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Autism | eye

For parents and

Issue 52
Winter 2023/24

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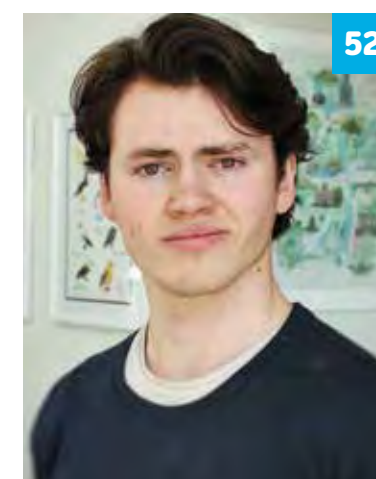
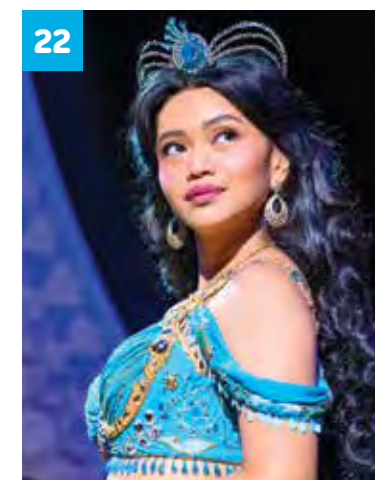
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Empowering through diagnosis, play-based interventions and meeting underlying health needs

Re:Cognition Health is a pioneering brain & mind clinic providing autism and ADHD diagnostics, developmental programmes and a bespoke multidisciplinary service to clinically evaluate and manage underlying medical difficulties.

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The team are also motivated to help better understand unmet health needs in neurodevelopmental conditions that can impact on development including sleep, learning and quality of life. They have expertise in helping manage a variety of conditions commonly affecting individuals on the autistic spectrum such as constipation/ bowel dysmotility, gastroesophageal reflux, migraine, immune and metabolic differences.

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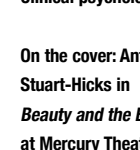
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**On the cover: Antony
Stuart-Hicks in
Beauty and the Beast
at Mercury Theatre,
Colchester. Photograph
by Mark Senior**



Jaime A Heidel
Autistic author

Why it's time to expect more



Gillian Loughran

'Expect More' should be our community's motto as we head on into 2024.

If you look through this issue you could be forgiven for thinking that parents do far more than their fair share of calling for more help and support for autistic people. More support for trauma (page 14), disability discrimination (page 16) and better health care (page 20) are just a few issues parents continue to shout about.

We rarely hear from our elected representatives. Those MPs are paid handsomely (£86,584 per annum, plus allowances) to stand up for their constituents, who, incidentally, include we parents and our children.

Getting our MPs to act on our concerns should be our goal in 2024. We hear of a few who are paying attention. Labour MP Barbara Keeley is calling for action over the inhumane treatment of autistic people in long-stay mental health hospitals (page 8). You can read (on page 52) about Liberal Democratic MP Wendy Chamberlain and Health Minister Maria Caulfield, who are taking steps to address the devastating effects of the PANS/PANDAS brain inflammation conditions, which are often mistaken for autism. Then there is Labour MSP Daniel Johnson, who has put forward a private members' bill to toughen the law on restraint and seclusion (page 10) after a battle by parent Beth Morrison.

If you feel strongly about an issue, or about help for your child's needs, you can email your MP using 'Find your MP' on the UK Parliament's website. Many MPs hold regular sessions, called surgeries, where they meet with constituents to talk about issues of concern. Your MP's website, or your local library, will have information as to where and when surgeries take place.

It pays to speak out. I've been part of our community long enough to remember the days when our children were made to feel unwelcome in the likes of theatres, cinemas and restaurants, airports, shops, you name it, we families were made to feel excluded. Many parents protested and the entertainment business listened. The results are what you can see on page 22, in our wopping feature on relaxed performances over the festive season and New Year. We hope you and your loved ones take up these wonderful opportunities to have fun and enjoy yourselves. Until the next time.

Gillian Loughran FRSA,
Editor



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NHS systems 'still failing learning-disabled people'

National health and care systems in the UK are not designed to look after people with learning disabilities effectively.

That's the key finding from a report on the care of learning-disabled adults in acute NHS hospitals.

The Health Services Investigations Body (HSIB) compiled the report. It found that people with learning disabilities are "often cared for by staff without specialist training, skills and experience".

The HSIB produced its report following the hospital death of a 79-year-old



learning-disabled man during the pandemic in 2021. He died of a heart attack and kidney failure after a fortnight in hospital.

The unidentified man stayed at three locations, where different staff cared for him. He also saw five consultants, which made it difficult for them to build rapport and for them to recognise changes. The unidentified hospital made the moves to contain Covid-19.

The report also found shortcomings in identifying, assessing, recording and sharing information on his learning

disability and the reasonable adjustments he needed. Other problems included training staff without specialist skills and the lack of availability of specialist support.

Campaigner Paula McGowan (pictured) fought to ensure all NHS staff receive training in autism and learning disability after the death of her 18-year-old son, Oliver, in hospital.

Teacher McGowan, 58, from Bristol, says she cannot believe how "in 2023 the same stories, investigations alongside recommendations are being repeated over and over".

Oliver, who had a mild learning disability, epilepsy and autism, died after an allergic reaction to antipsychotic medication. The teenager had reacted badly when trialled on an antipsychotic a year earlier. Nevertheless, the hospital gave him the drug against his wishes and those of his family.

Autism Eye approached NHS England for a comment, but it did not respond.

Fears as Government sidelines epilepsy

Epilepsy campaigners have criticised the UK Government for excluding the condition from its new strategy on tackling major health problems.

Epilepsy is one of the most common co-occurring health conditions among people with autism and learning disabilities. Charity Epilepsy Action argues the Government's failure to mention epilepsy in its major conditions strategy means it is not a priority.

Studies have suggested anywhere between two and 46 per cent of people on the autism spectrum also have epilepsy. A large US study published in 2019 that looked at almost 7,000 autistic children suggested around 10 per cent have the brain disorder.

Those with autism who also have a learning disability are more at risk of epilepsy, research shows. And research suggests that around 22 per cent of people with a learning disability also have epilepsy.

The Government says six health conditions are responsible for 60 per cent of all early deaths and illnesses and these are the ones it has included in its strategy. They are cancer, respiratory or breathing problems, dementia, cardiovascular or conditions linked to the heart and blood, musculoskeletal disorders and mental health problems.

Daniel Jennings, a manager with Epilepsy Action, said epilepsy services will not get the same level of "input or improvement" as conditions included in the Government strategy.

Challenging behaviours linked to gut

Researchers have used artificial intelligence (AI) to find a link between challenging behaviours, gut health and sleep in autistic people.

They found that for 20 per cent of those studied, gut issues could forecast next-day behavioural challenges with 80 per cent accuracy. Difficulties falling asleep or waking up multiple times during the night also influenced behaviour.

Researchers at the Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, in New York, carried out the research. The data they used in the study was collected by clinicians at The Centre for Discovery. This is a research, educational and residential centre in New York. The centre serves people with medical and developmental conditions, including autism. It holds data going back more than a decade.

The researchers used AI to work out when autistic people were likely to display challenging behaviours. They collected the data while residents went about their daily lives at the Centre for Discovery over 18 months, rather than in an artificial clinical trial environment.



Dr Juergen Hahn (pictured) led the research. He said: "Avoiding or mitigating challenging behaviours has the potential to improve the lives of people with autism. "This work has the potential one day to help caretakers predict when these challenging behaviours are more likely, helping them better plan activities and ensure everyone's well-being."

Biomedical charity Thinking Autism said long before the advent of artificial intelligence, parents had known that gut issues and sleep problems "exacerbate autism symptoms". In a statement, the charity said it knew of cases where children had been prescribed antipsychotic medication, then later found the children had gastrointestinal issues such as acid reflux.

The charity said it would welcome research into the numbers of people on the autism spectrum who have suffered due to "diagnostic overshadowing". This happens when doctors dismiss other health issues as simply being part of autism, instead of properly investigating them.

Many autistics feel 'hyper-empathy'

Many autistic people experience overwhelming 'hyper-empathy', according to new research.

The finding comes from a study by academics at Sheffield Hallam University. The study describes the lived experiences of empathy among autistic people. It includes their reflections on the stereotype that autistic people do not feel empathy.

The research found that autistic people experience empathy in diverse ways, with many reporting overwhelming feelings of empathy. The findings challenge misconceptions about autistic people and the persisting stereotype that autistic people lack empathy.

Most participants (78 per cent) felt they experienced 'hyper-empathy'. This is an emotional response so powerful and uncontrollable that it causes distress.

Comments from participants included: "I absorb other people's emotions, and I almost know how people are feeling before they are aware of it themselves."

Another was: "I feel empathy so much that it's painful."

Researcher Dr Diarmuid Verrier said: "Our findings are particularly valuable, as they show how nuanced and unique each



"Our findings are valuable":
Dr Diarmuid Verrier

autistic person's experience of empathy is. This is something that can be missed if people rely on stereotypes about what autistic people are like."

Within the research, participants reflected on how these misconceptions affected them and caused harm. One said: "I think it is a stereotype which causes a great deal of harm, and I am especially upset when I hear trained psychologists assume a person cannot be autistic because they have empathy."

Families denied 'vital' respite care

Nearly one in three families of children with special needs in South Gloucestershire has not been receiving 'vital' respite support.

That's the finding of the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman.

South Gloucestershire Council admitted to the Ombudsman during an earlier investigation that it struggled to find respite care for children in its area.

The Ombudsman opened a fresh enquiry. When pushed, the council admitted a further 29 families who were entitled to respite care were either not receiving some of their entitlement or none at all.

The families affected have agreed to support packages. These range from a few hours a week, with more in school holidays, to several hours of two-to-one support a week. Some include weekly or several overnight stays each month at a respite centre.

One child had an assessment that they needed a 52-week residential placement. Instead, the child was living at home with limited support.

Respite care allows families of children and young people with specific needs to take a break from caring responsibilities.

Paul Najsarek is the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman. He said the failure to provide the agreed support packages in full can cause significant difficulties and distress. This could affect the children and young people and their families, who were likely to struggle to cope without it.

Najsarek said: "For too long, families in South Gloucestershire have been struggling without the vital respite support they need, and the indications we have from the council suggest for many there is no sign of this improving in the near future."

"While we recognise the difficulties the council is having finding appropriate support locally, it should not have taken a complaint to us to spur them into more effective action."

"Statutory guidance is clear: if a council is satisfied it is necessary to provide support services, then it must provide them, and have the provision in place to do so. I am pleased the council

Dr Verrier said: "This research is based on work carried out by one of the students in MSc Developmental Psychology, Lesley Kimber, who is deeply interested in autism."

The research looked at the diverse ways autistic people experience empathy. While most participants experienced hyper-empathy, some reported that they did not feel empathy. Meanwhile, others said they do but find it difficult to understand or express these feelings.

One theme from the findings was that for some autistic people empathy is conditional. They were more likely to feel empathy for people close to them, animals or other autistic people.

Other participants felt that empathy took effort because of subtle, unwritten social cues and the differences in how non-autistic and autistic people express themselves. They felt it was a skill they could learn as they developed compensatory practices to become empathic. One participant felt they had grown more empathetic with age and life experience, suggesting that the ability to feel empathy is not fixed, but can change over time.



is working towards improving its breadth of provision and hope the rigorous local oversight it has now agreed to implement will ensure this work is not allowed to drift."

The council has agreed to apologise to all the families affected.

Long-term hospital ‘destroys lives’

Long-term hospital stays for people with autism and learning disabilities are a “national scandal” that destroys lives.

That’s the view of Labour MP Barbara Keeley, who chairs the all-party parliamentary group on disability.

The MP has called on the UK Government to take action over the lengthy hospital stays. She said they are “destroying the lives of so many autistic people and people with learning disabilities”, as well as their families.

Her comments came after it emerged that Nicholas Thornton, 28, lost the ability to walk and speak. This followed him being held in inappropriate care and hospital settings for more than a decade.

Thornton, who has autism and a learning disability, has been moved from one placement to another since he was first sectioned at 16.



Inappropriate care: Nicholas Thornton, who lost the ability to walk and speak

Reports in *The Independent* suggest he is now confined to a room alone at Rochford Hospital, in Essex. His story emerged following a report by Baroness

Sheila Hollins, which suggests that around 115 people with autism and learning disabilities are being held in solitary confinement. Some have reportedly been held for up to 20 years.

Baroness Hollins said there has been limited progress on efforts to reduce the number in solitary confinement. This was because when one person is discharged, another replaces them in segregation.

She said solitary confinement has no “therapeutic benefit” and “should be severely curtailed as soon as possible”.

At the end of October this year, there were 2,035 people with autism and learning disabilities being held in long-stay hospitals. Successive governments have consistently missed targets to reduce the number. However, the figure has fallen by just under 30 per cent from 2,885 in March 2015.



Scientists call for action on regression

Developmental regression must be recognised and children and families properly supported, new research has concluded.

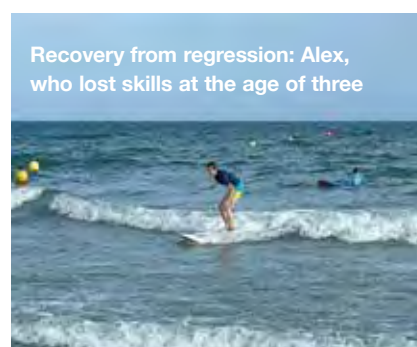
Researchers in Melbourne, London and Texas pointed to “significant knowledge gaps within and between conditions that feature developmental regression”. Regression sees children lose skills such as talking. It is most recognisable in autism, severe epilepsy with developmental delay, the neurological disorder Rett syndrome, and the genetic disorder Phelan McDermid syndrome.

Led by paediatrician Dr Kirsten Furlay, the scientists called for more research to “advance knowledge” and “improve child and family outcomes through earlier recognition and support”.

Veronica, a research scientist and parent who did not want to give her surname, told how her 15-year-old son Alex regressed when he was three years old. She said he lost “social and communication” skills after getting a flu jab. She said: “Soon after, he started to put cars and things in rows, which I hadn’t seen before.”

Veronica said she investigated nutritional and dietary therapies and her son is now making good progress at a mainstream school.

Biomedical charity Thinking Autism says many of the families it supports



Recovery from regression: Alex, who lost skills at the age of three

have seen significant regressions “after one, two or more years of normal development, hitting all milestones”.

Others have seen regressions in their teens explained away as autism.

In a statement, the charity said this is “yet another example of egregious diagnostic overshadowing”.

Diagnostic overshadowing happens when medical professionals ignore the impact of other health problems and attribute everything to autism.

Experts have suggested various causes for regression, including the body’s own immune system attacking the brain.

It has also been linked to neuroplasticity, or how far the brain can rewire itself, as this process is essential for learning and development.

The research was published online in the journal *Cortex*.

Apply for home adaptations, adviser urges

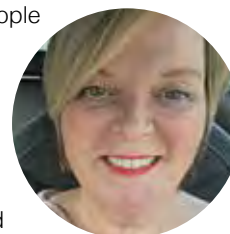
A disability housing expert is urging families of autistic and learning-disabled people to take up government grants for home adaptations.

