

MIDDLESBROUGH, December 2016

INTERVIEW WITH PARENTS OF CHARLIE AND IAIN

1 FAMILY DETAILS:

Charlie and Iain, identical twin brothers, live with their parents, in South Middlesbrough where they have lived for the past five years, having moved from another part of the city at the age of 18 months. The two boys at the time of the case study are in Year 1.

2. FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS AND CLIMATE:

The extended family consist of the two boys, parents, maternal grandmother, maternal great-grandmother, paternal grandparents and paternal great-grandparents, all based in the Middlesbrough area. Both parents work part-time; mother during the day (20 hours per week) and father at night (16 hours per week). They both used to work full-time but when the boys were four, mum lost her job through ill health and stayed at home for two years. During this period, she was confined to a wheelchair and on medication, and the boys helped her to get out and about. The original plan was that when the twins started school, both parents would return to full-time work, but this has so far not been possible with the current employment situation in the area.

Parental income is therefore relatively low and the boys are on free school meals. This has inev-

itably caused stress to the family at times. The boys recognise when their mum is a 'a bit down' and the parents have discussed with them the fact that they cannot afford holidays like some of their peers and that they are not a rich family but they have what they need. Both parents recognise the twins' maturity in accepting the situation. *"For 6 year olds, they accept it so well. They understand that we want to buy things but just can't, so they will say 'That's all right. We'll wait Mam, no worries'."*

There is a lot of involvement from grandparents on both sides of the family. One grandmother has recently moved closer, so the twins are now able to go twice a week straight after school and spend time with her drawing, doing puzzles and using workbooks. They also go to their paternal grandparents a little further away to stay for extended periods. In the summer, they make barbeques and cook in a pizza oven, and help their granddad in the garden. Mum feels that they are getting a good variety of activities from grandparents and is happy that they are active and not reliant on television.

CHILD CHARACTERISTICS:

Dad explained that the boys have different skillsets and extremely different 'chalk and cheese' per-

sonalities, though both are described as very polite and sociable, and able to chat easily. They have strong friendship groups at school and are able to resolve conflicts quickly and easily. They are described as even tempered with only very occasional minor temper tantrums.

At school, they have been split up so they both have separate teachers. This decision was made by agreement between home and school and it has so far worked well with both of them doing exceptionally well.

Iain seems to be more willing to share his successes with his parents and tell them how well he is doing but at parents evening it became evident that Charlie's marks were actually higher. He seems to not feel the need to tell his parents but will say *'Oh, yes, you know I do my work at school. You know I'm very good at school'*. They are both scoring highly and exceeding expectations but the parents are trying to encourage them to push harder and be a little less relaxed about their achievements.

Charlie is very technically minded and will happily read through instructions and build from K'nex for hours. He can work out complex things for himself. Iain is happier with his pencils and

a book, and is content to sit and draw. Charlie enjoys drawing too but mainly if there is a specific need.

Iain has just started a dance class whereas nothing could be further from Charlie's interests. Charlie appears to be very aware of cultural stereotypes, saying, when asked, to find an activity while Iain is at dance class: *"No, it's okay; I'll just go home and do my K'nex, mam. I can build more with dad while you take Iain to dance, because that's like a girl thing, isn't it, mam?"*

4. HOME EXPERIENCES AND ACTIVITIES:

Both parents explained that they have the same approach to learning. They tell the boys: *"You've got 10 years with us, really, before you go and decide to do what you want. It's our 10 years and we're going to try and get as much into you as we can, so to speak. (...) You can have fun at school and play with your friends and things like that, but your teachers are there to teach you stuff. You need to bring that home and tell us about it."*

"I don't want the boys to think 'I don't need to make the effort'. I'd like to see them put the effort in. (...) They know they need to do it for themselves. It's not for us, it's for them. (...) They see on the TV the nice cars. (...) to get them nice cars you need to work at it now. It needs to be imprinted in a way that they need to keep doing that."

Both parents read and the boys see this as a normal everyday activity rather than something that is just done at school. They will take an interest in what their parents are

reading and want to discuss it with them as well as the books they are both reading at different times at school.

When the boys are reluctant to discuss what they have done at school, the parents try to encourage them to do so, and constantly refer to their workbooks at home. Mum says *"I don't bother with the TV or laptop. It's only been very recently that they've got a tablet for Christmas. I've tried to keep away from electronics. I never had it and I know I did alright from school, and my husband did alright. We get books out; we doodle, do puzzles"*.

The only concession to this is a Sky box which is used to watch the Discovery channel, natural history films. They are riveted by David Attenborough programmes, call him 'Uncle David' and constantly ask questions which arise from the documentaries. *"If they ask, we'll tell. We've always tried to never fob them off."*

If watching a film, mum will try to make sure she asks what's going on so that she knows that actual learning is taking place, not just passive watching.

Other family activities described by the parents were decorating with stencils at Christmas, regular day trips in the local area and visits to the cinema, bird sanctuary, dinosaur park and local nature trails. They have pets (dogs, fish, and rabbits) and a keen interest in wildlife.

PRESCHOOL EXPERIENCES AND ACTIVITIES:

From the ages of one to three, the twins spent time with their grandparents but mum was very

reluctant to send them to nursery after bad reports from a friend and anxieties about funding, as well as feeling unready to let them go. She explains: *"My maternity leave ran out a lot quicker than most people's would have. So, obviously, I returned to work a little bit earlier, had taken all my holidays and that, but I didn't want to miss out on anything, and my husband didn't want to miss out on anything as well, which we're grateful of now, so, it worked for us. (...) As it turns out, it was only a few weeks after that we actually got the school place and I didn't need to, in the end, put them into a private nursery."*

However, they did access the local SureStart when Colin could take them to activities in the buggy and they enjoyed interaction with older children.

Their current experience at school is very positive with both of them loving it, especially their relationships with staff. In moving from a play-based curriculum to a more formal system, they know they have targets to meet and what they have to do to succeed, but their parents feel they were ready for the transition, *"they stepped up, they embraced it"*. Their last reports indicate that both are doing exceptionally well and over-achieving. Charlie achieved 100% attendance and Iain was the first child to be awarded a certificate for reading 100 books.