

## A school for Finley

This case study has been written by Aileen Hosty from Southgate School, a Community Special School in Huddersfield in partnership with Finley's Mum.

### Background

Finley was a bright, smiley and playful baby. He was always very active, agile and determined and could easily get out of his cot if he wanted to. As a baby Finley ate well, but became fussier as he got older. At about 2yrs old Finley started to have some [difficulties around joining in with play and interacting with others; he also showed signs of being overwhelmed when in a large group](#). Finley also started to choose when to follow instructions, rather than when it was requested. Potty training and using the toilet were difficult (and continue to be so) for Finley. He was reluctant to leave his mother, and wanted to be close by her side. Finley also had a great curious nature, and was very active and creative.

On a day to day basis Finley [struggles to manage his anxieties around transitions](#) (getting ready in a morning, going to school, getting out of the house, transitions between staff in school, going home from school, getting ready for bed, going to bed ...). Playing with other children can be a source of great pleasure for Finley (when things are going exactly the way he would like), however it can also go to the other extreme of causing him great upset due to the play being directed by someone else. Finley enjoys spending close time with trusted adults who are able to play in his way and adapt their behaviour to meet his current needs.

Finley has a lot of very special personal belongings (mainly toys) which he likes to have with him at all times. He doesn't really like to share these with other pupils, but enjoys playing with them with trusted adults. Finley can experience high levels of anxiety if he misplaces one of these objects or hasn't packed it in his bag. Adults around Finley need to be very quick-thinking in these situations, as it can often become a dangerous situation and can result in self-harm.

Finley has recently been diagnosed with Autism, and [whilst there is currently no formal diagnosis of PDA both his family and the school staff believe that he fits the profile perfectly](#). He responds to PDA strategies, and ['typical' Autism strategies often result in severe difficulties and crises](#).

### First experiences at school

Finley went to a childminders at four months old, and at about one year old he joined a local playgroup with her support. At three years old he joined a nursery pre-school, before moving to a reception class at a local school when he was five. It was evident to the carers and teachers working with him that Finley was developing differently to the other children. The reports, even in these early stages, stated that he had difficulties with social interactions and needed lots of reassurance from the adults around him. [Finley presented differently in different settings](#). When at his childminders he was very 'compliant', however as soon as he came home he would have severe outbursts. This resulted in Mum feeling as though she was failing and not doing the right things for Finley. Mum ended up with having to take time off work sick as she felt so bad.

When he started his mainstream school setting, concerns were raised by the teachers immediately about Finley's abilities to keep up with the academic side of the school. Mum tried to support school by attempting 'homework' each day with him, however this quickly resulted in high levels of anxiety at home and outbursts. Finley began to develop a stammer in his reception year, and had speech and language therapy intervention at this point. From starting in year one at primary school [Finley's 'behaviour' at school deteriorated quickly, due to the extra demands being placed on him and the more formal setting of the classroom](#)

**environment.** Finley's first exclusion from school was in the January of his year one. After this exclusion, Finley returned to school on a part time timetable, however this did not reduce his anxiety in the setting. Another attempt to include Finley in school life was to move him back into the reception class for the play-based learning, however this didn't work either.

By May of year one, the school felt that they had tried everything they could to have Finley in the school. From this point on, Finley was registered for offsite school and from September of year two the Primary Pupil Referral Unit Service sent a teacher to home-school him for 2 hours per day.

During year two, consultations were made with three mainstream primary schools, however none of them believed that they could meet Finley's needs. It was decided at this point to look into Specialist School Provision and Southgate School was identified.

### **Transition planning to Southgate School**

Everyone involved in Finley's care and education was committed to planning a transition that would reduce Finley's anxieties and successfully re-integrate him into a full time place in education. Multi-agency meetings were planned which included family.

It was evident very early on that a long transition process would be required as Finley had developed a strong bond with his 1:1 teacher. Southgate staff needed to observe how these sessions were being facilitated and slowly introduce themselves into Finley's world. **His current teacher used a crocodile puppet 'Caroline' to help introduce ideas to Finley, and to provide a 3<sup>rd</sup> 'person' in the room to make suggestions.** Southgate staff took their own puppets with them to meet Finley and got to know him in his home environment.