Jayne Knight (pictured) is a specialist housing adviser for people with disabilities and autism. She believes the grants could make a massive difference in enabling people to be happy and safe in their homes.

The UK Government has announced it is giving an additional £50m to councils. The money is to help disabled and older people live “safely and independently in their own homes”.

Disabled people of all ages can apply for a council grant to adapt their home. The cash is for homeowners, private renters and those in social housing and is delivered through the disabled facilities grant.

Knight said the fund could be used for everything from video doorbells to sensory rooms. Her other ideas include soundproofing, lighting dimmers, privacy film for windows, radiator thermostats, lighting switch covers to stop obsessive behaviours, or smart technology for lights and alarms to summon help.



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New hope against drug-resistant epilepsy

Children with drug-resistant epilepsy have been given fresh hope following a scientific breakthrough.

For the first time, scientists implanted brain electrodes in an 11-year-old without the need for surgery.

The boy has drug-resistant epilepsy (known as intractable epilepsy). The goal of the procedure was to locate the epileptic foci – the areas of the brain where the seizures originate. It paves the way for doctors accurately to remove those areas.

The Neuroscience Center of King Faisal Specialist Hospital and Research Center (KFSH&RC) in Saudi Arabia carried out the procedure.

The procedure used a cutting-edge stereoelectroencephalography (SEEG) technique. SEEG involves creating tiny 2mm holes in the skull to implant electrical monitoring electrodes directly



into the brain. These electrodes enable precise measurement and mapping of electrical activity. Specialists can then identify the specific regions where epileptic seizures originate.

Dr Ibrahim Althubaiti is a consultant at

the Epilepsy Integrated Practice Unit at KFSH&RC. He highlighted the distinct challenges of carrying out such a medical procedure on children instead of adults. Unlike adults, who can easily comply with instructions, children's movement can be difficult to control for prolonged periods. This posed a greater difficulty in executing the medical procedure.

"Nevertheless, the successful implementation of the SEEG technique allowed us to overcome this challenge," he said.

After placing the electrodes, medics monitor the patient closely for several days. The aim is to identify the origin of seizures and determine the specific tissues to remove or excise to eliminate epilepsy seizures effectively.

The ultimate aim of the approach is to improve patients' quality of life and that of their families.

Charity slams schools' isolation rooms

Isolation rooms have a "huge impact on young people's self-esteem, well-being and feelings".

That's the view of Jolanta Lasota (pictured), chief executive of the charity Ambitious about Autism. She said school staff often use isolation rooms to manage behaviour, but "the result is the informal exclusion of autistic pupils from their lessons and peers".

Staff take pupils to seclusion or isolation rooms to separate them from classmates. Lasota said some pupils may benefit from time away in a "breakout or sensory room" when distressed. But she said there is an important difference between autistic pupils "choosing to take themselves away" and "being put in isolation against their will".

Schools need to have a more inclusive approach, based on better training, Lasota said.

Scottish charity Positive and Active Behaviour Support Scotland (PABSS) campaigns for a reduction in the use of restrictive practices. These routines can involve seclusion, isolation rooms and restraint.

Research by the charity has shown disabled children are far more likely to find themselves in an isolation room or

being restrained by school staff.

In a poll of 403 families of special needs children between 9 and 13 March this year, PABSS found 62 per cent said their child's school had restrained or secluded them.

The charity said 93 per cent of the children are 11 years of age and under. Some 20 per cent were only six years old.

Beth Morrison, head of PABSS, has said primary schools are the problem, as

the statistics rise from age four to eight, before decreasing. She has long maintained that an element of cowardice underpins restraint and seclusion. This was because school staff target small children, while they find other ways to manage them when they become much bigger in adolescence.

Labour MSP Daniel Johnson has put forward a private member's bill to toughen the law on restraint and seclusion in Scotland.

And the Scottish Government has said it wants to strengthen the law in this area. It says restraint and seclusion should always be a last resort.

Morrison has said the UK and Welsh governments are also considering new guidance on restraint and seclusion, as is Northern Ireland.



UK Government 'snubbing' United Nations over disability

Campaigners have accused the UK Government of snubbing disabled people by refusing to attend a meeting to defend its record on disability rights.

The Government was due to attend a meeting in August at the United Nations. The meeting aimed to examine the Government's treatment of disabled people under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCPRD). Instead, it told the UN Committee it will present the UK's progress at a hearing in March next year.

In November 2016, the committee released a damning report, arguing the UK Government had systemically discriminated against disabled people. Kamran Mallick (pictured), chief executive of Disability Rights UK, said: "Time and again the Government is refusing to engage with people in a meaningful way."



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Hate crime victims unlikely to see justice

Victims of disability hate crimes are unlikely to receive justice, according to figures obtained by charities Leonard Cheshire and United Response.

Using figures obtained via Freedom of Information requests to all police forces in England and Wales, the two organisations found that just under 11,000 disability hate crimes were reported between April 2022 and March 2023.

The data showed that around half of these reports involved violence and 1,300 occurred online. While disability hate crime reports are down by 3.7 per cent from the record numbers of incidents in 2021/22, they are still higher than pre-pandemic figures.

Despite the drop in hate crime reports, just 1.2 per cent (132 reports) resulted in a charge or summons. This is down even

further than the previously very low 1.9 per cent that resulted in a charge or summons in 2021/22.

Across England and Wales, 36 of the 43 police forces provided figures on disability hate crimes. Around half (23) provided further data about outcomes resulting in no charge.

The three most common reasons given for victims to go without redress were 'evidential difficulties', 'victim withdrawing' and 'no suspect identified'.

The charities commissioned a YouGov poll to discover more about public attitudes to combatting hate crime. When asked about witnessing a disability hate crime, 86 per cent of the public who responded said they thought people should offer support to the victim if safe to do so.

A lower proportion of the public (66 per cent) thought people should offer to be a witness if they saw a disability hate crime. Nevertheless, 'evidential difficulties' was the main reason given for the extremely low charge rates.

Because not all hate crimes are reported, their prevalence is severely underrepresented. Kerry, from Milton Keynes, said: "As someone who has faced abuse online and offline, I can understand not reporting it to the police. I didn't want to be seen as a 'victim'. I thought I could handle it, just ignore it or even brush it off."

Despite the long-lasting impact of being targeted by a hate crime, the Government announced it will not publish a new Hate Crime Strategy that was promised in 2021.

Campaigning mum slams plans for reform of restraint

A campaigner has criticised plans to reform the rules on staff restraining and secluding pupils in schools in Northern Ireland.

Deirdre Shakespeare has led the fight for tougher rules on restraint and seclusion in the province by campaigning for 'Harry's Law'. Shakespeare, from County Tyrone, has said 12-year-old autistic son Harry (pictured below right) was strapped to a chair "like an animal" at Knockavoe School & Resource Centre, in Strabane, between September 2016 and May 2017.

Harry's Law advocated for mandatory recording and reporting of all incidents and the abolition of isolation rooms. Northern

Ireland's Department of Education (DoE) has since put new guidance on restraint and seclusion out for consultation.

Shakespeare, who has fought for Harry alongside husband Rodney, said while this new guidance delivers on ensuring the recording and reporting of all incidents, it falls short in other ways.

The DoE says the new guidance is "statutory", which means school staff "must have regard to it". It says the use of restraint and seclusion should only ever be a "last resort". Restraint is only justified when there is a risk of "harm or injury" and seclusion to prevent "serious physical harm".

But Shakespeare argues that restrictive practices are simply "reframed" in the new guidance as "supportive practices". The guidance allows physical contact through supportive practice to help with "movement, emotional well-being, feeding and personal care needs". Shakespeare says if families agree to "supportive practice" they are effectively rubber-stamping long-term plans to use restraint and seclusion. She said the guidance still allows "mechanical restraint", such as strapping a pupil to a chair if supported by an occupational therapist.

She added that teachers would have "no limitations" on this power. Disabled children were not "misbehaving" when distressed, and the guidance allowed staff to restrain them to control behaviours that were rooted in disability, she said.



WHAT'S NEW

Equals Nations Conference Friday 28th June 2024 Different not Differentiated?



A fresh look at Curriculum and Assessment for learners of all ages with PMLD and SLD.

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- Peter Imray - Equals Director of Developments
- James Waller - Sunningdale School in Sunderland
- Trish Turner - Brackenfield School in Derby
- Tim Holdsworth - St Ann's School in London

■ To learn more, please visit www.equals.co.uk



Curriculum in action: a careers talk on game-building (left) and safety taught in kitchen work (above)

A creative approach to EHCP outcomes

Swalcliffe Park's 'Quality of Life' (QoL) approach ensures we hear student and family voices on issues of importance to them on a regular basis



DfE No:
931/7007
CIO Registered
Charity No:
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Principal:
Robert Piner
CEO: Kiran Hingorani MEd

Hearing student and family voices regularly through weekly 'keyworking' and termly QoL surveys helps us work together to identify targets or 'areas of focus' for the term ahead, as well as evaluating progress against previous targets.

The school's 'Independence Plus' curriculum addresses many of these QoL issues and is integrated within our school day and residential provision. It is organised under six themes:

- My Safety (including safeguarding curriculum)
- My Future
- All about me
- At home
- In school
- In the community.

This means one theme can be addressed each half-term throughout the year through a series of student generated projects. This enables us to work collaboratively across the school in sharing ideas and resources, as well as planning activities and visits.

The running order for the themes is set at the beginning of

the year and shared with governors and families so everyone knows the focus of the project work.

Evidence of progress is collected in digital portfolios, to which students, families and staff can all contribute.

Lots of activities

In the first half-term the theme was 'My Safety' and there were lots of different activities and projects going on in school. These included learning to ride a bike, learning to swim and being safe online, as well as the theme being integrated into all subjects across the curriculum.

Since half-term the theme has been 'My Future'. This has included a Careers Week, with a wide range

of employers coming into school to talk about their jobs and what they do. This will be followed by visits out to see different jobs in action, as well as visits to colleges.

Progress within the curriculum is also assessed against end-of-Key Stage outcomes to provide a seamless link with the Annual Review process.

Progress benchmarked

These outcomes are benchmarked against mainstream norms for each Key Stage, which allows us to see how our students are progressing in relation to their mainstream peers.

This is not because we expect similar levels of development, but it helps us to see where the main areas of need persist. This can help Annual Review discussions about the continuing need for specialist support and placement, particularly in Sixth Form years, where funding is reviewed annually.

The result is a huge increase in enthusiasm and collaborative working for all students and staff... – and families love it too!

To find out more please just get in touch.

“The result is a huge increase in enthusiasm”



For more about our Independence curriculum and Quality of Life approach, contact Kiran on khingorani@swalcliffepark.co.uk or visit www.swalcliffepark.co.uk

Trauma, the unwelcome companion

Does trauma induce autism or make the condition more extreme? Darren Devine looks at evidence suggesting that trauma not only leads to mental health problems, but exacerbates autism symptoms

From school days, where early experiences are marred by being marginalised and excluded, to adult experiences of bullying, isolation and loneliness, the stress and anxiety that define trauma are never far away for those on the autism spectrum. It seems the everyday experiences of many of those on the spectrum throughout life are enough to make them want to retreat from a hostile world into self-absorption.

But how far does the evidence back up what parents and autistic people themselves see and live each day – that life itself can cause still more detachment and disengagement?

Post-traumatic stress

One person who speaks from this perspective is Jaime A Heidel, 43, from Connecticut. She is a late-diagnosed autistic writer who struggles with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Her book, *“What Did I Do Wrong?”: An Accessible Guide to Preventing Traumatic Misunderstandings Between You and Your Autistic Loved One*, is rooted in her own childhood experiences.

Heidel says the question, “What did I do wrong?” was the theme of her childhood, teens and young adult life. When she was having what she believed were ordinary social interactions she would suddenly find herself being yelled at for being rude, attention-seeking or selfish. This turned her into an adult who was often unable to

understand the reactions of others to her words and behaviour.

Heidel, who says she also has attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), wrote her book to help future generations of autistic people avoid the trauma she experienced. She maintains that there are so few autistic people who have not experienced trauma that it is difficult to disentangle the effects of the two.

She believes that forced sensory exposure, forced masking (where people camouflage their natural personality or behaviour to fit in with those around them) and peer bullying are the three main causes of autistic trauma. She maintains that many behaviour therapies focus on desensitising autistic people to the experiences they find challenging, such as loud noises and bright lights.

Sensory needs

Heidel, who blogs at www.thearticulateautistic.com, believes the same therapies try to prevent autistic people from stimming, even though this helps them regulate their emotions.

When autistic children do not have their sensory needs met and are denied the chance to stim, problems inevitably follow, she believes. The children end up showing a “marked increase in emotional dysregulation”, which results in signs of autistic trauma, such as shutdowns and meltdowns. And she says these outbursts can be focused on the “cause of the trauma (such as a teacher or behaviour therapist), and/or complete emotional withdrawal”.

The best way to counteract the impact of trauma in people on the autism spectrum is to listen to them and take their experiences and needs seriously, she says. People should also take the time to listen to the advice offered by autistic adults “doing everything in our

collective power to prevent the next generation of autistics from developing complex PTSD like so many of us have”.

Dr Samantha Fuld, a social work academic, reviewed the existing research on trauma and autism for a study in 2018. She found the research showing that autistic children were more likely to experience “traumatic and stressful life events” was “compelling”.

Dr Fuld believes there is physiological evidence to support this because autistic children struggle with “hyperarousal” and “general dysregulation” of the

experiences can cause the dysregulation in autistic children. Stressful and traumatic events are known to increase the risks of mental health problems for everyone and there is “convincing” research to show this also applies to people on the autism spectrum, she says.

Trauma misdiagnosis

In the UK, psychiatrists rely on the International Classification of Diseases (ICD 10) to diagnose conditions such as autism and PTSD. The ICD 10 says people get PTSD after “living through or seeing a traumatic event, such as war, a hurricane, rape, physical abuse or a bad accident”.

In the US, psychiatrists define trauma in similar terms using the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM5). They say trauma results from “actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence”.

The charity PTSD UK says trauma symptoms in children can be mistaken for autism. Repetitive play, problems in communication and outbursts of anger and frustration are common to both conditions.

Rather than autism, it could be the child’s way of dealing with intrusive thoughts after trauma. Because of these similarities, PTSD in autistic children can go unnoticed. And where the two conditions occur together, adults and children may struggle to get the additional diagnosis.

“
Listen to them and
take their experiences
and needs seriously”

hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis. This is the body’s main stress-response system. It not only controls reactions to stress, but also regulates many body processes, including digestion, immune responses, mood and emotion.

Dr Fuld says previous research has shown that negative stressors, social interactions and unexpected

Further reading



Jaime A Heidel (inset, far left) believes many autistic people endure trauma and disentangling the impacts of autism and trauma can be difficult. Her book, *What Did I Do Wrong? An accessible guide to preventing traumatic misunderstandings between you and your autistic loved one*, is £9.62/\$11.99 online.

