

Autism in Education, A mother's Story, "...all my son needed was to be in the right soil and he would start to bloom again"

By Archie's Mum (Name has been changed for privacy)

For BBC School Report at Thornhill Community Academy

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The mother of a student at Thornhill Community Academy tells her story.

I first began to be aware of my son's difficulties toward the end of junior school. He always went to school, but he never really enjoyed it. He had two or three friends but he didn't like a lot of people or even the teachers very much and found the work difficult. He went relatively unnoticed except when he was taken out of class for individual work before his SAT's test. This knocked his confidence and he began to say he was stupid.



In September 2013 he started high school. That began the worst period of our lives. Everything went down-hill, fast. He began to be anxious all the time and said he didn't want to go. I had meetings, they asked if he was being bullied. I tried to explain it wasn't any one person in particular it was people in general. I asked if someone could meet him on a morning to try and make him less anxious. Schools attitude was 'this is a high school' and they couldn't provide that sort of close attention.

Mornings became really upsetting, he would curl up into a ball in the corner of his bedroom; he would sometimes make an attempt to get dressed then hide back under his duvet. Sometimes I could get him in but we would have to sit in the car till everyone had gone, then it would take 5 minutes to take his seat belt off, then he would cling to me as I walked him through the car park. When we got into school he would immediately stop, become mute, put his head down and walk off following the teacher.

On the days I did get him in he spent the majority of his time in the isolation room with pupils who had been sent out of class. They sent work sheets to him that he couldn't understand. Break and meal times were difficult for him as people asked 'why are you never here?', 'why are you missing lessons?', 'what's wrong with you'?

He hated the busy corridors, he'd be confused where he had to go and would sometimes get lost. He couldn't eat in front of people, so missed lunchtimes. He was too scared to use the toilets in case people heard him urinating, so never drank. He could never tell anyone any of this because he was unable to speak in school. He tried to go as unnoticed as possible.

My son began to cut himself, and that's when I decided I wasn't going to apply any more pressure to get him into school. They weren't helping him, they were making him worse. Looking back, knowing what I know now I feel terribly guilty that I allowed the situation to go on as long as it did, I allowed the school to pressure me to get him into school. They told me they couldn't help him if he wasn't in the building, but they never did. They maintained it wasn't a special needs issue and didn't involve the SENCO, they said it was a mental health problem and I had to take him to the GP. I agree he was mentally ill but because of what he was going through at that school. I look at the scars now all up and down his arms and think that is a direct result of him not receiving the right help and I feel hugely responsible, he should never have had to go through that and I should have stopped it sooner.

Thankfully my son hasn't self-harmed for a long time now, because *now* he is in the *right* setting.

I remember a lady from CAMHS telling me my son was just like a flower in the wrong soil which was wilting. She told me, all my son needed was to be in the right soil and he would start to bloom again. I have never forgotten that, and how right she was!

My son now chats and laughs, he takes pride in his school work and wants to do well. He has ambitions for the future. The change in him is remarkable; I have had so many comments from friends and family. This is all down to the specialist autism provision he attends, they have worked wonders with him.

From day one they treated him so kindly; there was no pressure on him to do anything he didn't want to. He was matched up with one particular member of staff, who spent all day with him, getting to know his likes and dislikes. This was gradually expanded upon and now my son loves all the staff in the provision. To begin with they did not focus on academic work, they worked therapeutically, doing various activities with him, and in time my son relaxed and began to speak.

They did everything at my sons pace and gradually introduced him to the mainstream building. He was always taken over by a member of staff and supported. Over time this has become less and less, in some lessons my son now prefers to be unsupported as his confidence has grown so much.

What I really like though, is the flexibility, if my son is having an off day, he can spend that day in the provision with the staff until he feels better. They do lovely things like bake buns, make greetings cards, play board games.

My son now understands Autism and why he finds things confusing or difficult, he knows he is not the only one. Being with other young people who are Autistic has helped him so much. I think he would still have struggled in a mainstream school even if his Autism had been recognised because he would have felt being 'different' much more acutely.

Having a provision within the grounds of a mainstream school has been the perfect solution for my son. He told me the provision is like his second family, he goes there to 'check in' for comfort, reassurance, and understanding. The provision makes it possible for my son to access mainstream education. It is now a realistic possibility that he will gain qualifications and employment.

My life has also greatly improved; I feel as if a huge, black cloud has been lifted. I thought my life had changed forever and it would never be the same again. I felt different to all my friends and really isolated. Now I'm back to enjoying life again. I've re-connected with people I shut out and can talk about what happened to us. That's thanks to the staff at the provision, I've watched how they address Autism so positively; it has really made me think differently. I no longer wish things were different, I embrace what I have, my son is beautiful and unique, he brings me so much happiness and I love him exactly the way he is.