

Case Study – Darren

Darren, who had a diagnosis of autism and severe learning difficulties, started specialist school when he was seven years old. Up until this time he had been in a mainstream school. He found the school environment, its routines and expectations, very difficult to cope with. Darren had no formal or structured means of communication – no speech – and did not use signs or symbols. When challenged, he would grab and pull at people, throw things or try to run away.

When in class he did not want to participate in any group activity; he found it hard to sit down for any length of time. His main activity was to pull things off the wall, particularly shiny items which he would then use as a ‘flappy’, which would then over-excite him, making it difficult to engage with him.

The initial response of staff was not to challenge him but instead to get him used to the school routines by including him in the classroom activities, spending brief amounts of time in the group but being allowed a great deal of opportunity to remain outside of the group if he chose to.

The overall aim was then to gradually include him in activities as he became familiar with school routines and participated in the sessions, developing his skills and reducing his anxiety.

Over time he began to settle more, but remained resistant to participating too much in activities. The tearing of things from the walls reduced and he had only very particular items that he flapped and twirled.

As he became older and the expectations of pupils increased, Darren became more resistant and more physical in the classroom, hitting out at both staff and other pupils at times of transition from activity to activity or movement around the school, with outbursts throughout the day that could last up to 10 minutes. The length of time varied according to the response of the staff member. It became clear that any strong physical intervention simply prolonged any outburst. Greater success in defusing the situation came from calming techniques.

He was then assigned a one-to-one helper to support him through transitions and change, establishing more structure and routine on an individual basis and improving his structured communication. This resulted in a significant drop in his outbursts. He became more varied in his play and interests. In the playground he used the bikes more and was exploring other equipment. Some imaginative play with a spoon and other toys around the classroom also emerged. In soft play he began to favour the swing, which was very unusual for him.

He began showing interest in other members of his class and trying to engage with them, especially one in particular.

The most noticeable negative part of his behaviour became not liking being told what to do by others.

Darren started to use symbols and began to rely upon them to inform him of

activities and what is coming next. When he recognised a symbol, he would move to what activity was displayed on the symbol.

He began to respond well during activities. He would put down his flappy to do an activity and then look for it again on completion.

Around this time he also began to tap himself on the cheek and forehead from time to time. This was monitored. Over time it became a pattern that unusual obsessive behaviours would arise and then reduce. Some of these would become overwhelmingly obsessive for him and he would then become totally fixated but at other times staff worked with or around the behaviour.

Darren was very aware of the staff in school. He clearly enjoyed being with particular people and felt very secure with them. Transition and change remained particular problems for him; the calming and de-escalating response of staff became very important as he moved into adolescence, becoming as big as, if not bigger than, some of the staff working with him.