Stand up to sneaky discrimination

It's against the law, but many parents report their autistic offspring have been the subject of discrimination on more than one occasion. Fiona McNeill hears from a family whose child was rejected for college in a way that breached the Disability Discrimination Act, and from a SEN lawyer who gives an insight into what motivates the perpetrators

The law

The Equality and Human Rights Commission's website carries a definition: 'Disability discrimination is when you are treated less well or put at a disadvantage for a reason that relates to your disability in one of the situations covered by the Equality Act.'

'The treatment could be a one-off action, the application of a rule or policy or the existence of physical or communication barriers which make accessing something difficult or impossible. The discrimination does not have to be intentional to be unlawful.'

The website also points out that schools, education authorities and employers are legally required to make 'reasonable adjustments' for students or employees with any kind of disability.

whatsoever from the LA," Daisy says. "Finally, a week before the start of term, Jake's application was rejected because they said the environment wouldn't be suitable. I firmly believe they'd decided they didn't want him from the outset, which is why they made the process as difficult as possible."

Hopes and dreams

She adds: "Although it's true that noise and crowds can be challenging for Jake, he was willing to give it a go. Would it have been so hard to let him wear ear-defenders or visit a quiet room if he got overwhelmed? I felt awful telling him he'd been turned down. He's had a really bad year with friendship and self-esteem troubles and was looking forward to a fresh start, doing something he was interested in. Autistic people have hopes and dreams, the same as anyone else."

Esther Salter is a lawyer specialising in special educational needs who works as part of the public law and human rights team at legal firm Irwin Mitchell. She recalls a similarly unpleasant situation trying to find a suitable secondary school for her own

With much of the world gradually developing greater understanding of neurodiversity and the rights of disabled people, you might imagine that the UK is becoming a fairer place where young people are less likely to be denied access to work or education because they're autistic.

But while there are certainly strict laws in place protecting people from overt discrimination,

many families are shocked to discover that some organisations still find ways to exclude neurodiverse youngsters in a more underhand fashion. You might call it 'hidden discrimination'.

Jake Mantle*, aged 18, has a diagnosis of Asperger's syndrome and ADHD, along with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP). He lives in South London and recently applied to do a diploma at a nearby college.

"We went to look round before he applied, but were given a noticeably lukewarm reception," mum Daisy* recalls. "The woman from the SEN team kept emphasising how busy and crowded it would be, even though Jake was keen to try the course. There was absolutely no encouragement. It was really odd – as if she didn't want him to apply."

The family went ahead with the application nonetheless, believing

“There was absolutely no encouragement. It was really odd – as if she didn't want him to apply”

Not what it seems: discrimination may be disguised with seemingly welcome smiles

Jake had as much right to a place as any other student.

Although the local authority spent months trying to get in touch with the college to start the EHCP consultation process, e-mails and phone calls went unanswered. Frustrated, Jake and his mum turned up to the enrolment day to find out what was happening.

"We saw the same woman from the SEN department, who claimed they'd received no communication

The Parent's Portal by Autism Early Support is a new, interactive platform of resources, guidance and peer support.

"In short-it's fab! Such a useful tool for parents. It can be a scary time when your child is diagnosed, and the AES Parent Portal is just the resource we needed."

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- A peer network offering a non-judgmental space to exchange ideas freely, feel listened to and affirmed
- Signposting advice and guidance on EHCP's and the SEN process.



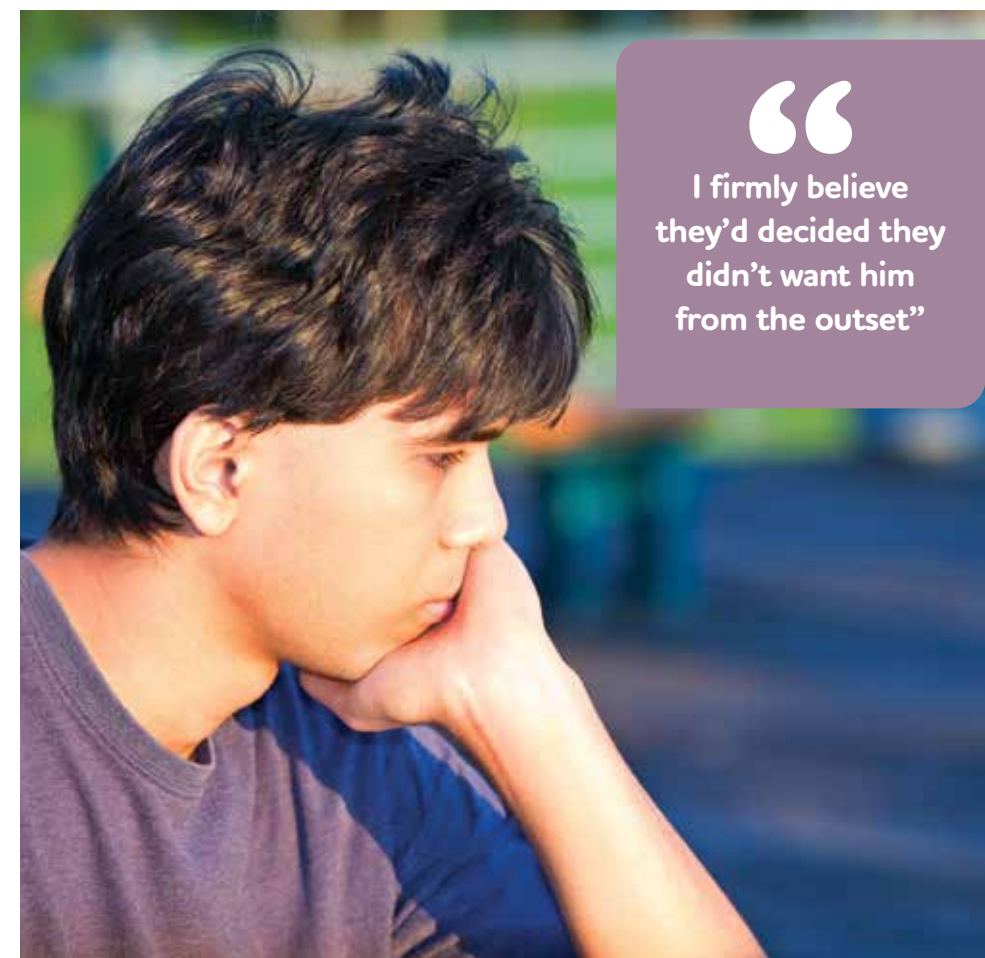
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"
I firmly believe
they'd decided they
didn't want him
from the outset**"**



Make it legal: lawyer Esther Salter (above) recommends that families make a formal complaint if they feel their child has been on the receiving end of discrimination

Some years ago, Esther worked as an in-house lawyer at a local authority (LA), where she observed first-hand, through attending meetings and sitting in on panels, how such financial decisions are made. "It's often about statistics, rather than the needs of an individual," she points out.

"I remember one colleague saying, 'Only five per cent of parents appeal.' It was as if they were working out which families would be up for a fight."

She mentions that sometimes, parents make the application for an EHCP assessment themselves if the school can't or won't complete the paperwork. "Unfortunately, LAs don't take parents seriously and are more likely to refuse – which is a kind of discrimination in itself," she says.

"In one case that I worked on, the girl started secondary school and was found wandering the streets. When she was eventually assessed for an EHCP, they worked out that, actually, her needs were so great it would take £18k per year to support her."

Esther recommends that families make a formal complaint if they feel their child has been on the receiving end of discrimination, no matter how subtle, and to challenge their LA's decisions at tribunal if necessary. "But I realise this can be exhausting for people and they can get tired of battling for their child, year after year."

Dreams dashed: young autistic people may be denied the support they need because local authorities want to save money

daughter, who, like Jake, has a diagnosis of autism and ADHD. "My daughter is academically able and dreamy, rather than hyperactive, so it's been decided she doesn't need an EHCP," she explains. "But because of this, when we looked round various schools, the overwhelming message was not to expect any help. There was a feeling that a child would have to fit in the right 'box' to access support. It really put me off mainstream education. We just didn't feel that welcome."

Esther decided instead to send her daughter to an independent school, where she is now thriving. However, in Esther's working life, she continues to come across other parents who are facing similar battles against 'sneaky'

discrimination. Much of this takes place at local authority level, she says. Demand for EHCPs has greatly increased in recent years – partly due to greater understanding of special educational needs, but also because of the massive shortage of specialist provision. Councils have always been reluctant to grant EHCPs because it means they have to provide schools with extra funding for each one issued. But now, Esther says, they are increasingly refusing to assess children for one in the first place.

Risk of exclusion

"It's a kind of, 'Look how good they are at maths – they don't need an EHCP!' attitude," she says.

"I've supported many families in this situation, where the young person gets to secondary school and just can't cope. If a child is hyperactive and can't sit still or concentrate, for example, instead of being supported, they receive sanction after sanction and risk being excluded."

CONTACTS:

- The Equality and Human Rights Commission: www.equalityhumanrights.com/en

- IPSEA (Independent Provider of Special Education Advice) offers help on many special educational needs subjects, including applying for an EHCP and going to tribunal. www.ipsea.org.uk

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Stateside science leads the way



Professor James B Adams



Dr John Gaitanis



Prof Mario Capecchi



Dr David Fajgenbaum

Dr Ben Marlow, who has long reported on promising autism research, travels to the US – and finds scientists there making advances that UK parents, who are desperate to help their loved ones, can only dream of

I had not slept for around 18 hours and was now on a rickety bus bouncing up and down on the concrete-topped highway, heading down to Monterrey on the Western US seaboard, just south of San Francisco.

I was alone, having left my family back in the UK to attend the annual Autism Conference 'Synchrony', hosted by the Brain Foundation. I don't attend many conferences face-to-face now, partly due to workload, but also for the guilt of leaving my wife struggling at home to manage childcare – particularly as my eldest son, Freddie, has profound autism and can have very challenging behaviour.

The reason why I have been every year since its inception in 2019 is that it offers hope, new ideas and a genuine desire to improve the health and life outcomes of children with profound autism. For many years now within the

UK, critical scientific thinking and a desire to challenge the normal medical paradigms have been absent at conferences; it's been replaced by a celebration of neurodiversity that masks the hard and dark questions of a condition that leaves many in chronic pain, in a constant state of anxiety and with medical co-morbidities that limit life. Meanwhile, recent publications suggest that many who are profoundly autistic won't live past the age of 40.¹

Frustration

The frustration for me, as a parent, is centred around the fact the field of autism is struggling to keep up with other areas of medicine that have trailblazed ahead: cancer and heart disease to name but two. For some reason, the 'autism' label is left well alone in biomedical research; it is supported through diagnosis and allied

professionals to a degree, but when it comes to basic science, gastroenterology, genetics, and immunology – in the UK these aren't part of the discussion.

Unacceptable struggle

Why are we letting our profoundly autistic children stay on a path shared by so many, with chronic gastroenterological problems, epilepsy, immune dysfunction and a limited lifespan? As a parent and clinician, I feel this is unacceptable, but at times within the NHS I feel powerless to provide support and hope to many children and families. They live a life mired in struggle and medical confusion, not knowing in which direction to turn to help manage the complex health needs of their child.

So, I made my way to the Synchrony conference, which in my mind offers an opportunity to listen to a vibrant and energised scientific

community of clinicians and scientists who really want to 'make a difference'. They see the struggles, pain and suffering and want to change the rhetoric.

Synchrony was set up by the US-based BRAIN Foundation, whose mission is to 'support translational research leading to development treatments and an improved standard of care for co-morbidities in individuals with autism spectrum disorder'. The organisation's aim is to do this by 'funding the most promising translational research, providing an opportunity for multi-disciplinary science symposia and working groups, tools for easier collaboration and access to resources to fund autism research', and 'Clinical initiatives focusing on translating research to evidence-based treatments for the core disabilities of autism and co-morbid medical conditions'.²

Their approach to funding medical research is informed by the voices of individuals at every level of the autism spectrum, their families, clinicians and a board of scientific advisors



Dr Richard Frye

from leading medical research institutions.

Synchrony, BRAIN Foundation's annual event, provides a line-up of all those globally who see the current issues and provide critical thinking and a desire to make a difference. The list includes **Dr Richard Frye**, paediatric neurologist and pioneer of research into cerebral folate deficiency and mitochondrial dysfunction³; **Dr John Gaitanis**, a neurologist discussing different perspectives of EEG and utility of cannabidiol⁴; and **Dr Harumi Jyonouchi**, an immunologist from New Jersey who has pushed boundaries in understanding

innate immune dysfunction in autism and its impact on brain development.⁵

Then there is **Professor Jim Adams**, giving updates on his Phase 2 trials in MMT in ASD, showing significant reduction in GI symptoms⁶; **Dr Mario Capecchi (Nobel Prize winner 2007)**, offering insight into different sub-populations of microglia and their relevance to synaptic plasticity⁷; and **Dr David Fajgenbaum (Everycure)**, offering an inspiring personal journey of how he overcame a life-limiting condition through re-purposing a medication that now is a gold-standard treatment for everyone with his hyper-inflammatory condition.⁸

They offer hope

To me, as a parent and clinician, these clinician scientists are inspirational – they offer hope, a sound scientific reasoning and an opportunity to radically shift how we manage and treat many of the autistic children who have medical challenges. Yet within the UK and among

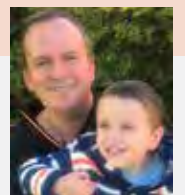
Mission and vision : The Brain Foundation

'Our mission is to support translational research that will lead to the development of FDA-approved treatments and an improved standard of care for co-morbidities in individuals with autism.

'Our vision is health, independence, and well-being for every person on the planet with neurological conditions, including Autism Spectrum Disorder diagnosis.' <https://brainfoundation.org>

my colleagues within the NHS, they are unheard of.

Synchrony also offers the chance to talk and share ideas, collaboration, grant funding and mentorship. It offers a space to expand and interact on what is a very complex area of medicine and something in the UK we could really benefit from. I am very thankful to the Brain Foundation for their continued support of research in this area.



Dr Ben Marlow (pictured with his son, Freddie) is a paediatric consultant (neurodisability) at Colchester General Hospital, Essex, and clinical director of the hospital's Synapse Centre for Neurodevelopment, which seeks to translate biomedical research into practical therapies. <https://www.synapsecentre.co.uk>

“
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Kerrang! Marty McFly bursts onto the stage in the spectacular *Back to the Future: The Musical*

Relaxed, chilled and sensory-adapted shows are taking place across the UK, making them as stress-free as possible for audience members on the autism spectrum. So book your tickets, relax and enjoy one – or even several – of these fabulous productions

Sensory showtime fun starts here...



Spookily atmospheric: *A Haunting in Venice*

Adelphi Theatre, London

Back to the Future: The Musical

When Marty McFly finds himself transported back to 1955 in a time machine built by the eccentric scientist Doc Brown, he accidentally changes the course of history. Now he's in a race against time to fix the present, escape the past and send himself... back to the future.

This spectacular show won Best New Musical at the Olivier and WhatsOnStage Awards.

Relaxed performance:

Sunday 10 March 2024 at 3pm.

Tickets are from £19.55.

The producers will make significant adjustments to sounds and lighting, but say there will still be parts of the show that 'generate 1.21 gigawatts of spectacle' and some of that will still be quite loud and bright.

