

(Intro music)

Beth: Welcome to episode two of the Solace Stories podcast. Solace is the leading domestic abuse and sexual violence charity in London, supporting nearly 30,000 survivors every year. I'm Beth, the Campaigns and Community Manager at Solace. Today, I'm sitting down to chat with Minty, one of our playworkers, who provides support to children in our refuges.

Beth: So hi, welcome Minty, thank you so much for joining us for episode two of the Solace podcast.

Minty: Hello! Thank you for having me.

Beth: Of course, you're welcome, thank you for taking the time out. So, we're just going to ask you a few questions about your role, and about what you do with Solace as a playworker. So, first of all, do you want to introduce yourself, what your role is and how long you've been here as well?

Minty: So, I'm Minty, I'm a Seasonal Playworker, I actually work for Enfield and for Camden, I started in Enfield last September, and then in Camden I started not that long ago, probably March. And yeah, I love it.

Beth: Amazing, and for anyone listening who might not know what a playworker is, could you briefly describe what your role is and kind of your day-to-day?

Minty: Of course! So, everyone always thinks *playworker - all you do is play*, which is all I really do! But no, my role really is to let the children play, however I like to let it be a place where they can be completely themselves. I think it's so important for the children to have the play, so for me to just spend an hour or two with the children in the refuges gives them that time to just be themselves and play. I plan activities, so I always try and do it to allow the children to pick what they would like to do, so we all chat and have little team kids' meetings and we pick what we're going to do. So, I come in, we do an hour and a half's activity, and then they leave.

Beth: Amazing, I mean it's brilliant, it sounds very fun but also very important, because play is important for the kids.

Minty: You know what, it is fun, because we do so many things, so many different things, it's not always that we just sit and play, we go outside, some of the older children they just want to come in and chat, so we have really lovely chats, they tell me what they've been up to at school. They all get to make friends with other people in the refuges. So yeah, it's a really important thing that they get to do.

Beth: And do you support children across all ages? Or is it a specific age group that you work with?

Minty: So I do all of the ages that are in the refuges, however, it's if the children want to come, I always like it to be a thing where it's up to them, it's their voice, if they want to come and do a session they can if they feel like they don't want to they don't have to, but to be there if the child comes. So, we have children that come in a tiny baby, so a couple of months old. And then we have children that come in that are 12, 13 and 14, however, I like to make sure the sessions are for the children. So, a baby would never come in with an older child, because I like to do that for their needs. But yeah, we have all ages.

Beth: Amazing. So, what in terms of you know, all children love to play, and we all know it's important, but why specifically, is it so important to these children who might have experienced or witnessed domestic violence and kind of that's why they're in the refuge in the first place.

Minty: Yeah, I guess it's a lot to do with the environment, the children probably haven't had the environment to be able to play and play, people think, you know, you just play, you just get up and play. But children need to feel quite safe to be able to play they need to be able to be themselves. And if they

can't be themselves, then they can't really play. For example, when children first come to the refuge, you'll see them maybe just sitting in the corner not really getting involved. And then the more they get to get comfortable with the environment, they start playing, they open up they talk about random things, it can be you know, interests or just a random story, but they they're just able to do that. And I think from being with the children, I've seen that it takes time for them to be able to do that. So, because they haven't had that the environment it's been hard for them.

Beth: That must be so rewarding when you see those kids kind of open up and laugh again and smile again.

Minty: Yeah. Do you know what's lovely is when they come in, a lot of the children they don't want to leave their mums. That's their comfort. And it's important that I don't make them feel that they have to be separated by their moms, because that's not what I meant. I'm just there to play and if their mums want to come in and play too. But over weeks, you can see their confidence building, and they're so happy to be like, Bye, mum and then leave the room and they just, they can just play and that's the rewarding part, knowing that they feel safe in a place because everyone should feel safe in a place shouldn't they.

Beth: Definitely, 100%. I mean, you already said yeah, it's so rewarding. But was there anything, you know, why did you want to become a play worker? What was your kind of journey to this role?

Minty: Because I'm really good at playing! Not really, I've always worked with children, I've worked with children in hospitals, I've nannied, I've worked in different countries in orphanages, I've seen a lot of different children, and I've seen that in every single setting, they need play. So I was like, I just want my role to be play. So that's why I'm here. And I just think, you know, if I get to give children an hour of the day to just play and have fun, then I'm happy with that. So yeah, that's why I'm a play worker!

Beth: That's lovely, you found your perfect role. What is, what's been your favourite day so far at Solace or is there kind of a success story that sticks in your head?

Minty: You know what, only because it was quite recently, because d'you know what I've had so many, but we had the Easter and Eid celebration a couple of weeks ago. So we had every child come from different refuges to one, one house. And you could see at the beginning, the children were like what's this? No, no, I'm not sitting, I'm not doing anything. And then we put on an Easter hunt. And as soon as they got involved with each other, and we did it where to find an egg, they needed to do five star jumps, and just how excited they were to play with each other. And I think it was just bringing them all together and seeing them have fun. And everyone was just laughing because that was so funny. And it was just so lovely. So yeah, that's up there.