The next stage was to bring Finley a book of photos from school which showed the puppets in situ. Finley's **curious nature then took over, wanting to know more about this school!** He was keen to learn about school and was extremely interested to talk to the staff, and puppets, about what happened there.

After the summer holidays, Finley began to come on visits to the school. These initial visits went really well, and he was happy to see the staff he was now familiar with and his puppet friends. **The novelty of the situation helped him to overcome his worries** of coming through the door! Finley was only attending school for an hour a day at this stage, and after a few weeks this was increased to 2 hours. At this stage Finley made it clear that he needed to have his own 'base' away from class in a quieter area (the one in the classroom wasn't working). A space was found for Finley where he could have his special belongings and have control of his environment and who was in it.

Finley slowly increased his time over the year to a full time place at school, and he clearly identifies himself as a full time pupil at Southgate!

### **Strategies developed and approaches used**

Staff from Southgate have been lucky enough to have the opportunity to **access coaching from Jilly Davies at Robert Ogden School.** This helped the team to improve their knowledge of PDA and change their practice to be more PDA friendly. Reading books, following PDA blogs, accessing Facebook groups and keeping up to date with current research have all enabled the teams to keep developing their awareness and practices.

These are a list of strategies we have found successful with Finley (although none of them are always 100% guaranteed to work!). These were discovered by trial and error and by of course learning from Finley's Mum as to strategies she found successful at home.

- Providing him a safe base to be in when he chooses

- Using his current special interests as a means to develop conversation and build relationships
- Play based learning
- ‘Sneaking’ learning activities into play
- Having fun
- Using humour (particularly acting silly, or making him laugh at you)
- Distraction
- Using surprises or novel experiences to gain interest
- Having trusted adults around or nearby at all times
- Indirect questions or requests
- Adults who can think quickly and adapt on the go!
- Using toys or puppets to communicate ideas or suggestions
- Validating Finley’s feelings and emotions when anxieties are high
- Providing Finley with a ‘way out’ of difficult situations

### **Lessons learnt and advice for others**

The most important and crucial aspect of the journey with Finley so far has been the commitment to honest and open dialogue with his family. As a school we have listened to their experiences, and learnt from their knowledge of what works and doesn’t work with Finley. Without building this relationship, without doubt the placement would have failed.

The second most important aspect of this transition and work has been a commitment from the Senior Leadership Team at the school to provide the environment and flexibility in approaches to meet Finley’s needs on a day to day basis. For the staff team working with Finley on a daily basis knowing they have this support is extremely beneficial.

Whilst there are no text book answers to providing a good transition for a young person with PDA into a school setting, there are clearly some strong messages which need to be adhered to:

- 1) Take your time, follow the lead of the young person and wait until they are ready (or better still ask) to spend more time in school.
- 2) Work with the families closely
- 3) Build relationships and trust with key adults
- 4) Focus on developing the ‘fundamentals’ of communication through using Intensive Interaction style approaches, being open to the pupil and responding sensitively to their needs
- 5) Provide a safe space within school which can be accessed at any time
- 6) Use special interests as a tool for learning and engagement
- 7) Read books, keep up to date with new research/advice, listen to the advice from adult PDAers
- 8) Remain positive
- 9) Ensure all staff in the school are aware of the needs of the pupil, and will follow PDA guidelines as necessary
- 10) Develop a staff team skilled in managing demands (both increasing at times of least anxiety and reducing at times of high anxiety)
- 11) Develop reflective practice, and always try to put yourself in the shoes of the young person when trying to problem solve difficulties you may be facing

Finley’s transition into school has gone as well as we could have hoped, but by no means does this case study want to imply that this PDA journey for our school is finished. Finley continues to have extremely high anxieties, which is often displayed by extreme behaviours which include self-harm, damaging property, physical attacks on others and using weapons. Finley struggles at some point every day, and has his own ‘base’ with 1:1 support at all times.

Finley does join his class during the day, but only when his anxiety levels are low enough for him to manage in that environment.

As a [class team we are constantly striving to improve our own practice](#) and think of exciting and tempting ideas to engage Finley in learning activities. We have learnt so much from this journey but know we have so much more to learn too, most importantly though we have had a huge amount of fun and enjoyment in getting to know this wonderful young person.