

STIGMA

Stigma is like a label, single parents are labelled as lazy, benefit scroungers who are work-shy and have no intention of working. Single parents are having children just so they can get a council house and claim benefits is something we hear all the time.

From personal experience I know this is not the case. I was in a steady relationship when I had my two sons and my partner had a good job – we had both worked since we were 12 and had a good steady income.

Single parenthood can hit anyone of us at any point – no one plans for it or expects it to be them. But no matter how you got into the situation where you are a single parent claiming benefits you will still be tagged with the same label – you are lazy and don't want to work.

Where does this stigma come from – why is people being demoralised to feel worthless and invaluable because they are claiming benefits? The benefits system is supposed to be there to support families in hardship but as soon as you claim benefits you have that label of being lazy and made to feel worthless. This is exactly how I felt – I tried going to college

to keep me out the benefit trap but juggling the demands of single parenthood was hard enough – never mind trying to study for a HND as well.

The process to apply for benefits was difficult due to the attitude of the job centre staff. Your personal situation did not matter – they had rules they had to follow and I felt like just a number to them. I was supposed to be able to apply for jobs that were within a 90-minute radius from my home which meant I could have been out the house from 7:30am to 6:30pm – who was going to pay for the childcare for my children for all that time and who would pick my children up if I missed the bus or the train were cancelled? I aired these concerns but was told that wasn't their concern they were just following guidelines. This obviously worried me hugely and had an impact on my mental health.

Whilst claiming benefits I felt I was being watched by everyone in my village and being judged as the non-working mum. I felt everyone was talking about me and watching my every move. I felt I had no right to treat myself or buy something for me – so I would try not to be seen in

the local café or the local pub incase people spoke about me. I felt I had no right to be seen spending money on myself. This led to me staying in a lot which led to me becoming isolated and depressed with no social life. Again, this had an impact on my mental health and my overall well-being.

I hid a lot from my family too – I felt guilty that I didn't work but was in receipt of benefits – my family have a strong work ethic and everyone worked from a young age. My sister and I used to go to the berries or potato picking during the school holidays for extra money and we both had part time jobs from aged about 12/13. My parents both worked hard and were not rich by any means but had the belief that you worked for your money and they did have a go a few times that I didn't work but had money for a bottle of wine on a sat night. Due to this I tried hard not to let them see how much I struggled and how my money did not always stretch to cover everything. I would go to my mums when she was off work for my tea and make out that I just wanted to see her and spend

time with her where most times it was because I had little heating at home and no food in the fridge.

I had no idea about the support services available for families so I tried to plod on by myself with the support of my family and very few friends. I think I was a little ashamed of claiming benefits so I shut myself away from a lot of my friends and just kept in touch with a select few. This feeling of embarrassment came from the stigma – it made you believe claiming benefits was a huge issue and getting away from benefits into work was always at the forefront of my mind.

The barriers I faced when trying to access employment were low confidence and self-esteem, childcare – the lack of it and the cost of it, travel – public transport availability and cost and the lack of suitable jobs available. My previous experience was in care and the hours were unsuitable for a single mum. I had no experience in any other line of work though so I knew as an unskilled worker I would need to apply for a job paying minimum wage and this would make me not much better off than claiming income support.

Childcare was a massive obstacle. Firstly, the lack of childcare available is very poor and then the hours are limited to school/office like hours and not flexible. Most childminders didn't start til 7/8 am and finish at 6pm.

This would suit someone working an office type job but isn't suitable for carers as the hours are early starts and late finishes. School holidays and weekends aren't considered either which makes finding a job to suit the childcare available so much more difficult. Secondly, the price. A lot of families feel they are just working to pay the childcare bill – which makes it a bit unfair and a bit pointless for some.

Travel was another obstacle... due to the job centre I was expected to apply for jobs in Perth, Stirling and even Glasgow. This meant trains and buses at a cost. The route from Fife to Glasgow meant a bus then two trains and would cost me around £25-30 per day. If I refused to apply for a job in Glasgow/Perth due to this I could potentially have been sanctioned. This worried me and caused me a lot of stress.

Living on a low income meant I could not afford to access social activities for myself or my children. The boy's friends were all into the

football or the karate and I could not afford for them to go so they had to miss out. We would go walks to the park and the woods looking for bugs whilst their friends were at the zoo or theme park and this broke my heart. The boys would come home from school telling me their friends had been abroad during the holidays or at a caravan park in England and asked why we couldn't go somewhere too. We did get away for wee holidays but was always to visit friends or family either up north or down south but it wasn't the same.

To gain experience and skills in a different line of work from care I began volunteering. This turned my life around. I worked with an organisation in Fife called Fife Gingerbread. It's an organisation which supports single parents to deal with the daily struggles and overcome all these barriers to allow them to access education and/or employment and to improve the lives for themselves and their children. Not only did I gain skills/experience – I grew as a person. I gained confidence and self-esteem, met a whole new circle of friends and realised living on benefits as a single mum was not something to be ashamed of. I found out that

other mums/dads were struggling to make ends meet too and it wasn't always poor budgeting on my part.

Volunteering made me see a whole new way to life and I feel volunteering should be more recognised at the job centre. Volunteering gets you a foot in the door but also lets you see how juggling work and home life would be and how you would cope with it – it's kind of like a trial run for work without the pressure. Volunteering allows you to build up your CV and gives you the opportunity to gain new skills and invaluable experience which could then be transferred into the workplace.

Families whether one parent or two should have the choice to stay at home with their children. All the skills needed to run a house, budget, prepare and cook meals are all transferable skills and should be considered when applying for work. Parents should be able to enjoy their children when they are young and be there for all their milestones instead of leaving them for 10 hours a day with a childminder/nursery to go to work.

For me however work was so much more than an income – work allowed me to find my identity and become Hazel again. Working gave me confidence and self-worth and allowed me to build myself and my life back up again. The depression and the anxiety subsided and I began to live life a little rather than just plodding along.

Through Fife Gingerbread I was introduced to Poverty Alliance and have been involved in a lot of anti-poverty campaigning for lone parents and I have loved it. By telling my story about my life and my struggles I am raising awareness of lone parents in Fife (and further afield). Working with Poverty Alliance allowed me to see Poverty in the bigger picture and see that our income and our budgeting is not within our control – we must make the best of what we have and at times it will not always stretch to what you need. There are ways and means to improve this one of which is the Living Wage campaign or the £5 increase on child benefit. Both campaigns will help to improve the lives of families in Fife including single parent families.

My sons are teenagers now and I have been a single parent for 12 years. Yes it has been a struggle and there has been many tears and tantrums but it has made the boys and me so much more grateful for the small things in life and appreciate what we do have. The boys do feel they missed out on a lot esp holidays and taking part in school activities such as football or karate but they also feel blessed to have awareness of poverty and how families are affected by it.

I am back at college this year with the hope of going to university next year and will hopefully graduate by the time I am 40. The boys have watched me grow and are so proud of me. They are both excelling in school and have great friends and girlfriends so I am also very proud of them and I know I have done everything I could for them.