



Artwork by Lara MacGillivray, Growing2gether Youth Advisory Board member

## CASE STUDIES SERIES

# John

My first impression of John was that he was 'large and solid' and I thought that no one would be able to knock him over. He spoke quietly and initially I found it hard to understand what he was saying. He appeared calm, a bit flat and expressionless. He only really spoke if he was addressed directly. I had little information about him and in the early sessions, I found out that he was Polish and that English was his second language. He had moved to the U.K. when he was about 6 with very little English and he can remember the struggle he had in his Primary school classes to fit in as he did not really understand what was going on.

Initially there was a certain passivity about him; very polite and just nodding occasionally. At school he has had patchy attendance and few friends. He was not really interested in school work or anything really. When he did speak he said the minimum with little facial expression and there was no enthusiasm. I checked with him that he had chosen to come and he confirmed it was his choice.



At the start of the programme, one of the first worksheets, the WELCOME sheet provides them with an opportunity to say why they have chosen to come on Growing2gether and what they want to get out of it.

John wrote the following ....

“ I want to help kids and really I want to be more happy. I want to be a better person and to be able to improve my understanding and then my communication between people”

A lot of young people respond with one word answers but John seemed to have a clear idea of what he wanted from Growing2gether.

Initially he sat back in the group and did not contribute other than giving his agreement or answering minimally. He held a steady gaze on whoever was talking and smiled only occasionally. This group of 4 boys and 3 girls did not really know or mix with each other prior to Growing2gether, so in the early weeks, it was relatively quiet with a definite reluctance to share anything much.

The nursery is large and there are 2 rooms plus a large outdoor space and children can go from place to place as they please. On the first day, John was approached by a little boy almost instantly and was taken by the hand to the cars. This child has many challenges and special needs and did not relate well to other children or the staff so everyone was a bit surprised when he went to John and held out his hand. In the check-in after our first visit, John was beaming. He did not say much but it was clear that he had enjoyed himself.

Every session, this boy would find him and together they would 'huddle' and enjoy lots of different activities together with the child leading the way. The staff were delighted as the boy would remain calm and involved in all sorts of play when John was there, with no sign of the frequent shouts, screams and tantrums. It was in the 5th session after nursery that John's enthusiasm bubbled over and he took up about 10 minutes of the check-in talking about what he had been doing, his observations and lots of energetic communication. It was like something had been lit.

Soon his enthusiasm was there at the start of the session too and he became participatory and clearly happy to be in the group. Everyone responded well and I noticed how interested the group were and how focused they were as they listened to him without interruption. He no longer mumbled. He spoke in short clear sentences with confidence. I think that the change in his energy was this amazing catalyst for everyone else and all of them began to really communicate with each other without looking at me or the other facilitator but with each other.

John continued to work with the same boy and as friendships in our group were established, other group members would approach John and his child in the nursery accompanied by other children.

There was a gradual transition where this little boy tentatively began watching others and just every now and then ventured towards them. There was a lot of snatching toys but John remained by his side and gently and repeatedly explained about sharing and turn taking. This little boy's social and emotional development benefited from this excellent 1:1 mentoring that John gave so willingly and wholeheartedly. It was a joy to see this transformation in John's motivation, enthusiasm and ability to communicate.

There is this point in the programme when we invite the young people to say what qualities, strengths and skills they have witnessed in their peers when they are with the children. It is important that the feedback is specific and that they can relate it to what they have seen. It became a very moving process and John was able to give and receive acknowledgements in equal measures. John had grown so much and he had become confident in all aspects of the work both in nursery and in our group time.

I was touched by how John expressed his gratitude on the last day " this has changed my life ...it was the best thing i have done"

From John:

*" I got to help children in nursery and it helped me to find skills and qualities I never really knew I had. I am so happy I got this opportunity because I would never have got the chance to improve myself to become who I am now. "*

*" I have enjoyed this group and I may join another one....I have become more mature and confident, especially speaking."*

I asked John what he had learned and I wrote down what he said...

John knows that doing Growing2gether gave him the confidence in understanding and speaking English which he says he never has had before now. Talking with a child helped him as there was no pressure and he can hear that he sounds more enthusiastic and his voice is more interesting. He feels happier and has made friends.

*"I have learned that all children...everyone is different and it takes time to get trust. In the past I have been bullied and called names about my weight and being Polish.....they say 'immigrant' to me and I used to get very angry ..now I am aware that I bottle it up and that is not good. I want children to not be alone like I was ...I want them to be able to ask for help."*

This underlines the capacity that John has to learn from his own experiences and to seek to provide more positive experiences for other children. The ability to transform his own painful challenges is built on John becoming more aware of his own experiences and being willing to talk about them and share his experiences with other young people. With this increased self-awareness, John has greater choice in how he can use the skills he has been learning and his own unique strengths and qualities to achieve what he wants in his future.

John may be moving and he really wants to get into a particular college in Edinburgh. He knows that he needs to get the grades to do this. He is not sure yet what he wants to do in his life, but he is certain that he wants to get to university and he is happy knowing that he will be able to make friends in the future.