● A visual story and sensory synopsis are

available on the show's website:

<https://www.backtothefuturemusical.com/london/access/>

Barbican Centre, London

A Haunting in Venice

If you like spookiness and scariness, you should enjoy this... Sir Kenneth Brannagh stars as Belgian detective Hercule Poirot, who is enjoying retired life in Venice. His friend, the bestselling American mystery author Ariadne Oliver (played by Tina Fey), persuades him to come to a Halloween party, where things take a turn towards the macabre.

The screening takes place at Cinema 3, which is on Beech Street, a short walk from the Barbican's Silk Street entrance. Tickets are £6, plus a £1.50 booking fee.

The venue regularly hosts relaxed screenings throughout the

year, so you could keep up to date by visiting its website: <https://www.barbican.org.uk/whats-on/cinema>

Relaxed screening:

18 December at 6.25pm.

● <https://www.barbican.org.uk/whats-on/2023/event/relaxed-screening-a-haunting-in-venice>

Get Happy by Told by an Idiot

Told by an Idiot is a theatre company that aims to take creative risks and tell universal stories. It says *Get Happy* is an unexpected variety performance, bursting with quirky playfulness and off-the-wall humour. *The Sunday Times* has described it as 'anarchically inclusive joy'. It's said to be suitable for all ages.

All performances are relaxed.

The show takes place at The Pit three times a day until 19 December. Tickets from £11.

● <https://www.barbican.org.uk/whats-on/2023/event/told-by-an-idiot-get-happy>

Relaxed, sensory-adapted and chilled performances

Relaxed performances are adapted to be accessible to a wide range of audiences, including those on the autism spectrum, those with a learning disability, or anyone with additional sensory needs. There are adjustments to the production's sounds and lighting, house lights are kept on (but low) during the performance, there's a relaxed attitude to movement and audience responses, there are dedicated quiet areas inside the theatre should anyone need to leave their seat, and there are extra staff on hand. Often, a pre-show information pack is sent out so audiences can learn about the theatre and the production before their visit. **Sensory-adapted performances** are similar to relaxed

performances. Technical changes are made to the production, such as adjustments to light and sound effects, for those with sensory sensitivities. These performances also allow for noise and movement in the auditorium, a chill-out space for patrons who may need time away from the performance, and re-entry when needed. They would suit those on the autism spectrum, or with epilepsy or a learning disability.

Chilled performances allow for noise and movement in the auditorium and re-entry for patrons who may need time away from the performance, but the performances themselves remain unchanged.



METRO



Daily Mail



The Telegraph

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RELAXED SHOWS

My Neighbour Totoro

This is a coming-of-age story exploring the magical fantasy world of childhood and the transformative power of imagination, as it follows one extraordinary summer in the lives of two sisters. It's a production by the Royal Shakespeare Company and executive producer Joe Hisaishi and has won six Olivier Awards and five WhatsOnStage Awards. *The Stage* calls it "utterly beguiling" and *Metro* calls it "jaw-dropping". It's on at the Barbican Theatre.

Relaxed performances:

Thursday 1 February 2024 at 2pm,
Saturday 17 February 2024 at 2pm.

● <https://www.barbican.org.uk/whats-on/2023/event/royal-shakespeare-company-my-neighbour-totoro>

Rhiannon Faith Company:

Lay Down Your Burdens

Restore your weary soul with this radically tender and immersive dance theatre premiere that invites you to explore the beauty of humanity and the eternal need for community and compassion. Suitable for ages 16+.

Relaxed performance:

22 December at 7.45pm at The Pit. Tickets from £18.

● <https://www.barbican.org.uk/whats-on/2023/event/rhiannon-faith-company-lay-down-your-burdens>

Beck Theatre, Hayes

Beauty and the Beast

Antony Costa, of boyband Blue, heads the cast of this family panto, with slapstick, audience interaction and memorable musical numbers.

Relaxed performance:

14 December at 10.30am. Tickets from £23.

● <https://trafalgartickets.com/beck-theatre-hayes/en-GB>

Bush Theatre, London

Feeling Afraid As If Something Terrible Is Going To Happen

Strap in for a laugh-out-loud journey through self-awareness and self-sabotage as the hit play transfers to the Bush for its first London run. Starring Olivier and Tony award nominee Samuel Barnett. Suitable for ages 14+.

Relaxed performance:

14 December at 7.30pm. Tickets from £15.

● <https://www.bushtheatre.co.uk/>



Ready for the ball:

Georgia Gallagher as Cinderella, with Ugly Sisters David Dale and James Holmes in Buxton Opera House & Pavilion Arts Centre's production

Shifters

A fierce romance for anyone desperate for a different kind of love story, *Shifters* is a tribute to the enduring power – and fragility – of memory and love. Suitable for ages 14+.

Relaxed performances:

2 March 2024 at 2.30pm, 21 March 2024 at 7.30pm. Tickets from £15.

● www.bushtheatre.co.uk/event/shifters/

Buxton Opera House & Pavilion Arts Centre Cinderella

You shall go to the ball with Buxton Opera House's magical family pantomime, *Cinderella*. Working all day long, completing chores and being taunted by her ugly stepsisters is all Cinderella has ever known. That is, until her Fairy Godmother makes all her wishes come true...

Relaxed performance:

Wednesday 13 December at 5.30pm. Tickets are £12, with one essential companion admitted free. Book via the box office on 01298 72190.

● <https://buxtonoperahouse.org.uk/event/cinderella-2023-autism-friendly-performance>

Hare & Tortoise

This musical play for 3-8 year-olds and their families is intended as an ideal introduction to theatre. It's a reworking of Aesop's famous fable, as the audience travels through the seasons with two unlikely but loveable friends and help them prepare for their big race.

Relaxed performance:

Sunday 17 December at 10am. Tickets are £8. Book via the box office on 01298 72190.

● <https://buxtonoperahouse.org.uk/event/hare-tortoise>

Northern Ballet's Tortoise and the Hare

Don't confuse this with the above *Hare & Tortoise*. *Tortoise and the Hare* is a touring production by Northern Ballet, aiming to be the perfect introduction to live ballet and music for young audiences. Read more about this in our Touring the UK section on page 32.

Relaxed performance:

Tuesday 20 February 2024 at 6pm. Tickets are £11 (adults) and £8.50 (children).

● <https://buxtonoperahouse.org.uk/event/tortoise-and-the-hare>

Cliffs Pavilion, Southend-on-Sea Peter Pan

Comedian Joe Pasquale teams up with barrister Rob Rinder (TV's Judge Rinder) for this family treat of a panto.

Relaxed performance:

31 December at 11am. All tickets for the performance are £21.

● <https://trafalgartickets.com/cliffs-pavilion-southend/en-GB>

Churchill Theatre, Bromley Cinderella

Musical theatre star and television personality Brenda Edwards stars in this spectacular family pantomime.



Relaxed performances are adapted in a number of ways to reduce anxiety and create a supportive atmosphere

This includes adjusting light and sound levels, providing 'chill-out' areas and demonstrating an embracing attitude towards audience noise and movement in the auditorium. Relaxed performances could provide an opportunity for people with autism spectrum conditions, learning disabilities or other sensory and communication needs to access theatre in a relaxed environment.

Chilled performances take a more casual approach to noise and movement in the auditorium, but the performance itself is unchanged. This performance is ideal for people who feel more at ease knowing they can go in and out of the auditorium during the show.

Find out about upcoming Relaxed and Chilled Performances at OfficialLondonTheatre.com/access

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THEATRE
.com

RELAXED SHOWS

Relaxed performance:

12 December at 1.30pm. Tickets from £22.

● <https://trafalgartickets.com/churchill-theatre-bromley/en-GB>

Curve Theatre, Leicester

The Owl Who Came For Christmas

When a family put up their new Christmas tree they discover, hidden among the decorations, a secret visitor. It's a tiny owl. See how the loving family help save her and return her home.

All performances are relaxed:

Saturday 9 December - Saturday 6 January

● <https://www.curveonline.co.uk/whats-on/shows/the-owl-who-came-for-christmas/>

Evita

The famous Andrew Lloyd Webber/Tim Rice musical, for ages 10+.

Relaxed performance:

6 January 2024 at 2.15pm

● <https://www.curveonline.co.uk/whats-on/shows/evita/>

Festival Theatre, Edinburgh

Scottish Ballet's Cinders!

This playful new production will have a surprise for audiences each night as the curtain rises: on some nights, Cinders will be a woman, swept off her feet by her Prince; on others, Cinders will be a man, swept off his feet by his Princess.

Relaxed performance:

18 January 2024 at 2.30pm

● <https://www.capitaltheatres.com/whats-on/all-shows/scottish-ballets-cinders/2106>

Frameless, London

This is not a theatrical show, but an accessible, multisensory, immersive art experience. The venue, near Marble Arch in Central London, features four galleries and showcases some of the world's greatest works of art, brought spectacularly to life with dynamic lighting and projection.

Frameless is running a series of chilled experiences. The sessions are open to all, but have been created especially for neurodivergent, deaf and disabled people, and those who might feel more at ease in less busy public spaces. The venue's capacity will be reduced. Other adaptations will include minimising loud noises, keeping on low-level lighting to



avoid complete darkness, switching off hand driers and building a large chill-out space, with sensory lighting and a dark tent. The venue will also provide fidget toys, easy-read and visual guides and an access team to welcome and support visitors.

The venue will provide audio described and British Sign Language tours during the chilled experiences. It says it finds that autistic visitors "can really benefit from joining an audio described, storytelling tour during our chilled sessions".

SEND visitors are eligible for a complimentary, accompanying carer's ticket, which must be booked at the same time. Carers may be asked for valid ID on entry. Discounts of 30 per cent are also available for groups of eight or more.

Those requiring further support or assistance can email access@frameless.com or call 07590689539 between 9.30-5.30 Tuesday - Thursday.

There is an easy read and visual guide on the venue's website: <https://frameless.com/accessibility>

Chilled sessions:

Tuesday 19 December (Christmas break) 10.00am – 12.00pm;

Lost in wonder: a child experiences one of the works of art brought to life at Frameless

Monday 12 February 2024 (February half term) 9.30am – 11.30am; Tuesday 2 April 2024 (Easter break) 9.30am – 11.30am; Tuesday 28 May 2024 (half term) 9.30am – 11.30am.

Relaxed school sessions:

One SEN teacher wrote to the venue after a classroom visit: 'One of our pupils who is selectively non-verbal turned to his headteacher and said, "I want to stay here forever." This was the first time the headteacher had ever heard him speak and she was in tears when she told us about this.'

Schools can book a morning or an afternoon slot. The next relaxed sessions will be on Tuesday 27 February 2024 and Wednesday 5 June 2024.

Tickets are £8 per person, with two free tickets per ten purchased. For more information or to book, email schools@framless.com or call 07590689539 between 9.30 -5.30 Tuesday - Thursday.

Garrick Theatre, London

The Gruffalo's Child

Follow the Gruffalo's Child on her adventurous mission in Tall Stories' adaptation of the much-loved picture book by Julia Donaldson and Axel Scheffler. Suitable for

RELAXED SHOWS

ages 3+, but babies and younger children will be allowed entry.

Relaxed performances:

16 December at 10.30am, 21 December at 10.30am, 3 January 2024 at 2pm. Tickets from £10.

● <https://thegarrricktheatre.co.uk/tickets/the-gruffalos-child/>

Kings Theatre, Glasgow

Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs

Watch the wicked queen being outwitted so that love can prevail.

Relaxed performance:

14 December at 1pm. Tickets are from £13.

● <https://www.atgtickets.com/venues/kings-theatre-glasgow/>

Lyceum Theatre, Crewe

Cinderella

X-Factor winner Matt Terry heads the cast for this family panto, with loads of slapstick comedy and catchy songs.

Relaxed performance:

14 December at 6pm. Tickets are from £21.50.

● <https://trafalgartickets.com/lyceum-theatre-crewe/en-GB>

Lyceum Theatre, Edinburgh

The Snow Queen

Follow young Gerda on her quest to save Kei, and the world, from an eternal winter.

Relaxed performance:

22 December at 7pm. Tickets are from £12.

● <https://lyceum.org.uk/>

Mercury Theatre, Colchester

Sleeping Beauty

Once upon a time in Colchesteria, Princess Luna was turning 18, but all celebrations were banned by her wicked Aunt Carabosse, who was determined to stop Luna from taking her rightful place as Queen.

Mercury's free Access for All scheme can help you book tickets and parking online.

Members receive online access to the best seats to meet their needs, including seats in accessible viewing areas, access to an accessible parking area, automatic discounts or free tickets for those that need a companion, and regular check-ins with the customer experience team.

Relaxed performance:

6 January 2024 at 2pm. Tickets



start at £10.

● <https://www.mercurytheatre.co.uk/event/sleeping-beauty/>

National Theatre, London

The Witches

The witches have come up with an evil plan. The only thing standing in their way is Luke and his Gran. But he's ten and she has a dodgy heart. Time is short, danger is everywhere, and they have just one chance to stop the witches from squalling every stinking little child in England.

This is a rip-roaring musical version of Roald Dahl's timeless tale, filled with wit, daring and a lot of heart.

Sensory-adapted performance:

Thursday 21 December at 7pm at the Olivier Theatre. Tickets are from £66.

● <https://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/productions/the-witches/>

New Theatre, Cardiff

Jac and the Beanstalk

Lesley Joseph, from *Birds of a Feather*, plays The Spirit of the Beans in this family panto. Expect laughs, music, special effects, magic beans and bundles of audience participation.

Relaxed performance:

19 December at 6pm. Tickets are from £19.50.

● <https://newtheatrecardiff.co.uk/Online/pantomime-tickets-cardiff-wales-2023>

Orchard West Theatre, Dartford

Beauty and the Beast

Shona McGarty (Whitney Dean in *EastEnders*) leads the cast in this spectacular panto.

Relaxed performance:

15 December at 12pm. Tickets from £24.50.

● <https://orchardtheatre.co.uk/Online/tickets-beauty-and-the-beast-dartford-2023>

Old Vic Theatre, London

Just For One Day

The Live Aid musical. In a decade of neon and noise, one moment made the world stand still and brought 1.5 billion people together – and they all have a story to tell about 'the day rock 'n' roll changed the world'. The show is suitable for ages 14+.

Relaxed performance:

23 March 2024 at 2.30pm. Tickets are £22-£25.

● <https://www.oldvictheatre.com/stage/event/just-for-one-day>

Perth Theatre

Aladdin

Your wish is our command... Aladdin magically flies into the Perth Theatre.

Relaxed performances:

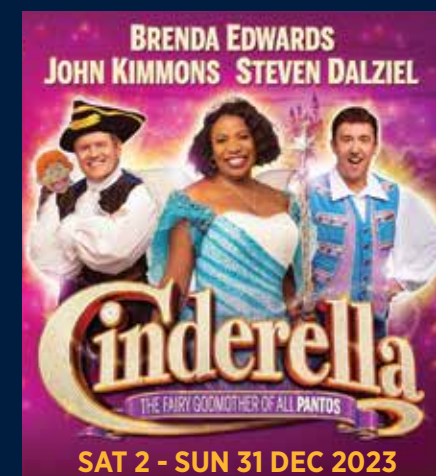
10 December at 1pm, 28 December at 2pm. Tickets from £17.

