

## **A case study: Noel**

Noel is a nine year old boy with a diagnosis of Autism. He can be quite sociable with people, which can sometimes mislead those who do not know him well. He has a mosaic of interests and skills but his threshold for anxiety can be very low. Adults with him need to be sensitive in identifying his needs and how to support him to maintain low stress levels. He manages his anxiety better now but requires support at key times. He is currently going through a phase of being confused as he moves around school. He is never completely clear where he is or where he is going. When it gets too much he drops to the floor becoming silent and limp.

His language skills in the context of school are relevant to his daily routine and regular timetabled activities. His use of language can be deceptive as he appears to have a wide vocabulary, but if observed over a period of time the phrases can be seen to be repetitive in nature. He can remember faces and names of people extremely well even when he has only briefly spent time with them. With those he sees very often he needs acknowledgement or he becomes very anxious and will repeat their names inserted into short phrases from TV programmes or films, which is usually a sign of his growing anxiety.

He enjoys a wide range of TV programmes and films appropriate to his age, particularly animated films, and he is able to repeat a great deal of the dialogue from his favourites. His favourite TV programme is 'Numberjacks', as are numbers in general. He can count up to 100 and but has no concept of number beyond two. The school buses are of particular interest to him. As the buses are called he will tell you which buses are left regardless of the order in which they are called. If it is 2, 5, 6 & 9 he will tell you that 1, 3, 4, 7, 8 & 10 are left, and so on. He becomes extremely anxious if he is either first or last to leave the room, particularly when the bus numbers are called.

In class he is very aware of the routine of the day and when things do not happen in order, or are not carried out by the same person, he becomes very anxious very quickly. The same applies to the seating positions during activities; everyone has to be in 'their' place.

He enjoys the company of the rest of the group and the classroom activities, preferring to be an observer rather than a participant, though he must have his turn. His skills in all areas continue to improve, as well as his ability to interact with a range of people, but his capacity to cope in a group or more fluid situation is very dependent upon the skills and knowledge of the adult supporting him.

At lunchtime he collects his own food. The dining room staff know he does not like his food touching and that he only likes two foods at a time on his plate. He sits with the same group of children at the corner table. If allowed to move freely he will go back twice for more food always returning to his seat. He will sit with the rest of his group and not leave until they do and he is usually very relaxed at this time.

It is possible to calm Noel, but this is best done through simple precise rhythmic phrases. He relies heavily upon being given very exact information when things do not go according to plan.

He has a range of fixations that may occupy him and are dependent on his mood on the day. Some days he is fixated by colours, on another day it will be shapes or numbers or people. You never know which one it will be until the day.

Unstructured times in school are difficult for Noel. If left to his own devices he will become very stereotypic in his behaviour, which can become a trigger for him. This may begin simply with walking back and forth, repeating phrases to himself, or laughing to himself as if amused by something. The laughter can be a prelude to him rocking back and forth and then pacing, wringing his hands. However the wringing of his hands is an indication he is about to self-injure by slapping his face and if this continues he will begin to bang his head on any solid surface he can find. This does not happen often but when it does he does not want to be touched by anyone and it requires a great deal of time and attention to calm him once more.

Staff who have worked with him have always been able to develop good relationships with Noel and he has come to rely upon them to guide him safely through his day. This has generally worked well for him.