

Caring for disabled children

Have you ever wondered what it takes to look after disabled children? Mel Parks hears about the experiences of two childminders from Cardiff.

Denise Evans and Janet Pentony are both registered childminders with the Cardiff Carers Network. Set up in 2001, the network provides respite care for families of disabled children. The children often have complex needs and so the care the childminders provide is usually one-to-one, and the childminders on the Cardiff Carers Network get paid three times the standard hourly rate to reflect this. There is a waiting list for the network, which is always on the lookout for new childminders.

Develop your skills

Special training and making changes to your practice and setting isn't always necessary, but sometimes helps. Denise Evans, a registered childminder since 1997, says, "I had been childminding for a few years before I joined the Cardiff Carers Network. I joined without special training but now I do go on a lot of courses; however, I feel the most important quality you can have when looking after disabled children is empathy."

When Janet Pentony, a registered childminder since 2004, joined the network, her Godson had recently been diagnosed with epilepsy and a friend's child with an autistic spectrum disorder, which was increasing her awareness of disability. Even with this experience she felt that training, for her, was vital. She says, "something clicked and I thought that I'd really like to be part of the network but I didn't feel like I could do it without understanding and awareness of children and their requirements. I got my level 3 in



Denise Evans joined the Cardiff Carers Network after a few years of childminding

childcare practice, did extensive autism training and in-depth child development, manual handling, and even nutrition – as this can affect a condition or sometimes help to manage it. Having said all that, it is the parents who will teach you the most about their child. I didn't have to make any particular changes to my setting because with childminding you have to have everything safe for children anyway. However, we can get hold of specialised equipment if we need it."

“It's the best job I've ever done – the hardest, but the most rewarding”

Challenge yourself

There is no denying that the work is often challenging. Denise says, "I looked after one little girl who could be quite aggressive. She would sometimes slump in the middle of the road and pull me down with her. But I think it's important to ensure that

The parents put their trust in you and you build a bond with the whole family

children become involved in the local community, by going to places like cafés where parents might be worried about taking them."

Reap the rewards

The rewards more than make up for the difficult and challenging moments. Both Denise and Janet agree that each small step forward is a huge achievement for the child and that watching each child progress keeps them motivated. Denise says, "a 4-year-old girl that I look after couldn't talk or move independently just over a year ago, and now she can walk brilliantly if you hold her hand, and she can climb on apparatus. It's wonderful to see her progress. Seeing the children have fun is what gives you the buzz, and knowing that the parents are getting time for themselves too."

Janet says, "I looked after a boy with an undiagnosed condition. He came to me at 7-years-old; he was, at the time, in a special unit within a mainstream school. He had challenging behaviour and wouldn't interact or make eye contact. Now he has moved on to another carer because he doesn't need the one-to-one care that I gave him. He even gave me a hug at the end which is something he wouldn't have done at the start. Two years on, it was brilliant to be able to go to a meeting with a psychologist and talk as a professional about the things he has achieved."

Feel valued

Parents of disabled children are often concerned that other people won't be able to provide for the needs of their child. Finding professional childcare for those families is life-changing. Denise explains, "out of the 20 families I've worked with, there's only one that didn't want the provision; they are all appreciative." Janet agrees and adds, "the parents put their trust in you and you build a bond with the whole family."



Janet Pentony enjoys a day out with Olivia

Get advice and support

Childminding networks provide support to childminders looking after disabled children; the network coordinator can also deal with placements and liaise with the local authority for funding. Denise explains, "if I have any queries about my childminding practice, I go to my network coordinator. If I'm looking for work, they can help too. The support of the network is essential for liaising with other professionals, for example, social workers and health visitors."

Janet offers advice for other childminders who are interested in looking after disabled children: "Ask if you can shadow a childminder who already looks after a disabled child, or just speak to a network coordinator. They were supportive and let me go at my own pace; I wasn't rushed into it. Most importantly, go into it with an open mind. It's the best job I've ever done – the hardest, but the most rewarding." ●



Could you look after disabled children?

Talk to the Early Years team at your local authority or your NCMA regional office to see if there's a community childminding network in your area, or disability awareness training happening locally. You can find the contact details of your regional NCMA office on page 43.