● <https://www.perththeatreandconcerthall.com/>

Rip-roaring:
William Skinner
as Bruno in
The Witches
at the National
Theatre

NATIONAL THEATRE IMAGE BY MARC BRENNER

IT'S PANTO TIME!



CHURCHILL THEATRE, BROMLEY
RELAXED PERF: TUE 12 DEC 1.30PM



NEW THEATRE, CARDIFF
RELAXED PERF: TUE 19 DEC 6PM



LYCEUM, CREWE
RELAXED PERF: THU 14 DEC 6PM



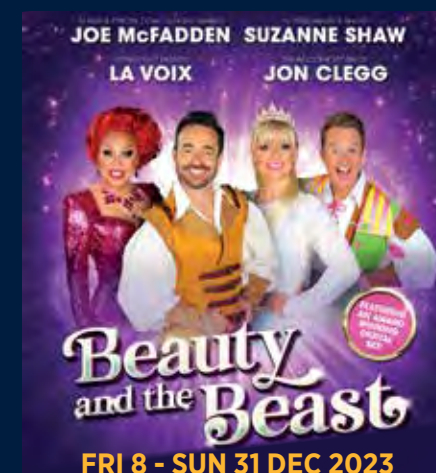
ORCHARD WEST THEATRE,
DARTFORD
RELAXED PERF: FRI 15 DEC 12PM



THE BECK THEATRE, HAYES
RELAXED PERF: WED 27 DEC 1PM



THE BECK THEATRE, HAYES
RELAXED PERF: THU 14 DEC 10.30AM



WYCOMBE SWAN, HIGH WYCOMBE
RELAXED PERF: FRI 29 DEC 1PM



CLIFFS PAVILION,
SOUTHEND-ON-SEA
RELAXED PERF: SUN 31 DEC 11AM



WYVERN THEATRE, SWINDON
RELAXED PERF: FRI 8 DEC 1PM

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RELAXED SHOWS

Royal Shakespeare Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon

The Box of Delights

The Royal Shakespeare Company promises festive family fun with this show. Follow schoolboy Kay as he gets caught in a battle between two magicians and struggles to save the future of Christmas, helped by an amazing magical box.

Chilled performance:

7 December at 1.30pm. Disabled tickets £16, with companion free.

A Midsummer Night's Dream

Matthew Baynton, from *Horrible Histories* and *Ghosts*, stars in this captivating comedy set on a magical midsummer night.

Chilled performances:

9 March 2024 at 1.30pm, 28 March 2024 at 1.15pm. Disabled tickets £16, with companion free.

● <https://www.rsc.org.uk/your-visit/access/assisted-performances>

St Lukes, London

London Symphony Orchestra

The London Symphony Orchestra is planning two relaxed lunchtime concerts at LSO St Lukes, a converted church at 161 Old Street. The concerts are free and there's no booking – just turn up. The doors open at 12pm and the music starts at 12.30pm. It finishes around 1.30pm.

These bite-sized relaxed concerts are particularly suitable for individuals or groups who feel more comfortable in a relaxed environment. Everyone is welcome, including those with sensory and communication impairments or learning disabilities.

The concerts will introduce you to orchestral instruments and chamber music. There will be friendly introductions to guide you through the concert from presenter



Rachel Leach. If you're left with burning questions, you can ask them during a Q&A session.

Relaxed concerts:

23 February 2024, 12.30pm:
● <https://www.lso.co.uk/whats-on/free-friday-lunchtime-concert-23-february-2024/>
7 June 2024, 12.30pm:

● <https://www.lso.co.uk/whats-on/free-friday-lunchtime-concert-7-june-2024/>

Swan Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon

The Fair Maid of the West

Join the RSC cast at the pub in this celebratory, music-filled, ensemble comedy about the life-saving powers of community, compromise and compassion.

There will be 'pub style' seating on bar stools and benches in a few of the rows, bringing audience members closer to the action and immersing them in the Swan Theatre's transformation into the 'Open Arms pub'.

Chilled performances:

Friday 29 December at 7.30pm, Saturday 6 January 2024 at 1.30pm.

● <https://www.rsc.org.uk/the-fair-maid-of-the-west/>

Theatre Royal, Nottingham

Dick Whittington

TV stars Shane Ritchie and Dr Ranj will be adding Christmas sparkle to the Theatre Royal's panto this year. Join Shane, playing the title role, and trusty sidekick Kitty Cat as he seeks fame, fortune and happiness journeying to become Lord Mayor. Can he outwit the evil rodent Queen Rat and free the city from her team of revolting rodents?

Front of house manager Emily Malen says: "We create a visual story which we send out in advance to everyone who has bought tickets. The visual story is a free pictorial guide with more detailed notes about the layout of the venue and facilities on offer to help customers prepare for the sights and sounds of the experience."

She adds: "Visiting an unknown space can be daunting. If customers aren't very well-acquainted with the layout of the building prior to their visit they can book a free familiarisation visit. It's amazing how something as simple as this can greatly reduce anxiety and help everyone, including carers, to feel more comfortable

Can Aladdin win her heart? Princess Jasmine in Disney's touring production of the Aladdin musical. See page 32 for details



Free concerts: the LSO at St Lukes

LSO IMAGE BY TOM LOVATT

ESCAPE TO A WHOLE NEW WORLD

Disney Aladdin



RELAXED PERFORMANCES

Wales Millennium Centre, Cardiff - Wednesday 10 January 2024, 6:30pm

Theatre Royal, Plymouth - Thursday 8 February 2024, 6:00pm

Sunderland Empire - Thursday 7 March 2024, 6:30pm

Mayflower Theatre, Southampton - Wednesday 25 September 2024, 2pm

Birmingham Hippodrome - Wednesday 23 October 2024, 1pm

To book tickets and to find out more visit AladdinTheMusical.co.uk

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At the Unicorn Theatre, we offer subsidy to groups to enable them to attend where needed, and make our work with the values of curiosity, respect and courage.

We partner with schools from our local boroughs and community groups from across London to ensure that young people have easy access to our shows.

UPCOMING ACCESSIBLE PERFORMANCES:



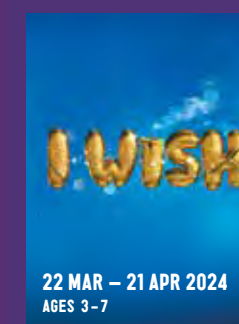
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ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND

RELAXED SHOWS

about their visit to the theatre."

Relaxed performance:

Wednesday 3 January 2024 at 2.30pm. All tickets £16.50.

● www.trch.co.uk

Touring the UK

Aladdin

Disney's spectacular West End musical, Aladdin, is touring the UK and Ireland until January 2025.

Aladdin the musical follows the adventurous title character as he embarks on a journey to win the heart of Princess Jasmine and defeat the wicked Jafar. With the help of his genie, Aladdin navigates the streets of Agrabah and discovers that there's more to life than material wealth.

This exuberant production is filled with magic, comedy and breath-taking spectacle. It lasts approximately 2 hours and 30 minutes, including an interval. It's recommended for children aged six and above.

Tickets for relaxed performances will be priced between £20-£45.

Relaxed performances:

Cardiff (Donald Gordon Theatre): Wednesday 10 January 2024 at 6:30pm.

● <https://tickets.wmc.org.uk/en/syos/performance/108656>

Plymouth (Theatre Royal): Thursday 8 February 2024 at 6:00pm.

● <https://my.theatreroyal.com/336573/336575>

Sunderland Empire: Thursday 7 March 2024 at 6:30pm.

● www.atgtickets.com/shows/disneys-aladdin-relaxed-performance/sunderland-empire/tickets/1CC380E3-27B4-4BE0-BDE0-193A5DFCEC83

Southampton (Mayflower Theatre): Wednesday 25 September 2024 at 2pm:

● www.mayflower.org.uk/whats-on/disneys-aladdin-relaxed-performance-2024/

Tortoise & the Hare

This is a heart-warming re-imagining by Northern Ballet of Aesop's much-loved fable of Tortoise, who, tired of being teased for his slowness, challenges speedy Hare to a race.

It's a ballet for children aged three and above and their families that runs for only about 40 minutes. It is designed as a way for young



audiences to experience live dance, music and theatre together at an affordable price.

The production will open in London at the Royal Opera House's Linbury Theatre from 27 – 29 January 2024. Between 12 February and 26 May, it will embark on an extensive UK tour, travelling to **Leeds, Buxton, Aylesbury, Stoke, Goole, Barrow, Huddersfield, Crewe, Corby, Oxford, York, Durham, Harrogate, Newcastle, Doncaster, Hartlepool, Hull, Barnsley, Mansfield, Middlesbrough, Bridlington, Bradford, Berwick** and, finally, **Edinburgh**.

Many of the venues will include a relaxed performance.

● For more information, on-sale dates and details of how to book, visit <https://northernballet.com/tortoise-and-the-hare>

Queen Elizabeth Hall, Southbank Centre, London The House with Chicken Legs

Based on a popular novel by Sophie Anderson, this story comes to life with puppets, live music and magic. Suitable for ages 9+.

Relaxed performances:

16 December at 2.30pm, 27 December at 7pm. Tickets are from £20.

● www.southbankcentre.co.uk/whats-on/performance-dance/house-chicken-legs

Tron Theatre, Glasgow

Aganeza Scrooge

A spin on the classic Charles Dickens tale. This family show aims to have you singing and dancing in the aisles.

Relaxed performances:

19 December at 1pm and 7pm.

Tickets from £17.50

● www.tron.co.uk/shows/aganeza-scrooge/

Unicorn Theatre, London

The Wolf, the Duck and the Mouse

The Unicorn's new artistic director, Rachel Bagshaw, directs this deliciously dark and hilarious fable that delights in the notion that friendship can sometimes be found in the darkest and most unusual of places. The performance is aimed at children aged from three to seven and lasts around 50 minutes.

Relaxed performance:

10 December at 2.30pm. Tickets from £20.

● <https://www.unicorntheatre.com/events/the-wolf-the-duck-and-the-mouse>

The Odyssey

Homer's classic story is retold as a musical with a 1960s soul and pop-inspired score. Join Telemachus on an epic adventure through stormy seas and strange lands, filled with mystical creatures, dangerous monsters and enchanting sirens - plus two talking sheep - and find what really makes a true hero.

Let's dance:

Alexandra

Barredo

and Daniel

Jagusz-Holley

in Mercury

Theatre's

Beauty and

the Beast

production

last year. This

year's show is

Sleeping Beauty

- see page 28

BEAUTY AND THE BEAST IMAGE BY MARK SENIOR

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SHANE RICHIE DR RANJ

Dick Whittington

THE PANTIMIME PAVED WITH GOLD

ANNE SMITH EMILY BETH HARRINGTON

SAT 9 DEC 2023 - SUN 14 JAN 2024

RELAXED PERFORMANCE Wed 3 Jan 2:30 PM

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THEATRE ROYAL ROYAL CONCERT HALL

RELAXED SHOWS

Relaxed performance:

19 April 2024 at 11am.

● <https://www.unicorntheatre.com/events/odyssey>

The Three Billy Goats Gruff

Joyful musical for ages three to seven, lasting around 55 minutes.

Relaxed performances:

2 February 2024 at 11am,

6 February 2024 at 11am,

14 February 2024 at 11.30am.

● <https://www.unicorntheatre.com/events/the-three-billy-goats-2024>

White Rock Theatre, Hastings

Cinderella

This production stars panto stalwarts Ben Watson as Buttons and Tim McArthur as Cinderella's Fairy Godmother, alongside a full cast and a junior ensemble.

Relaxed performance:

27 December at 1pm.

● <https://whiterocktheatre.org.uk/Online/tickets-panto-hastings-east-sussex-pantomime>

Wolverhampton Grand Theatre

Snow White

Prepare yourself for a big spectacle from the start. Olympic figure skating champion Robin Cousins joined the creative team for this year's family pantomime and choreographed the opening of the show. As the curtain rises, the audience will be greeted with the sight of dancers ice-skating in a beautiful winter wonderland.

Relaxed performances:

Friday 15 & Saturday 16 December at 11am. Tickets from £16.50 on the Friday and £15 on the Saturday, plus a £4 booking fee.

● <https://www.grandtheatre.co.uk/whats-on/snow-white/#book>

Wycombe Swan Theatre, High Wycombe

Beauty and the Beast

Joe McFadden (surgeon Raf Di Lucca in *Holby City* and *Strictly Come Dancing* winner) and Suzanne Shaw (actress and formerly of hit band Hear'Say) combine with singer and performer La Voix and comedy impressionist Jon Clegg in this family panto, which boasts a set that uses LED screens with animated scenes and mesmerising effects.

Relaxed performance:

29 December at 1pm. Tickets are from £20.

● <https://trafalgartickets.com/wycombe-swan-theatre/en-GB>

More Scottish productions

To see listings of extra relaxed productions in Scotland, visit: <https://www.accessscottishtheatre.com/?termf&datef&access-type%5Brelaxed%5D=relaxed&city-region&venuef&scroll=425>

ADVERTISEMENT FEATURE



Festive fun: *The Box of Delights*. Photo by Manuel Harlan

Shows at the RSC this Christmas

We have plenty of shows to spark the Christmas spirit in even the grumpiest of Scrooges

Our fantastically festive family show *The Box of Delights* plays in our Royal Shakespeare Theatre until 7 January 2024.

After a seemingly chance encounter on a train, orphaned schoolboy Kay Harker finds himself the guardian of a small wooden box with magical powers.

Caught up in a battle between two powerful magicians, Kay fights to save not just the people he loves, but the future of Christmas itself. Suitable for ages 7+.

The Box of Delights Assisted Performances:

- Thursday 14 December 2023, 7.15pm, Royal Shakespeare Theatre – Handheld Captioned
- Friday 15 December 2023, 7.15pm, Royal Shakespeare Theatre – Audio Described
- Thursday 4 January 2024, 1.15pm, Royal Shakespeare Theatre – Captioned
- Friday 5 January 2024, 7.15pm, Royal Shakespeare Theatre – Performance with an Integrated BSL Interpreter with a Post-Show Talk.

In our more intimate Swan Theatre, we have our alternative festive offering, *The Fair Maid of the West*. Thomas Heywood's Elizabethan romp featured in the Swan Theatre's opening season in 1986. Now it is redefined by Isobel McArthur in this celebratory, music-filled comedy adaptation for 2023.

The Fair Maid of the West Assisted Performances:

- Friday 29 December 2023, 7.30pm, Swan Theatre – Audio Described, Captioned, Chilled Performance
- Saturday 30 December 2023, 1.30pm,

- Swan Theatre – Handheld Captioned
- Saturday 6 January 2024, 1.30pm, Swan Theatre – Audio Described, Captioned, Chilled Performance
- Saturday 13 January 2024, 1.30pm, Swan Theatre – Performance with an Integrated BSL Interpreter.

In the new year, delve into the drama behind the music with our new show, *Ben and Imo*, written by Mark Ravenhill and directed by Erica Whyman. It focuses on the turbulent partnership of composers Benjamin Britten and Imogen Holst and the creation of the opera *Gloriana*.

