

## Case Study – Wendy

***‘I try and do everything myself and I try to handle it as best I could, but then I wasn’t coping and she was getting into more trouble. So I thought well this is where I need some help from someone else.’***

Connections UnitingCare is a community organisation with a long and proud history of supporting marginalised and disadvantaged people. We offer a range of services across a continuum of care from preschool and childcare through to counselling and in-home support. We provide innovative and early intervention programs that support children, young people and their families giving them a better chance in life now and in the future.

Our work is exemplified through the story of Wendy who needed advice and assistance to ensure she could get through a difficult time. Wendy and her daughter Sarah’s story is like so many other people we work with. There is no simple, closed-book, happy ending. We don’t pretend that we can make life easy, that we have a solution that is going to remove all of life’s obstacles, but we are there to help and support people. We aim to provide the advice and assistance to set people onto a new path and we have the support mechanisms to help make their future brighter.

We work with people on life’s journey – we’re there to give a helping hand and to ensure that the practical assistance, useful tools, advice and therapeutic care is there when it’s needed.

Wendy’s daughter, Sarah, was just 14 years old and about to begin year 9 when she met her boyfriend, who was 16 at the time. Meeting this boy was a catalyst for change in Sarah’s life, and the beginning of a downward spiral into transience, drugs and anti-social behaviour.

Sarah had lost a friend of hers a year before and a psychologist believed this anniversary triggered her desire to find someone to take that place. The boy she found was controlling, obsessive, abusive, yet despite his downfalls he somehow managed to have an unbreakable hold over Sarah’s life.

*‘Oh definitely, he’s obsessive, he’s controlling, he’s jealous, he’s everything – he won’t leave her alone... oh he abuses her, yeah. He is abusive, you know, throws her around, slaps her, verbally abuses her as well and I have no idea why she takes it.’*

Sarah abandoned school, her friends, a loving home and a sense of safety to live with her boyfriend wherever they could.

*‘At one stage she was living pretty rough, not in a stable place, so that’s something I couldn’t understand. She had a bed at home, a nice warm home, a loving family – she knew we were all there, but she didn’t choose to be at home.’*

Sarah’s absence devastated and confused her parents and her sister, who could not comprehend the reasoning behind Sarah’s actions.

*‘Try and digest all that and have your daughter out there at the age of 14, not knowing where she is or what she’s doing, yeah it was really hard, really hard and Connections helped once again.’*

Wendy sought help from Sarah’s high school, and was put onto Child FIRST by the school support worker. Initially, Sarah met with a psychologist who wouldn’t meet with her again until she was ready to interact, which was a challenging setback for the family.

*‘We’ve had more success from family therapists through Connections than what we did with a psychologist in the first instance.’*

Wendy and Sarah had counselling sessions together and individually through the Connections program, and they were able to establish open communication lines between them.

*‘Once we’d done that family therapy, there was much more communication. Now she knows the door is still open but she’s choosing not to take up the opportunity and come home at night.’*

*‘The communication has been fairly open between the two of us and that was something that was discussed with the Department of Human Services (DHS) and Connections as well – for us to keep the communication lines open and try and encourage that as much as we could.’*

For the majority of the time, Sarah made the effort to attend these appointments, yet it often depended on the situation in her relationship and whether she felt the need to talk about it. Sarah realised that the meetings were not just for her benefit, but were of great assistance to her mother.

*‘She knew I wasn’t coping and I think when I let her know that I wasn’t coping, that’s when she stepped it up a little bit more and*

## Case Study – Wendy (cont'd)

*she would make a bit more of an effort to answer her phone or come to the appointment.'*

Despite the efforts of a range of services and case workers, Sarah has not returned to living in the family home permanently, and the family as a whole is dealing with impact this has had on their lives.

*'The longer she's away from home I think the harder it is, because she doesn't know how everyone's going to react when she comes home, whether they're going to be happy to see her or whether they've put that wall up again.'*

Sarah's father was frustrated by the red tape that prevented action being taken and found it difficult to cope with her comings and goings from the family home.

*'He just wanted to throw her out, he'd had enough. She's coming and going, he didn't know how to deal with it, so he just wanted to go and wring the boy's neck, as a father would, but I said to him no you need to let the authorities deal with that side of things*

*and it's up to Sarah to make these choices. It took him a while to come to terms with that.'*

Sarah's sister found it difficult to cope with the situation and the constant changes in her life at home.

*'She put up a wall as well. She wouldn't want to talk to her when she came home. So, I think it made it harder for her to come home because of that but then when she did come home and she stayed home, the walls started to come down again and they started to communicate.'*

*'Through all the groups, knowing that you're not the only one out there that's going through it with someone so young too, was a little bit of help, not that it made a great deal, but yeah, you're not on your own.'*

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### What services do we offer?

» Child FIRST (Family Information Referral and Support Team) aims to provide support to families by improving their ability and resources to cope with difficult times.

» Reconnect works with both young people and their families to assist in building relationships with family members and links to education, employment, training and community homelessness assistance if return to the family is not possible.

For a full listing of all our services go to [www.connections.org.au](http://www.connections.org.au)

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### What challenges do we face?

As one of Victoria's largest welfare agencies and Victoria's provider of the largest Child FIRST, a key community intake and referral service, we are well-placed to identify key problems and recommend important policy, funding and structural changes.

We need a service system that exists for the family and one that maintains continuity. Most services are funded on time limited basis, often leading to ceasing involvement well before families like Wendy's are ready to say good bye to supports.

Funding at the moment only allows for one Case Worker to support the child, the family, including any siblings. But various family members often have competing needs, their different

perspectives make it difficult for each member to feel that they are getting the unconditional support they need. In these circumstances, it would make more sense to have a response that could provide support to all concerns separately.

Essentially we think more effective funding models should provide for multiple Case Workers that are not limited by time and this would provide for much more effective results. In a broader sense, we also say that as a community we need to move to an investment and increased emphasis in the preventative, family strengthening and community services model of care – an investment in this end of the system would alleviate the pressures currently experienced by Child Protection and would give us more opportunities to get in early and help people in need.

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