

## **Gwen's Family Reunification Story!**

Gwen's first interaction with Vermont's child protection system began with a knock on the door. Several people she knew had called Vermont's Child Protection Hotline (1-800-649-5285) to say they had concerns about her children's safety.

"When I first heard from DCF, I was scared", says Gwen. "I thought they'd just want to take my children and keep them away from me. I had no idea that my Family Services Worker would end up being one of my biggest supporters."

Gwen loves her children and wanted them home with her, but she was not quite ready to make the changes they were asking for. The case went to court, and the judge placed her children, temporarily, with a relative who stepped up to help.

When children are removed from their families to keep them safe, the goal is to reunite them with their families — as soon as possible.

"I had a clear choice", says Gwen. "I could continue down the path I was on: abusing drugs, staying in an abusive relationship, not taking care of myself or my children, blaming everyone but myself. Or I could take advantage of the help being offered."

Gwen chose the latter. But getting clean was just the first step. She also had to deal with the stressors and triggers that caused her to turn to drugs and unhealthy relationships. And she had to cut a few negative people out of her life, completely.

After several months of substance abuse treatment, intensive family therapy, parenting classes, and court appearances, Gwen's children safely returned home.

Reunification with family is the most common outcome for children and youth in Vermont foster care.

"My worker was very supportive," said Gwen. "She pointed out my strengths and gave me something to build on. Having that support system and someone willing to work with you, instead of against you, made it easier for me to be open about what was going on."

When asked what advice she had for parents involved with DCF's Family Services, Gwen said: "Don't automatically think your worker is the enemy. If you work with them, they'll work with you. But be ready to do the work. I wouldn't have had the same relationship with my worker if I was out buying drugs, shooting up, and partying every weekend."

When asked what advice she had for Family Services Workers, Gwen said: “Keep the lines of communication open. Return calls from parents as soon as you can. Be available. Not knowing what’s going on with your children is a major stressor.”