Ben and Imo Assisted Performances:

- Saturday 16 March 2024, 1.30pm, Swan Theatre – Captioned
- Wednesday 20 March 2024, 7.30pm, Swan Theatre – Handheld Captioned
- Saturday 23 March 2024, 1.30pm, Swan Theatre – Audio Described, Chilled Performances, Handheld Captioned
- Wednesday 27 March 2024, 7.30pm, Swan Theatre – Audio Described, Captioned, Chilled Performance
- Saturday 6 April 2024, 1.30pm, Swan Theatre – Performance with an Integrated BSL Interpreter

In the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, let Shakespeare's captivating comedy *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

transport you from deepest midwinter to the most magical of midsummer nights.

Director Eleanor Rhode returns to the RSC with a *Dream* that is both epic and intimate, and completely full of wonder. The production features *Horrible Histories* and *Ghosts* favourite Mathew Baynton as Bottom.

A Midsummer Night's Dream Assisted Performances:

- Friday 23 February 2024, 7.15pm, Royal Shakespeare Theatre – Captioned
- Saturday 9 March 2024, 1.15pm, Royal Shakespeare Theatre – Captioned, Chilled Performance
- Saturday 21 March, 2024, 7.15pm, Royal Shakespeare Theatre – Handheld Captioned
- Thursday 28 March 2024, 1.15pm, Royal Shakespeare Theatre – Chilled Performance
- Saturday 30 March 2024, 1.15pm, Royal Shakespeare Theatre – Handheld Captioned

All performances of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* from Wednesday 14 February onwards will have Creative Audio Description.

This means audiences can access an additional soundscape through headsets delivered live by the ensemble.

This is primarily designed with those who may benefit from audio description in mind; however, we also want to encourage sighted audiences to experience the production in this way.

We have 50 headsets available and will have multiple on-stage touch tours throughout the run

Join us this festive season and embrace the magic of live theatre.



For a full list of Assisted Performances across all productions in Stratford-upon-Avon until March 2024, please use this link:

- <https://www.rsc.org.uk/your-visit/access/assisted-performances>



MUSIC

from the London Symphony Orchestra

RELAXED CONCERTS

Friday 23 February & 7 June 2024

12.30–1.15pm, LSO St Luke's

Free informal concerts, particularly suitable for individuals or groups who feel more comfortable in a relaxed environment. Everyone over 5 is welcome, including people who have sensory and communication impairments, or who are neurodivergent.

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CAP	Sat 13 Jan 2pm	Captioned
AD	Sat 13 Jan 7pm	Audio Described, Touch Tour

Life lessons

PSHE stands for personal, social, health and economic education. Nearly all of it became statutory in the UK in September 2020 under the Children and Social Work Act. Fiona McNeill goes in search of schools that have made the subject a successful part of autistic children's education, turning it into an entirely positive experience for them

Adolescence is a tricky time for most youngsters, but if you're autistic there are extra barriers to acquiring life-skills and understanding relationships. The PSHE – personal, social, health and economic – curriculum in schools aims to cover these topics, but how do educators give autistic kids that extra 'push' to help them navigate adult life?

Lynn McCann is an autism specialist teacher with Reachout ASC, a consultancy that supports schools and employers in working with neurodiverse people. The organisation also works with young people themselves, running workshops on sex, relationships and internet safety.

McCann says that autistic kids are under immense pressure to 'fit in', but at the same time they're

vulnerable to mistreatment from other people. Despite these challenges, she has found teaching them PSHE to be a "joy".

She says: "They're so willing to be open and honest and laugh. Gender identity is a really big thing in the autistic community. The way they question society's expectations of masculinity and femininity is so interesting."

Parents can help children on the autism spectrum to learn about adult life, she suggests, by mentioning topics without making them a 'big deal'. "You might say, for example, 'have you heard of 'sexting'? and start a conversation," she suggests. "Listen to what they say. Keep drip-feeding."

Helen Pechey is deputy headteacher at Inscape House, a school in Stockport for young

Plenty to think about: a TCES Group student learns PSHE, above left. Above right: Jo Aiyathurai (left) of Learn and Thrive with Bethan, a young person taking part in a boat race that focused on inclusion

people aged 5 to 19 from opposite ends of the autism spectrum. Because the students have such different needs and abilities, she explains, they need highly individualised support for PSHE.

"We work hard to develop trusting relationships with the children and find out exactly where they need help," she says.

"One child might need to learn about developing friendships, for example, while another might need to think about e-safety and the information they pick up from TikTok."

Given that all autistic youngsters struggle to understand social situations, Helen adds, staff also spend a lot of time commenting on what the pupils are doing in all situations as a way of explaining how life 'works'. They may, for example, say, "that was helpful to share your pencils with your classmates".

She adds: "It's also important to use practical examples. If you're teaching road safety, for instance, there's only so much you can learn in a classroom. You need to take the students out so they can practise crossing a road."

Learn and Thrive is a charity that offers free video teaching resources on a number of subjects for young people with Down's syndrome and moderate learning

disabilities. Many of the students the organisation helps are also on the autism spectrum.

Chief executive Jo Aiyathurai, herself the mum of a daughter with Down's, explains: "There aren't many resources out there for our young people that are age-appropriate but also take the child's difficulties into account. People with Down's – like those with autism – often take language literally and don't get inference, which is used a lot in PSHE subjects."

"We have to spell it out for our students," she continues. "Our 'Learning for Life' videos cover topics such as the difference between public and private places, privacy, and when it's appropriate to touch another person. We've also recently developed a series on friendships, looking at what a friend is and how to identify and

end an unhealthy friendship."

If an autistic child is non-verbal or having trouble expressing their emotions, symbols may help.

"Symbols are a powerful tool for PSHE teaching," says Sally Wells, an education consultant for Widgeit. "Sometimes children find it difficult to express their emotions. A visual representation of a feeling acts as a stepping stone to identifying how they feel. A child who can point to a symbol of a sad or confused face can express themselves clearly even if they can't say it out loud."

Holistic approach

The TCES Group is a social enterprise, providing schools and services to neurodiverse youngsters aged 7 – 19. Elizabeth Lickiss, head of Post-16 Services, maintains that PSHE learning is probably the most important aspect of education for autistic students.

"Of course, we want them to get English and maths qualifications, but unless they have good life skills and can cope with the outside world, GCSEs aren't going to be much use," she says. "We take a holistic approach. Although we run designated PSHE lessons, this learning is embedded right across the curriculum, even in enrichment activities where students might learn about, say, turn-taking and decision-making through board

“Unless they have good life skills and can cope with the outside world, GCSEs aren't going to be much use”

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From the TCES Group of special schools.



games." She adds: "We also offer a leadership programme, mentoring and therapeutic support, all tailored to each person's learning style. This approach means that the difference between when they start with us and when they leave is often quite remarkable."

Sunshine Support is a consultancy offering advice and support to parents and professionals working with youngsters with special needs. This includes training for school staff, online and in-person peer-to-peer support, and advocacy for families negotiating the Education, Health and Care plan process.

When it comes to helping young people acquire the life-skills that form the basis of the PSHE curriculum, the organisation offers a range of blog posts and webinars – some free and some available via subscription – on a wide range of topics such as mental health and how it's affected by social media, being a teenager with ADHD, and becoming a parent when you have

“
The way they question society's expectations of masculinity and femininity is so interesting”

ASD. Some are aimed at the young people themselves.

"We often ask experts, such as speech and language therapists, to deliver webinars on specialist themes," says Gabby Gregory, a former primary teacher and SENCO. "Each webinar is around two hours long and we're adding new topics all the time."

Although not aimed only at neurodiverse children, the innovative website Friendometry addresses some of the social difficulties that can arise for autistic

youngsters. Devised by clinical psychologist Dr Dan Kriz, Friendometry allows parents to locate and contact potential friends for their child in their area. Because children are not allowed on the site, it is safe.

"Children on the autism spectrum have some challenges that make it more difficult to make and sustain friendships," Dan says. "If a child with autism has just one friend, it can be considered a protective factor against peer-rejection and bullying."

"Friendometry is only one idea. We always recommend finding other ways to find friends such as local ASD groups, church, extracurricular activities or games stores. I encourage parents to be proactive in finding friends for their children if they are having difficulty doing it on their own and to start early in childhood. We have had numerous children with autism find friends through our site and, as a result, they feel more accepted and experience more joy."

Somantic experience and the value of decompression

Part of the PHSE offer should be helping autistic students understand the 'mind-body connection' to help them deal with stressful situations, says Elaine Nicolson MBE, who specialises in body psychotherapy

Having observed the learning outcomes of the Planning Framework for Pupils with SEND and which come under the headings of **encountering, foundation, core, development, enrichment and enhancement**, I have noticed an area that is ripe for inclusion in PHSE education, but which is not specifically referenced, and this is **somatic experience**. It's how to notice what is happening in the body and what to do about that which you are noticing.

Noticing what the body has to say

There may be some teachers who are already highlighting somatic

experience – **the mind-body connection** – in PHSE, though I should imagine that the percentage of those doing so is low to non-existent: after all, education is all about top-down (head) processing. By teaching bottom-up (feet-upwards) body awareness, the educator is giving the SEN child another voice – **the voice of the body** – and this is useful, especially for autistic children, whose core condition means they experience a qualitative impairment in social communication.

Our bodies speak to us all the time, whether you are old or young. Remember when, as a child, the tummy ache you felt when your



Elaine Nicolson MBE is the founder/CEO/counsellor of Action for Neurodiversity (formerly Action for Asperger's) and is a trainee body psychotherapist with Cambridge Body Psychotherapy Centre. www.actionforaspergers.org

least favourite subject was being taught in school? Or being gently coerced to visit that grown-up relative with whom you had nothing in common? That was your body saying, "I'm anxious... upset.... unhappy". No words were needed to express those difficult emotions. Your body just knew.

The autonomic nervous system

Some of the ways in which the body's autonomic nervous system might react in emotionally charged situations are:

Muscles: slack, tense, rigid (deer in the headlights), flaccid.

Respiration: shallow, fast (upper

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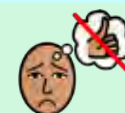
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Emotions Word Cards



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chest), hyperventilation, hypo-ventilation.

Pupils (eyes and lids): heavy lids with smaller pupils, dry eyes with tense lids and pupil dilation.

Skin tone: variable, pale hue regardless of skin colour, flushing.

Digestion: variable, constipation, changed frequency of bladder and/or bowel evacuation.

Skeletal: tense jawline, aching joints, rounded shoulders, hunched posture.

Hands/feet: overly cold or clammy.

Red flags

Getting a SEN child to notice what happens to their body when they are feeling strong emotions and to then use those somatic markers as red flags is important. Noticing those red flags allows an opportunity to use decompression techniques that aid emotional self-regulation.

If a child knows, for instance, that their hands go clammy and their tummy aches when they are upset – **and this is what always happens to them during such times** – then this is their forewarning to exit the situation they are in and to find a place to decompress without delay.

Methods of self-expression:

Widget symbols can help autistic children who are having trouble identifying or communicating their emotions, above left. Above right: a student copies a teacher as part of a PSHE lesson at the TCES Group

Decompression prevents the escalation of symptoms that have the potential to lead to full-blown fight/flight/freeze/appease behaviours, otherwise known as “meltdown”.

An educator should be asking the child whom they suspect is distressed by whatever means – “what are you noticing in your body?” If the SEN child cannot answer the question, then having an educator who can read a child’s body language will be helpful. For example, does the child look frozen body-wise? Is the child staring aimlessly? Does the child have a straight back? Do they appear too still?

If the answer to these questions

is “yes”, then the child’s upset is likely rising, and they are on track for an eventual meltdown.

How can you, as an educator, help stem the tide of meltdown? The answer is simple: gently remove the child from the situation they are in and refer them to a calming space, wherever that space may be, to allow for decompression to happen.

What counts as decompression?

For a child, decompression can be any activity, from having a ten-minute breather outside a classroom to a walk around the sports field, a brief interlude on a short computer game, or a breathing technique. A good app to use for decompression is “AFA Grounding”, which I developed to aid decompression for all. This free app gives helpful physical, mental, and soothing grounding techniques for all ages.

Decompression as prevention

As a seasoned counsellor working in the field of SEN, and as a trainee body psychotherapist, I can confidently state that the children/



If a child with autism has just one friend, it can be a protective factor against peer rejection”

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teenagers with the most buoyant emotional health are those who have a meltdown the least often. Meltdown after meltdown isn't good for any child and can potentially lead to post-traumatic disorder or other psychiatric disorders, and, in some cases, poor physical health affecting various bodily systems - musculoskeletal, respiratory, cardiovascular, endocrine, and gastro-intestinal.

This could all be avoided if we have insight into our bodies and take action to prevent escalation by taking the need for regular decompression seriously.

Noticing our bodies and allowing for decompression while experiencing the rigours of everyday life – **particularly when in an emotionally heightened state** – is such a simple formula for living a good life.

Sadly, however, many of us are oblivious to this fact.

LINKS:

- Inscape House: www.togethertrust.org.uk
- Friendometry: www.friendometry.com
- Learn and Thrive: www.learnandthrive.org.uk
- Reachout ASC: www.reachoutasc.com
- Sunshine Support: www.sunshine-support.org
- TCES group: www.tces.org.uk

Further reading

Resources on sex and relationships:

- www.mencap.org.uk/about-us/what-we-think/relationships-and-sex-what-we-think
- www.rsehub.org.uk/resources/puberty-sexuality-for-children-young-people-with-a-disability/

Internet safety guides:

- www.childnet.com/resources
- www.childnet.com/resources/star-toolkit
- www.nspcc.org.uk/keeping-children-safe/online-safety/online-safety-families-children-with-send/
- www.kelsi.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0011/74576/Online-Safety-for-SEND.pdf
- www.internetmatters.org/inclusive-digital-safety/advice-for-parents-and-carers/supporting-children-with-send/

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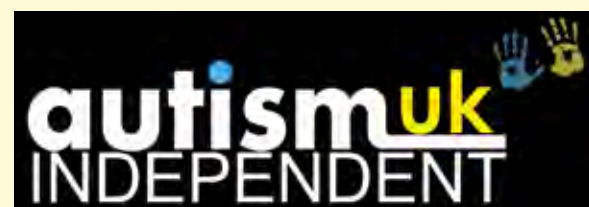
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Why SEND teaching in mainstream schools needs an overhaul



**By Rebecca Bromley-Woods,
new principal of Pinc College
for neurodivergent students**

Britain's education system is failing far too many young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), including autism.

Lack of support and meaningful opportunities mean they leave school with limited achievements and are over-represented in school exclusions and the criminal justice system. Unemployment rates for neurodivergent adults are estimated to run as high as 40 per cent¹ – eight times the rate for people without disabilities.

As the leader of a specialist art college for neurodivergent young people, I see every day the amazing things they can achieve – from gaining A levels to starting promising careers in museums. But, with government finances limited and many students not meeting the SEND-support threshold, establishments like ours can only help a fraction of those in need. The solution is for radical changes in the way students on the autism spectrum and other SEND students are taught and treated in mainstream schools.