Beth: That sounds lovely. I think we saw some photos of that in the internal update, it was really cute. Obviously, your job is wonderful. And it is all about play. But we also know that you have to deal with some really difficult things. So, kind of on the flip side, what do you think the kind of toughest or hardest thing about your job is?

Minty: I definitely say like with the environment, I think seeing the children so scared to leave their mums and come to me. And I think because they've been in such vulnerable situations, and they've had so many traumas happen to them. I'm just a stranger to them. So when they come to me, they're like, 'no, no, no', and I have to somehow, like work my way around, being able to look after that child without scaring that child. So it can sometimes be quite hard, even when people are like oh, you just do play, it's like not every child wants that, you can't just throw play at the child straight away, you know, you need

to get to know them. And so definitely getting the children warmed up to the rooms is quite hard. And umm...

Beth: I mean, it's a good thing, if you're struggling. Sounds like it's a good role. We can always come back to it.

Minty: There's been so many times where things have happened, I just can't think.

Beth: And yeah, I think that's really tough kind of seeing, seeing children at the start. But as you said, very rewarding to see that progression.

Minty: I think also, it's quite hard for them, for the change, like because they come into the playroom, they come and have play sessions, and then they move on. Or a lot of times I see that they make such good friends with children. And then the children move on. And they will be like, Well, why minty? Like you were playing with them? Why aren't they here? And it sometimes feels like it's down to me to be like, you know, to explain to them because even though I just do play, like play sessions with them, we get really friendly, so they'll talk to me about things that have happened or things that are upsetting them maybe that they wouldn't talk to another worker about because they're in the playroom so they can speak about things. So there are a lot of times where I do have to address situations with the family support worker. And it can be hard, like it makes me feel sad at times because they're telling me things and I'm like, they're a child, no child should have had to, like, feel and think that. So that is that is a challenge, and the friends like when they get so close to someone, and I know I know that child's leaving in three weeks and that one's going to be staying for a while. And I feel like oh, no, like they're so close to them, and they're going to have to be separated. So the bonds, yeah, that can be quite sad too.

Beth: Yeah, it's an interesting point you make about the kind of, I suppose you create such a casual fun environment that, yeah, they do feel safe to disclose things. They, a lot of children speak to a lot of, kind of, they're in professional settings, right? Like speaking to social workers, or even with family support workers, it might be quite kind of formal, getting them into new schools and things like that. So it's interesting that you've created this casual kind of play space.

Minty: And I guess that's because I never have a notepad and a pen. So when they're chatting to me, I'm never writing anything down, whereas when they go and have a meeting with their parents, things are probably being written down, and I'm just playing. So free play, it's quite amazing how much a child would open will open up.

Beth: Yeah, yeah, definitely. And on that, you know, we know that domestic abuse cuts across kind of everyone, there's no kind of "perfect victim" or anything like that. And the things that children experience are very complex, but are there any kind of commonalities or some kind of key issues or challenges that you, you see a lot in children who have experienced or witnessed domestic violence?

Minty: I mean, there's quite a lot of, I'd say, hitting, where children will hit other children instead. I mean, I know schools, children get angry and they'll push and shove, but this is more like, they're really angry. And sometimes it's like they're not there. You know, they'll get quite aggressive. So we have that, we've had that quite a lot with all aged children really. And we've got an area in one refuge, where we have a lot of the soft play. So you know, if they're feeling a little bit angry, and like need to just let out their steam, it's safer for them to go in there. However, we don't have that in every refuge. So I think it's important that we can try and get a look something where the children can, you know, like a soft play area. So yeah, they get quite angry, we also get a lot of the children throwing the toys, which again, you'd be like, you know, kids throw toys, but it feels different, you know, if they're quite wound up

instead of, you know, just saying how they feel. I guess that's it. They don't always express how they feel with words. It's quite done in throwing things, hitting each other or screaming.

Beth: Yeah, I suppose anger, it's important to give them that outlet. I know, I've heard from kind of other family support workers and things how, you know, particularly if it's a young child, they might not understand what they witnessed. So all they know is that mum took them out of their home, away from their school, away from their friends, not quite kind of understanding maybe the danger they were in. So they actually might hold quite a lot of anger towards mum, also anger towards dad or you know, whoever it was in the house that was violent. So yeah, it's important to give them that outlet, I suppose, to kind of, I suppose process the anger.

Minty: Exactly, because I don't want to say to them like, no, don't, because if they're feeling angry, you need to let out your emotions, everyone does, we do as adults, so why shouldn't children? However, it needs to be safe because they're in a playroom. So if they're feeling angry, we could, you know, like fidget toys and stress toys, like, it'd be so amazing if we could get a lot of these things. So then the children could, you know, express their feelings without having to feel like it's harming anyone around them.

Beth: Yeah. And then is there any kind of techniques you use or anything? You know, I've heard other workers use, like the empty chair method to kind of speak to that potentially violent parent or anything like that, do you kind of have any techniques, I suppose that you use with children to help them with those potentially angry feelings.

