

TRANSCRIPT: Introduction to REACH

Jen Angelini and Catherine Bernie

Jen Angelini: REACH stands for Relationship Education for Autistic Children and it's an approach we've developed over a few years working on helping pupils with autism to communicate better, to work on their interaction skills and emotional development.

It's about wooing the children and trying to engage them, first, with what they're interested in and that way they become interested in us as well and then, from there, once you've built a relationship which is strong with them, then you can start to extend it and start to engage them in more activities that you would want to do as well.

Catherine Bernie: You always have to start with where the child is at, so we tend to do an assessment of the child before working on the REACH curriculum with them, so we know where their strengths are and where there are weaknesses and, whilst we try and support the strengths and develop them further, the approach is very much aimed at trying to bring the weaknesses up to a level so the child's got a more even profile. It's often based on sensory-motor because that's the child's preferred comfort zone activity and because we want to challenge the child but not cause them undue discomfort, we usually start with what their comfort zone activities are.

I think the majority of schools would tend to use more structured approaches because we do know that structured approaches suit children with autism, but what we do in the REACH approach is we take away some of that structure because what we hope is that by developing a relationship with the child, the child trusts the adult, that they're going to be safe. Yes, things will go wrong but you get over it, you deal with it and we try and put those supports in place for the student. So rather than always supplying them with the prompts they need to help them feel secure, we challenge that quite early on and then move to building them towards being able to cope without our support because they've got the emotional self regulation to be able to either self-talk or know how to get assistance if things go wrong. So that we hope to end up with children who are much more flexible because, after school, they will go out into the wider community and they won't necessarily be the same predictability that they expect if they've come from a more structured approach. We still do have structures in place. We still have the lesson format, they still have the same visual support that you might have in other settings, but we hope to develop a much more flexible student at the end.