Make SEND a far more important part of teacher training and development

The Department for Education should make high-quality, inclusive teaching of neurodivergent pupils something every prospective teacher focuses on, rather than reducing it to a separate or even optional part of training. Schools and colleges must use their influence to make sure this happens.

One cannot underestimate the importance of qualified, well-trained, trauma-informed practitioners, educational leaders, SENCOs, learning support and

All about art: Pinc College is unable to accommodate many autistic students, so radical change is needed to cater for more in mainstream schools, argues Rebecca Bromley-Woods

specialist teachers. So often, students are offered substandard environments and varying degrees of 'expertise'. Professionals who are up to date with developments are essential, as is growing the numbers of teachers with long-term SEND experience and insights.

The Government's *SEND and alternative provision improvement plan*² proposes to advance the knowledge levels of school SENDCOs (special educational needs and disabilities co-ordinators). It sounds like a great move until you realise there is already a SENDCO recruitment crisis.

Embed SEND strategies into daily practice

Schools and colleges must incorporate SEND support and teaching strategies into everything relevant that they do, including staff appraisals.

This can be easier than many school leaders realise. Using visual aids, such as timetables and work planners, reduces reliance on the spoken word and may be very engaging for autistic students. But they can be hugely beneficial to all pupils. So can using draw-and-talk techniques that help students visualise what is being asked of them and act as memory prompts while they work.

**“
Schools should move
towards a policy of
avoiding exclusions
or any off-rolling
of SEND pupils”**

Teachers and classroom-support teams should be making better use of diagrams, charts, word-to-text, text-to-word, and AI, such as Chat GPT. Far from being tools that may be considered cheating or shortcuts, these kinds of visual and kinaesthetic resources activate the right and left hemispheres of the brain, promoting imagination, attention, patience and recall in SEND and other students.

Enhancing their awareness of the way they communicate and the way information is received can help teachers make themselves better understood by everybody. The 'Pace and Pause' technique, for instance, aims to streamline information by removing unnecessary dialogue, keeping vocabulary clear and allowing the receiver time to process facts before moving on.

All young people will benefit from a classroom where the lights and temperatures are controlled, and where pupils with ADHD are encouraged to move around and take regular movement breaks rather than be disruptive.

One neurodivergent pupil might benefit from bite-sized learning. Another may hyperfocus and need to spend time on understanding the details. Teachers are under pressure to deliver an inflexible curriculum to 30 pupils or more. They must be given the time and freedom to be more flexible.

Standard classroom good practices, such as structure, routine, firm boundaries, rewards and consequences may be good for many SEND students. But they may trigger negative behaviour in an autistic pupil with pathological demand avoidance, for instance. Teachers need to be able to personalise their approach.

The mainstream system focuses on attendance and exam results in academic subjects. Art, design and other creative subjects are squeezed out. But for many students on the autism spectrum, they are a lifeline. Being creative creates optimal brain health and can increase positive thoughts and reduce stress. As we see at Pinc, it can lead to students creating brilliant paintings or models,



Focused: a student at work at Pinc College

“Ofsted inspectors are too often recruited because they have been leaders of schools that rank well”

achieving qualifications and beginning careers in cultural organisations they never thought possible. Policymakers must stop the slow death of art in schools.

Zero exclusions of SEND pupils

Schools should move towards a policy of avoiding exclusions or any off-rolling of SEND pupils, if at all possible.

Rules are important to maintain discipline in schools. However, teachers should explain the reasoning behind them clearly to students. This will empower neurodiverse students. Schools must avoid punishments for SEND students who perhaps lack organisational skills, forget their stationery or develop extreme anxiety around timekeeping. These may be minor infractions in themselves, but can accumulate into major behavioural issues.

Schools should take a more constructive approach to positive behaviour assistance. Teaching and support teams would benefit from training in trauma-informed practice. They must create safe spaces to allow students to self-regulate among trusted adults. At Pinc College, we seek to

understand the cause of negative behaviour and use the student's support needs and personal interests to reset their mindset. We have never excluded anyone.

A new approach from regulators

At present, Ofsted inspectors are too often recruited because they have been leaders of schools that rank well in league tables. Their measures of success are more likely to be around attendance and high-grade achievement targets, rather than a more inclusive approach to learning. There needs to be better recognition that achievement comes in many forms and, often, in small steps. All Ofsted inspectors and other regulators should have experience or training in inclusive learning.

Government ministers must move away from thinking of the education system as a business model and largely judging success through outdated exam models and a narrowing curriculum.

If our education adopts these measures, we are likely to see a huge improvement in the school and life outcomes of many ASD/ASC and other SEND young people. I've seen them thrive at Pinc, and they can thrive in mainstream education, too. They bring a wealth of talents, perspectives and strengths that can greatly enrich our society.

But urgent action is needed if we are not to waste the potential of tens of thousands of young lives. 🧡

REFERENCES

¹ <https://mydisabilityjobs.com/statistics/neurodiversity-in-the-workplace/>

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/send-and-alternative-provision-improvement-plan>



Rebecca Bromley-Woods became the new principal this September of Pinc College, the UK's only specialist college for creative learning for neurodivergent students, including those with autism and ADHD. It operates across the North West, Midlands and Yorkshire. <https://pinccollege.co.uk/>



Dr Lisa Guy



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Then, parents can add pedals when children are ready for them, as with the girl's bike, above.

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- <https://kidvelobikes.co.uk>



Calming cocoon

This Sensory Pod attracted a lot of attention when it was exhibited at this year's Autism Show. It's typically used in special needs schools, as well as places such as libraries and hospitals that want to create an autism-friendly environment.

The Pod provides a cocooned haven for children or adults who are stressed or anxious, helping to prevent sensory overload. The manufacturer, Murrays, says principals, teachers and students have all reported on the benefits of having a calming focal point for those in need of withdrawing.

Teachers can carry on working with students who are in the Pod. They can use its 32-inch monitor to mirror educational software from their phone or computer, thereby providing better intensity by removing distracting stimuli.

Murrays says: "Parents and schools report improved attendance and students are less likely to self-absent, as coping skills increase with the Pod."

The company adds: "It encourages personal sensory regulation and independence. Students absent themselves from class when they feel the need. This works well for the child and the classroom, as the negative stigma of disruption for other students is reduced." Users can easily change the colour of the mood light in the ceiling. The Pod also includes in-built Bluetooth speakers. There are no software subscriptions or annual charges.

- **From £8,000 plus VAT.**
- <https://murraysmedical.co.uk/product-range/sensory-pod/>

Hypnotic help

Mesmerising motion inside these Sensory Fidget Tubes offers children a soothing visual distraction to help them focus and calm down. These fidget toys have been specially developed for kids, are easy for little hands to grip, and the child-friendly tubes are permanently sealed. They're said to be so hypnotic that adults will love them, too.

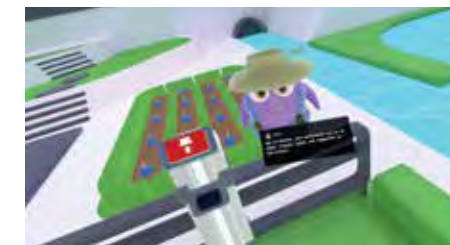
- **£32.50 inc. VAT.**
- www.learningresources.co.uk/



Go intergalactic at home

BLINKK and the Vacuum of Space is a ground-breaking intergalactic adventure designed with assistance from autistic individuals to help players on the autism spectrum relax and enjoy the immersive escape of virtual reality.

The virtual world features charming characters and engaging gameplay, all designed to be enjoyable and stress-free.



The game includes a no-fail state. Users can explore the virtual world at their own pace, without the fear of failure, to promote a sense of accomplishment and reduce anxiety. It's also possible for players to adjust the colour, sound and other elements to suit their sensitivities.

Users can take a break when they wish. They hit a smart watch and are taken to The Fold, a tranquil area where

Chocolate that does good

Harry Specters is a social enterprise in Cambridgeshire, set up by the mother of a now-adult autistic son that employs people on the autism spectrum.

Out of every £1 spent on the company's chocolate, 69p is said to go directly back into the business to offer free work experience for autistic students, as well as paid employment for autistic adults.

These Christmas Chocopops are gluten free and made without artificial colours, flavours or preservatives. They come in milk and dark varieties, as shown here, and in white chocolate as well.

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- **Dark - www.harryschocs.co.uk/products/christmas-chocopops-dark-pack-of-3**
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Box of delight

This red box is a Toniebox Starter Set. Toniebox is an interactive audio system that reads stories, sounds and music aloud. Simply turn the box on, pop a Tonie on top, and let the audio adventure begin.

Each Toniebox comes with a Creative-Tonie figure that can hold 90 minutes of audio content.

It could be ideal for anyone with a love of adventure, reading and stories. It engages auditory senses and communication skills.

- **£105.06 inc. VAT**
- www.rhinouk.com/product/toniebox-starter-set/



they can relax until they're ready to return to the action.

The game has now been released on PlayStation VR2 and is available to play on other headsets as well. Our picture on the far left shows a player using the game at this year's Autism Show, while the other images are from the game.

- **£7.99, inc. VAT (game only)**
- <https://linktr.ee/changingdayvr>



RESOURCES

Go with the glow

This Baby Voyager is a compact version of Rhino's portable Sensory Voyager. It's said to be ideal for creating a sensory environment at home. It includes a Budget Hurricane Tube, 100 Fibre Optic Tails and a Bluetooth-compatible radio.

- £2,041.20 inc. VAT
- www.rhinouk.com/product/baby-voyager/

Bottled-up emotions

These sensory bottles are intended to help children express and understand emotions. Whether happy or sad, scared or angry, they can use the bottles to practise self-awareness, self-management, and social awareness.

Each bottle features an expression and is filled with liquid and material to create a

flowing action that represents the emotion. Happy includes gold glitter, sad has a slow-motion lava lamp-like effect, angry is red, and scared is green. Move the bottles around and watch the mesmerising motion of the liquid and colour inside.

Each child-safe bottle is permanently sealed.



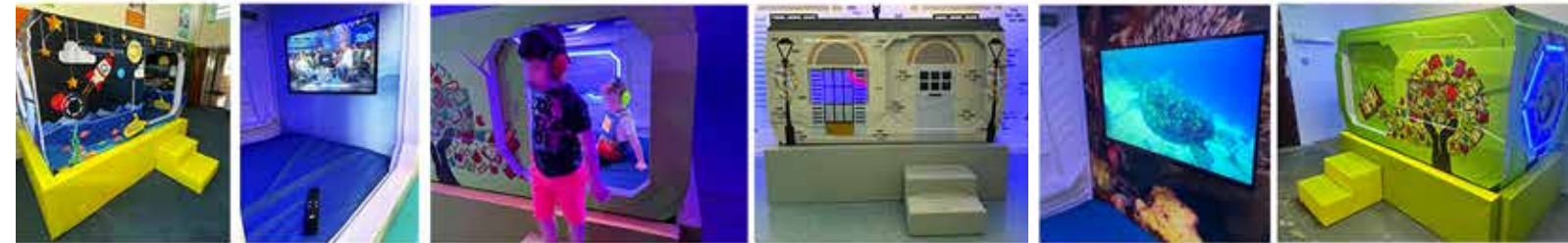
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St. John's College is part of Ambitious about Autism, the national charity standing with autistic children and young people. Registered charity: 1063184 Registered company: 03375255.

Brain invaders

Gregory Burford was suffering hallucinations because of a little-known brain-inflammation condition called PANS, which can be mistaken for autism, before doctors cured him. Now, health minister Maria Caulfield has said the UK Government could fund research into PANS and the similar disorder of PANDAS after acknowledging that the conditions exist. Darren Devine reports



“Incredibly thankful”:
Gregory Burford, who recovered from PANS after treatment with antibiotics

Gregory Burford is now a 20-year-old student studying music at Cambridge University, but his life came within a hair's breadth of taking a very different course.

In 2016, he was diagnosed with autism after falling ill with a nose and ear infection while on holiday. He regressed heavily into autism and was also diagnosed with Lyme disease. During his darkest days, he struggled with hallucinations and voices that prodded him to launch horrifically violent attacks on his own family.

Gregory, from Leamington Spa, says he was haunted

“perpetually” by a hallucination, whereby he would see another version of himself he named Nico. It was this figment of his disturbed mind that followed him “every waking moment” and would tell him to attack his family.

He says of that time: “If I was eating with my family, using a knife and fork – I’m just eating – he’d sort of be there and be telling me to stab my mum with a knife that I was eating with. It was quite graphic. I could only really ignore it a certain amount.”

Two years later doctors diagnosed Gregory with PANS (paediatric acute-onset neuropsychiatric

syndrome). Thankfully, he recovered from the hallucinations after treatment with antibiotics. His autism symptoms also diminished.

PANS and PANDAS (paediatric

“
He’d sort of be
there and be telling
me to stab my mum
with a knife”

autoimmune neuropsychiatric disorders associated with streptococcal infections) are conditions triggered by infections that cause brain inflammation.

PANDAS is a subset of PANS, where an infection of the skin, throat, blood, muscle or fat triggers the misdirected immune response. The two conditions are little known and are often misunderstood, leading to the frequent misdiagnosis of autism. But now, alongside recognising that the conditions exist, health minister Maria Caulfield has indicated the UK Government is open to funding research.

Gregory says he always understood his hallucinations were

Wrongly diagnosed? Those with PANS or PANDAS are frequently given a mistaken diagnosis of autism – but the situation may improve with government-funded research



Liberal Democrat MP Wendy Chamberlain: “With children up and down the country still suffering – and still being refused appropriate treatment – there is still so much more for our leaders to do”

not real, though they did make him “second guess” himself and his “moral compass”. Despite his troubled mind, he was able to reason with himself and ignore Nico’s violent promptings.

Sleep deprivation and pain

As well as the hallucinations, he struggled with sleep deprivation and pain. He dropped out of school for a year and, at one stage, medics discussed whether he should be sectioned. He believes he may have ended up killing himself if he had remained trapped in a cycle of sleeplessness and terrifying hallucinations.

“If I had been sectioned it would have been the rest of my life dealing with this condition and I’m not sure that in that state, being that much in pain, sleep deprived, consistently distressed – I’m not sure that I would have seen that as being any better than death,” he says. He says he feels “incredibly thankful” for his recovery.

Charity PANS PANDAS UK has said growing numbers of parents are discovering links to illnesses when they reflect on the history of their child’s autism. The children can then be re-diagnosed with PANS or PANDAS.

Caulfield told the House of Commons in September that “we have the evidence to sufficiently demonstrate that PANS and PANDAS are discrete disease





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RESEARCH



Health Minister Maria Caulfield: “We have the evidence to sufficiently demonstrate that PANS and PANDAS are discrete disease entities”

entities”. But she added that “we do not have the evidence and research base on assessment, diagnosis, treatment and management”.

Gregory’s mother Vicky, who chairs PANS PANDAS UK, believes the Government’s recognition of the conditions and willingness to consider funding research is “huge”. She says her charity is now working with the medical royal colleges on PANS and PANDAS, so services for “thousands of children” going without the help they need are improved.

Wendy Chamberlain, who serves on the all-party parliamentary group on PANS PANDAS, says Caulfield’s announcement is an important step forward. But the Liberal Democrat MP for North East Fife adds that “with children up and down the country still suffering – and still being refused appropriate treatment – there is still so much more for our leaders to do.”