Minty: I mean, I guess this is why it comes down to the word play, because I always like to, I mean, all of the children think I'm a child. So I think the more I can be at their level and talk to them and play with them, it's like you can get through to them better. You know, like if there's children fighting, and I'm just like, No, don't do that, and I'm raising my voice at them, they want to be on top of that. So if we just stop playing, I find, I'd really try and make sure I get interest for all the children. So you know, if something is happening, I can like, bring them over to do something else. And then they'll just talked to me about things, you know, I don't like to look like it's too out-the-book, and I've got to say this, and do this, I like it just to kind of flow as much as it can. And also, I think fresh air is amazing. And you know, if children feel like they're uptight or I need to have a talk with them. If we can just like sit outside or just get some fresh air, somehow it does relieve their feelings a little bit more.

Beth: Yeah, amazing. And I know you guys do kind of day trips and things in the summer, have you got anything planned?

Minty: Well, I think we've got Chessington wild adventures, is that what it's called? The theme park place? Because there's a half term, I think, at the end of May, beginning of June, so we're going there, I tried to pick something that was animal based, because somehow the kids all are obsessed with animals at the moment. So, there's a little zoo in there, so I thought it'd be nice for them to be able to see the animals and see, a lot of them haven't been to the zoo. And you know, these things that kids probably do a lot of the weekend, these children haven't seen that. And it's so amazing that these refuges allow them to be able to see this and they get to go on the trips. So that's what we've got lined up.

Beth: That will be very fun. I'm sure the kids will love it.

Minty: I'll be on the rides.

Beth: Yeah, it'll just be you, it'll be a day off for you! So, in terms of kind of, obviously, at the moment, we're seeing a lot of pressure with cost of living, and also like still feeling the impacts of the pandemic

and things. Have you seen any sort of shift or, you know, is there any kind of additional struggles due to cost of living and things like that, that are impacting these children or impacting how you can deliver your work?

Minty: I definitely think that, I mean, it's hard because I started this job after the pandemic, so I'm not too sure what it was like prior to what was going on. But I see, there's definitely hunger, a lot of the children come in and they're hungry. And, you know, I have sessions that start in the morning, when you know, most children would be having breakfast, and they come in and they're like, Oh, we're really hungry, so I always try and keep fruit in the playrooms. We do have a couple of children with obviously allergies, so we have to be really careful with giving food, but hunger is a massive one there. And you can tell like if children are hungry as well, like they can't concentrate. And yeah, and then clothing is also, we have children come in and they can't go and play outside because they don't have a coat, they don't have shoes on. And that's really hard, because, for example, just before Christmas, when it was snowing, I really wanted to go out and build a snowman. But we had nothing for the children to go out and do the snowman with, there were no gloves... so this is obviously an impact. And it's hard in the playroom, like you probably wouldn't think because you're like, 'Oh, you just go in and play'. But you know, when kids are hungry and when they've not got the right clothing on, you can't always do the activities that you've...

Beth: Yeah, it comes down sometimes, it's the real basic essentials. Yeah, they, you need to deal with that first before you even think about the recovery process. Yeah, definitely. Well on that, if you did get more funding, which is you know why we're here today and why we're running this summer appeal. You know, what would more funding do for your service and the children you support?

Minty: Oh, man, it'd be amazing, you know, like I was saying play is such a big thing. And to be able to make it even bigger and be able to do more with these children would just be amazing. Like, I've seen them smile more now. And I'm not saying that's me and the playroom, but just for being able to play with other children. And if the playroom's not open and they can't be in there, they stay in their room a lot. They don't come out. So the playroom is a place where they can interact, even for the women, you know, the women come down and they'll talk about things and then another woman would be like 'oh that happened to me' and get chatting. So yeah, funding is a huge thing. Even little things like we have, which is amazing, we get a lot of funding for babies, we get lots of amazing things and I'm so appreciative of these, but we also get a lot of older children in the refuges. And when they hear the word play, the last thing they want to do is come into that playroom. So you know if we could get things for these teenagers and older children, then it allows them to come and talk and you know, it will be amazing.

Beth: Well, we'll do our best. So kind of on that to sort of end, you know, we're kind of speaking to all our supporters today, what do you want to say to them? You know, if they're listening at home and want to help, and want to get involved, how can they support your service?

Minty: I guess, for people that have children or play with children or see children or have children around them, just look at how happy they are when they play, look at how they are and how, how much they enjoy it, and just think every kid deserves that, you know, it's what kids need to do, it's going to help them in the future. So, any funding or any help, or you know, anything that can help the service of play, it would be so appreciated, and it would just make the children so much happier.

Beth: That's amazing. Well, I think we should end on that, because that's a lovely note thank you so much for coming

Minty: Thank you for talking to me!

Beth: And taking time out of your play session. Yeah, thank you so much.

Minty: Thank you so much, guys.

Beth: Thank you for listening, and thank you so much to Minty for taking the time to tell us all about her work, speaking with such passion about the difference she makes. If you'd like to support her work, consider making a donation to our appeal by going to solacewomensaid.org/donate. Every donation made to our big give appeal between the 6th June and the 20th of June 2023 will be doubled. Thank you so much for your support and thanks for standing with Solace.

(Outro music)