

Finding a school which works – Thomas' Story

As identified in our [Being Misunderstood report](#) 70% of children with a PDA profile of autism are not in school or regularly struggle to attend. This figure is much higher than for the autistic population as a whole and shows how challenging school can be for PDA children.

This was the experience Thomas had on his education journey prior to joining The Link School satellite site. Both mainstream and specialist provisions had been unable to meet Thomas' needs, resulting in a sustained period where Thomas was not able to access education. The Link School worked closely with parents to identify the support Thomas needed and work towards a positive placement for him. Today, **Thomas attends school daily and is thriving in the supportive space.**

Reflecting with parents and school it's clear there have been distinct factors that have aided in this successful placement for Thomas:

Outreach service – The support from the school began before Thomas even started as a student with a comprehensive plan on integrating him into the school, led by a dedicated transition teacher. Students joining at the same time were able to link up with each other meaning that they had connections and budding friendships even before they arrived on site. Transitioning into a new provision was not an easy or fast process. The outreach service is key to ensuring PDA children transition into school at a pace, and in a way, that works for them.

The school environment – The Link School satellite site has a large amount of green outdoor space, and playground equipment, available to students throughout the day. For Thomas, this means he is able to access space and equipment that helps him to regulate and get sensory feedback whenever he needs.

The classrooms are large and spacious, having been built to support 30 pupils, providing ample space for the 7 children accommodated in each class.

The personalised curriculum – The Link School satellite site offer different education pathways for their students. Thomas accesses a semi-formal curriculum meaning that he accesses English and Maths at the start of the day and then the rest of his learning is achieved through a "back door learning" approach. This is where staff carefully blend learning outcomes into activities that motivate and interest the young person. It is a child led process, with lots of flexibility and choice. For Thomas this all means he now accesses formal learning every day alongside child-led and interest-based learning.

Flexibility – A flexible approach is hugely important for PDA children and at The Link School satellite site timetables are rarely used unless the student themselves want them to be. Movement breaks can be taken whenever they are needed, resulting in Thomas not feeling that being in the classroom is a demand imposed upon him. Transition into school was also flexible with short school days and the ability to alter the school day whenever needed. This slow and steady increase meant that by his fourth month at the school Thomas had a 100% attendance – something he hadn't had the opportunity to achieve since Reception.

Prioritising connection – The need to get to know Thomas and for him to know and trust staff was recognised as being hugely important. In addition to the work completed by the outreach team, staff spent the first six weeks learning what Thomas liked, even trying out new apps that he enjoyed. This helped them to make a social connection with him. Thomas' Mum feels that this connection has been key in ensuring that his placement at The Link School satellite site has worked.

Supporting emotional regulation – The school's approach to dysregulation has been key to helping Thomas to feel safe and build trust with the adults supporting him and his environment. Physical intervention is only used as a last resort for safety reasons so as not to breakdown the connection between staff and students.

The positivity of staff in the face of a difficult day was key to maintaining trust and positive relationships. Thomas is met every day with the same positive response and attitudes by staff no matter what the previous day has been like. Parents report how important this was to Thomas as he felt that staff had not "written him off" or punished him for his dysregulation. Instead, it was understood that the incident was tricky for him and something had raised his anxiety so high that he experienced a fight or flight response.

Collaboration with the family – Collaboration and communication between school and Thomas' parents has been crucial to the placement. Previously parents felt they were seen as overly anxious and the root cause of issues. Staff at The Link School satellite site recognise that parents are a great source of information when understanding a young person and forming those important relationships. Working with the family to understand Thomas helped staff to build a connection with Thomas, develop trust and understand his anxiety and approaches that can support this.

Like so many families who support PDA children, it's been really difficult for Thomas's parents to see him go through the struggles that he has. It is an enormous relief for him to now be at a school where people 'just get it' and work with parents to understand the young person.

"The flexibility, environment and staff knowledge and expertise with PDA at The Link School has made it possible for Thomas to access school and want to attend daily."