Chamberlain wants the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) and Healthcare Improvement Scotland to produce guidance on

PANS and PANDAS. She thinks it should run alongside a public awareness campaign that includes writing to GPs about diagnosis and treatment.

Caulfield says the Department of Health and Social Care works on rare diseases through the National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHCR). The NIHCR spends more than £1 billion every year on research, particularly into rarer conditions. She is encouraging anyone with an interest in raising awareness of PANS and PANDAS to apply for research funding.

Research awards

The NIHCR could provide the funding and guidance and the minister has promised to organise an “introductory meeting”. Applications are subject to peer review and judged in open competition, with awards made based on the importance of the topics to patients, health and care services.

The dearth of research on the conditions means there are no figures detailing their prevalence in the UK, but in the US scientists have suggested up to one in 200 children may be affected.

NHS England is working on a nationwide surveillance study designed to identify the signs and symptoms of PANS and PANDAS so they can be tested against diagnostic criteria. Doctors currently diagnose PANS and PANDAS through observation after taking a detailed history. They first rule out other conditions, such as brain tumours, as the cause.

LINK:

● PANS PANDAS UK: <https://www.panspandasuk.org/>



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Question of perspective

Theory of mind, or perspective taking, is often talked about in relation to autism. Risca Solomon explains what theory of mind is, how important it is to understand it, and how it can be taught



Risca Solomon is a Board Certified Behaviour Analyst at Skybound Therapies, www.skyboundtherapies.co.uk

Theory of mind can be described as the ability to understand that others have thoughts, feelings, intentions and beliefs that are separate from your own. It also means you can understand how someone else may feel in different situations, and how you can understand their perspective.

This ability to 'mind-read' allows the individual to make sense of others' behaviour and to make predictions about what they might do¹. It is considered that typical children have acquired a well-developed theory of mind by around three to four years old.

Children on the autism spectrum have been described as having mind blindness, that is that they lack the theory of mind ability¹. This has been tested most often using false belief tests. One of

these, the Sally Anne test, assesses whether the child can predict what someone else will do.

Research has also suggested that an indicator of a lack of theory of mind could be an early difficulty with joint attention (our *capacity to* share attention with another towards the same object or event). Joint attention is often difficult for autistic children.

The lack of theory of mind can lead some people on the autism spectrum to having poor social skills and appearing rude and unsympathetic, as they cannot infer how people may be feeling and therefore how they should act towards that person. The lack of this ability can mean that an autistic individual also displays some of the following issues, described by Patricia Howlin and her co-authors in their book,

“
Theory of mind is used by neurotypicals all day, so teaching it to autistic people is a priority area”

Teaching Children with Autism to Mind-Read:

- Inability to take into account what other people know
- Inability to understand whether someone is interested in what the autistic person has to say
- Inability to anticipate how their actions may be perceived by other people

Mind-reading: developing the ability to understand others' perspectives can help to make sense of their behaviour and predict their actions

- Inability to understand deception
- Inability to understand unwritten rules
- Inability to understand the reasons behind someone else's actions.

Theory of mind is used by neurotypical people all day, every day, so teaching it to autistic people is a priority area that is the subject of research.

Structured teaching procedures have evolved for autistic individuals to help in this area. The approach developed by Patricia Howlin and her co-authors involves teaching children five stages of theory-of-mind skills:

- 1 How to recognise emotions from photographs

- 2 How to recognise emotions from schematic drawings of faces
- 3 How to identify situation-based emotions
- 4 How to identify desire-based emotions
5. How to identify belief-based emotions

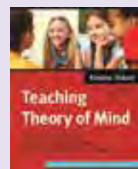
Another systematic approach to developing theory-of-mind skills is contained in the book *Teaching Theory of Mind* by Kirstina Ordetx². As with the Howlin programme, it begins with identifying emotions from photographs, but it then also incorporates teaching these steps:

- How to recognise body language other people may display
- How to recognise cues as to

Further reading



Teaching Children with Autism to Mind-Read by Patricia Howlin, Simon Baron-Cohen and Julie Hadwin. Wiley-Blackwell, £38.95 paperback.



Teaching Theory of Mind: A Curriculum for Children with High Functioning Autism, Asperger's Syndrome, and Related Social Challenges by Kirstina Ordetx. Jessica Kingsley Publishers, £26.99/\$40 paperback.

what a person may be thinking or feeling

- How to use these skills within conversations and social situations

Pamela Croke, of the Social Thinking Center in San Jose, California, and colleagues reviewed some of the research on developing theory-of-mind skills¹. They suggested that skill-based teaching programmes are limited in the way they are generalised to natural situations, and they investigated using Social Thinking as an intervention for teaching perspective-taking skills. They describe this approach as not only teaching the skills needed, but also teaching the individual *why* these social skills are needed.

Social Thinking uses a specific vocabulary to describe perspective-taking skills. It includes breaking perspective-taking skills down into basic components, such as teaching the child what a thought is and then that everyone has thoughts about each other. The specific vocabulary used in these lessons can enable people on the autism spectrum to discuss the abstract concepts that together constitute theory of mind.

LINK:

¹ Pamela J Croke, Ryan E Hendrix, Janine Y Rachman (2008): 'Brief report: Measuring the effectiveness of teaching social thinking to children with Asperger syndrome (AS) and high functioning autism (HFA).' *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 38(3), 581-91. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/18026829/#:~:text=Results%20indicated%20significant%20changes%20from,%22unexpected%2Dverbal%22%20and%20%22>

From despair to hope

Stella Chadwick tells the remarkable story of Mark, a young man who came to her clinic suffering from complex health challenges, making life for him and those around him untenable. His journey is a tumultuous one that has turned from despair to hope for a much more positive future



Stella Chadwick is the founder of Brainstorm Health® and an experienced nutritional and biomedical consultant who specialises in working with adults and young children on the autism spectrum. www.brainstormhealth.co.uk

Mark, who is now aged 19, began life with a series of health challenges that would shape his future. He endured persistent ear infections during his early years, leading to multiple rounds of antibiotics. He also endured gastrointestinal symptoms throughout babyhood. These early health issues set the stage for a life filled with obstacles.

By the tender age of four, he confronted cognitive impairments, severe digestive distress and recurrent illnesses. However, the most pivotal chapter in Mark's health narrative followed a family trip to Goa when he was three to four years old. This journey triggered a staggering regression in Mark, resulting in the loss of his language skills and ushering in profound health and behavioural challenges. He received an autism diagnosis shortly afterwards.

Aftermath of divorce

Another remarkable decline in Mark's health transpired in the aftermath of his parents' divorce. The once sweet-natured young man began to exhibit behaviours that were bewildering and often alarming. He would engage in violent outbursts, targeting escorts who assisted him on his way to school. The escorts were faced with the difficulty of understanding and managing his sudden violent tendencies, which included kicking, hitting, grabbing, and pulling hair.

Mark's home life was marked by agitation, requiring extended evening drives and long walks in the park to calm him. He engaged in tactile sensory activities for most of his waking hours. During the night, sleep remained elusive and

he had frequent episodes of shrieking that persisted into the early hours.

His behaviour extended to public spaces, particularly on buses and trains. He would reach out to grab people, especially those with intriguing hair or clothes, causing distress and discomfort to fellow commuters.

The situation became so severe that public transport became nearly impossible for his family, who had to be cautious when around people who might not understand the risks.

Mark's gastrointestinal discomfort was evident. He would often pat his stomach and make distressed sounds. Vomiting episodes became a frequent occurrence, leading to significant weight loss. In addition to his behavioural challenges, his bowel movements became irregular, with occasional episodes of diarrhoea and constipation.

Mum's relentless advocacy

Despite the challenging circumstances, Mark's mother was a relentless advocate for her son. She recognised the importance of not just addressing the immediate symptoms, but also understanding the underlying causes of his health challenges.

Her journey involved consulting healthcare professionals, conducting tests, and seeking solutions to provide Mark with the care he needed. Mark was assessed by a medical team who wanted to start him on a proton pump inhibitor. This was something that had been tried previously without success, so the family decided to look elsewhere for solutions.

Over the years, mum had tried many different diets and supplements, and had consulted many professionals. Mark has been on some form of an anti-inflammatory diet almost all his life. Not long ago, through the NHS, he was placed on the FODMAP diet. It did little to help his symptoms and, in fact, mum said she felt the diet had exacerbated his symptoms.

The turning point

Mark's family turned to Brainstorm Health for help, seeking holistic solutions that would delve into the root causes of his health issues.

“

By the age of four, he had cognitive impairments, severe digestive distress and illnesses”

Our approach began with a comprehensive analysis of his health history, family background, medications, supplements, diet, sleep patterns, exercise habits and lifestyle. The goal was to uncover the complexities of his health and understand the triggers of his distressing symptoms.

Complex health challenges

In-depth lab tests were conducted, analysing stool, urine and hair samples to gain insights into Mark's gut health, nutrient status, toxicity levels and hormone balance. The results revealed a

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Sleepless:
 Mark suffered from sleep being elusive, accompanied by frequent bouts of shrieking that would last until the early hours

“
 Mark's journey is a testament to the potential for hope and transformation”

complex web of health challenges. Mark exhibited low pancreatic enzymes, insufficient beneficial bacteria, and indicators of small intestinal bacterial overgrowth, candida, and raised oxalates.

His body showed a high demand for antioxidants, B vitamins, minerals and digestive enzymes. Raised KPU (kryptopyrroluria) levels pointed to deficiencies in B6 and zinc, significantly affecting serotonin recycling. Furthermore, elevated levels of toxic metals such as

arsenic, lead, tin and mercury were discovered, alongside ratio imbalances indicating suboptimal thyroid function. Mark also demonstrated significantly raised stool histamine levels and deficiencies in lithium, copper, chromium, selenium and iron.

Personalised plan

Armed with a deeper understanding of Mark's health challenges, we crafted a personalised plan to address his unique needs. We implemented dietary modifications, with our 30-Day Body Reset plan eliminating inflammatory and high-histamine foods. This was complemented by detoxification support, including Epsom salt baths. Targeted supplements were introduced to address a range of health aspects, from digestion to liver function and gut health.

Transformation

Mark's journey towards well-being was marked by a series of

noteworthy changes:

- In just one week, there was a substantial reduction in vomiting episodes and self-injurious behaviours.
- By the fourth week, the frequency of screaming and picking behaviours significantly decreased.
- After ten weeks, Mark's self-injurious behaviours vanished, and his communication skills improved significantly.

Mark's journey is a testament to the potential for hope and transformation in the face of daunting health challenges. It emphasises the power of a holistic approach to healthcare, one that goes beyond symptom management to uncover and address the causes of health issues.

His story serves as a reminder that with unwavering advocacy, a comprehensive understanding of health challenges and a holistic approach to care, a brighter future awaits even in the most challenging circumstances.



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Where Do I Start? How to Navigate the Emotional Journey of Autism Parenting



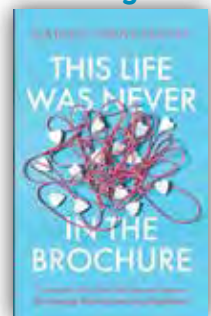
When a child is diagnosed with autism, no one thinks about the full impact on parents. Author Kate Laine-Toner does just that in this new title and advises parents on how to address their own anxieties, understand

and accept a diagnosis and set themselves up for a successful family life.

It includes self-care strategies and advice on how parents can look after their own mental health while supporting their child. Kate, who founded the Bristol Autism Support group in 2012, is also a parent to an autistic child.

● **Jessica Kingsley, £14.99/\$20.95 paperback**

This Life Was Never in the Brochure: Caring For Our Son With Severe Autism & Profound Multiple Learning Disabilities



Autism Eye has, on many occasions, raised awareness through our features and news stories about profound autism and its impact on families. This form of autism, we hear, can turn the lives of those who have this

condition and their carers towards despair, with untreated health issues and accompanying stress.

Now, Nadine Honeybone, a long-term campaigner for autistic people and their families, reveals the struggles thousands of families around the world endure. She talks frankly about her life caring for her

son with severe autism and profound multiple learning disabilities.

Nadine also charts her family's journey struggling to find their way through the 'system', trying to get the support they needed for 16 years, and then having to make the hardest decision of her life for her son. After falling into the depths of depression and dealing with traumatic stress, she thankfully made her way back to better mental health.

Determined to get severe autism better understood and widely known, this is her first book to raise awareness and provide much-needed help and support for others.

● **Authors & Co, £10.99/\$13.70 online, paperback**

Helping Autistic Teens to Manage their Anxiety: Strategies and Worksheets using CBT, DBT, and ACT Skills



Unfortunately, autism and anxiety go hand in hand for many autistic children and adults. Author Dr Theresa Kidd offers strategies and worksheets

using techniques drawing on her extensive clinical and research experience to provide support.

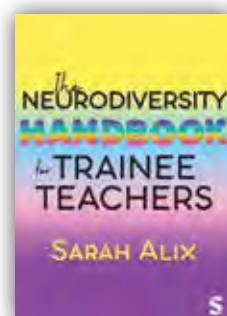
She presents practical strategies developed for parents, therapists and teachers working with autistic adolescents who experience anxiety. In addition, she includes chapters dedicated to assisting parents in supporting their anxious child.

The book outlines the co-occurrence of anxiety and autism, highlights specific anxiety risks and triggers, and presents practical solutions for

overcoming barriers to therapeutic engagement. A collection of CBT, ACT and DBT-informed practical worksheets are included, making this book ideal for use at home, at school or in OT, psychology and speech sessions.

● **Jessica Kingsley, £19.99/\$29.95 paperback**

The Neurodiversity Handbook for Trainee Teachers



If you are in the unfortunate position of finding your child's teacher has not received the memo about the importance of an inclusive approach to teaching neurodivergent

pupils, you may like to direct them to this book. Of course, they won't be happy if they have already qualified as a teacher, but this is the kind of book they should have already read if they are struggling to teach your child.

Written by Dr Sarah Alix, who is the Initial Teacher Training Programme director with the Sigma Trust, it promises to provide the knowledge for trainee teachers to understand better the complexities of working with neurodivergent pupils. Starting with a model of difference rather than deficit, it may be helpful for trainee teachers in any kind of school.

● **Sage, £23.99/\$36 paperback**

Helping Your Autistic Child: A self-help guide for parents



This self-help guide focuses on practical, proven techniques to help parents support their autistic children in many common areas of difficulty.

A useful focus of the book is the information it provides for parents seeking

advice on how to help their autistic child manage anxiety. It also includes advice on managing communication needs, sleep, feeding and sensory needs.

Ann Ozsivadjian's book also covers how to understand sensory responses in autism and how to manage distressed behaviour, including self-harm and demand avoidance.

● **Little, Brown, £12.99/\$19.99 online**

“
Nadine talks about her life caring for her son with severe autism and profound multiple learning disabilities”

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"It enables our young people to more independently regulate their own behaviour and to understand that at times when they feel overwhelmed or overstimulated, they have quick access to an area of calm and quiet where they can work on reducing tension." Headteacher, The Shires at Oakham

"It's such a calming environment and I have noticed that the students are much calmer and more engaged."

Manager, Cambian Pengwern



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