagine the kind of economy that that brings with it. We have a lot of people who work on the land around here. We have children and young people who live on rural farms, maybe small cottages at the, at the bottom of the Three Yorkshire Peaks.

We know that children and young people, who are from poor families and live in the countryside, are actually worse off than children from poor families who live in the city, because of services. Because they just can't access anything and there aren't the resources in their schools and in their communities to be able to support them. I spoke to one family who were making 80-mile round trips to attend mental health appointments. We cannot just fund towns and cities, we have to fund our smaller rural communities, otherwise the gap gets bigger.

We have one of the most deprived estates in North Yorkshire here, in Skipton town, and we have children from that estate who've never been to the seaside, to our lovely Yorkshire coast. We also do residential breaks in the Yorkshire Dales where they can go and sleep under the stars or – *laughs* – some prefer to sleep indoors, but that's fine too. But we also do trips to cities, you know, to Bradford and Leeds and – further afield so that those young people do get those opportunities to go to things like sports stadiums and museums and galleries and, you know, see all the culture that a city has to offer.

But then there's also children who have never got a train anywhere, they don't know how to order things in shops. And you know those sort of independence skills is super important for us to nurture as well so that they can see that there's – more out there and there's so many more opportunities available to them.

If you're the only child in your school that has autism or ADHD, or you're the only child whose parents have split up, or you're the only child who identifies as trans, then you're going to have no community around you of support. And that's what we do at SELFA is we bring those children together. And they see other children like them and they meet other

children like them, and their parents meet, and we create friendships outside of our remit. And that's really what it's about. It's not rocket science; it's about bringing people together in a nurturing environment and supporting them to the best of our ability.

We are sometimes the only place where people feel accepted and a sense of belonging and feel that they can – we'll be there for children and young people throughout their childhood. And that's what really makes us unique.

I moved to Yorkshire 24 years ago. I originally come from Northern Ireland 'n I grew up in the Troubles. People do think that they're moving to the countryside for a better life, and I think like my mum said whenever I moved to England. She said, 'You know, you have to take yourself with you!' – *laughs*. You know, at that time I didn't realise what she meant, but actually I was bringing all my troubles, all my trauma with me and – and you know, it wasn't really until further down the line that that all really caught up with me personally. And I think that, you know, children who've maybe been affected by, say, domestic violence and we see that they've moved here with parents, but actually, then that starts to present in their behaviour later down the line and the support needs are there.

My daughter started to present with signs of need and – support with her mental health when she was just eight years old. She really, really struggled with her emotions, behaviour. And I found that there was just very little support out there. There was just nobody I could really go to. There were long waiting lists for support or things that just weren't available. So that's really a lot of, influenced a lot of what of the work that I do at the moment is, trying to make sure that children and young people who live in areas that aren't our big towns and cities can have access to the same services that their peers who live in the hearts of cities.

I hope that people can see from my journey that actually, things do get better, and they can get better. She's 18 now and she's off to university next month. And it's not always easy. She does carry a heavy load with her from day to day, but I'm super proud of what she's done.

It's very telling when a child comes to you at half nine and says, 'Is it lunchtime yet?' Because you know what they're saying is, 'I haven't had breakfast.' A lot of our families are impacted by food insecurity. We have a community fridge here and we provide food parcels for all our families. It's not always families who are on the lowest incomes and on benefits but quite often we have people who are in employment when they just can't make ends meet. There's quite a high level of rural poverty so you can imagine that, compounded by lack of access to services, your access to food banks, to cheaper food, to affordable fuel.

And we see those all coming together to form the perfect storm really, where families feel that they can no longer cope with the situation that they're in. And I think all those things impact children's mental health. There isn't a support system there for them and that's why we've tried to bring that support closer to home and then try and work with others to get a longer-term solution.



What's really nice about being part of a – small community like this, you'll go to the local supermarket, and you'll see some of our young people who are working there. Now, you know, they've progressed on to that. Others who've gone on to college, university, you know, really, really proud of them. Some who've, you know come to our sports groups for children and young people who are disengaged with sport. One young person has previously represented England at fencing, you know, through starting that journey here. So, we hear lots of stories like that. Its just people being integrated in our community who weren't before and never felt like part of it, you know. Children, young people who were barely leaving their bedrooms and now are living a full and happy life. And it sounds so simple, but it is the most rewarding thing.