



PDA diagnosis & inclusive approach enable Rob to thrive in mainstream school

When Rob arrived at school, he couldn't integrate into the class setting and it was clear that he had some differences and difficulties. The high levels of noise and activity proved very disorientating for him and often resulted in meltdown. Whilst Rob demonstrated a strong grasp of most subjects, even basic educational tasks and activities caused distress and anguish.

However, without a formal diagnosis, his individual needs couldn't be met and access to resources, such as one-one support, remained a closed door. After two terms, his anxiety level became so severe that his Mum decided to remove him temporarily from school until appropriate support could be accessed and funded.

Rob's Mum had a difficult journey through the diagnostic pathway, eventually securing a diagnosis of autism featuring PDA. School life continued to be turbulent and, after repeated hearings, an EHCP (Education Health Care Plan) was obtained with funding to grant Rob access to mainstream school with one-to-one teaching on a part-time timetable. The school was then able to make adaptations to the curriculum alongside a social skills programme.

Each lesson is self-led and access to learning is via Rob's interests, especially his love of sea life. For instance, together with his one-to-one teacher, Rob works on PowerPoint presentations using source materials such as documentaries and biology books about the marine world. Evidence and progress tracking is done using the Tapestry programme, with photos and brief descriptions of work logged in an 'achievement folder' for Rob. Aspects of the 'Socially Speaking' programme have been used to help Rob recognise others' emotions – for instance, Rob will play a tune on a keyboard and take turns with his teacher to identify how this tune makes the other person feel by analysing one another's facial expressions.

These adaptations and approaches were, according to the school's head teacher, "nothing short of transformational". Rob now has a circle of friends and has even developed a liking for the time he spends at school.

At the heart of the positive changes was a 'holistic' approach to schooling. Whilst understanding PDA was very important in terms of highlighting general approaches, the real key was a slow process of understanding the child beyond his PDA, seeing his personality and likes. It became clear to the school that Rob's education had to be completely personalised – understanding his love of Minecraft, Disney films and sea creatures unlocked a path to learning based around these interests, whilst using the KS2 National Curriculum targets as an overarching guide.

Rob's teacher has provided some top tips showing how they have achieved an inclusive approach to mainstream education for a child with PDA:

- **Patience** – allow a pupil to engage in education at their own time and own pace (otherwise you may have no sign of progression to measure at all!).
- **Educate others about PDA** - take time to chat with other members of staff, many of whom won't have heard of PDA, and provide them with lots of information.
- **Space** – providing personal space to defuse and regulate; allowing access to noisy and quiet areas so that a pupil with PDA can, over time, adjust to different environments.
- **Don't be deterred** - a meltdown or panic attack shouldn't deter you from trying something different: remember, continuous negotiation and adaptations can allow pupils to achieve their own goals.
- **Student-led approach** – this is essential for a successful PDA placement. You may need to regularly remind yourself that it's not that your pupil just wants 'their own way', it is that they can find it difficult to operate without a strong sense of control.
- **Take mini breaks** – this applies to the student and the staff member! Take time out to reflect on what has gone well or less well and think about what further adjustments may be necessary. Have a break from one another's company.
- **Don't allow the National Curriculum to overwhelm you or your pupil** – it is quite easy to succumb to pressures but don't, the only way it can work for all parties involved is if the approach is highly individualised.
- **Try off-the-cuff approaches** - mood fluctuations caused by autism/PDA require constant adaptations. Try different approaches like putting on an act and entertaining your pupil; this can lower anxiety and lead to stronger engagement in a topic. Also, unplanned or covert learning is still learning!
- **Expect good and bad days** – and if things aren't going so well, it's not to say that the provisions you're making aren't working. Your pupil may not easily be able to voice his or her frustrations, and you may need input from other staff members or your pupil's family.
- **PDA requires a voice** – so don't be afraid to show your compassion and enthusiasm!

With thanks to Rob's teacher for this case study – names have been changed