

SUPPORTING PEOPLE WITH AUTISM TO LIVE THEIR LIVES

**Supporting children at school
during breaks and eating**

Ramesh

Background before support

Ramesh is 7, he has a diagnosis of autism and attends a mainstream school. He has a Learning Support Assistant (LSA) in the mornings 5 days a week, however over the past year he has been disruptive at lunchtime, involved in squabbles and minor fights. He has started to abscond from school, especially at lunchtime, and making his way home or playing in a local park.

He is often being brought home by members of the local community or coming home alone, hungry, tearful and angry. Luckily, he lives locally with his parents and an older sister who is at secondary school. Both parents are angry and demand a meeting with school as they are concerned about Ramesh's safety and believe that he must be being bullied for him to run away.

The School Head agrees to meet them at a time convenient for both parents. She meets with them and includes the Year Head ensuring that they give them time to express their anger and concerns. She also expresses her deep regret, worry and wishes to find a safe solution for Ramesh. They all agree that they will review the absconding to see if there is a pattern and whether there are any signs of bullying taking place. The Head assures the family that there is no tolerance for bullying in the school.

She also advises the parents that Ramesh has been unsettled for some time and that he has been expressing some behaviours that can be challenging to manage, asking if this is something they see at home. Although upset about the nature of the question the parents admit that they are finding it difficult to settle Ramesh at night who is struggling to sleep and has started to lash out at them. They agree to try and talk to Ramesh about his absconding from school and his LSA who knows him well will also ask him what is happening.

The Head Teacher said she will coordinate another meeting with the parents, the Year Head and the Form Tutor and also invite the LSA. She states that whilst Ramesh is invited, she is mindful that she doesn't want him to think he is in trouble and is happy for the parents to decide if he should attend the meeting. However, she is keen that his voice is included in any decision-making going forward.

The LSA talks to Ramesh in his 'quiet space' about what happens when she leaves him at the end of the morning. She discovers that he is having difficulties transitioning to lunch break when he doesn't have support: he finds the canteen difficult to cope with and, being a strict vegetarian, also finds it difficult to identify the food that he can eat without having to ask. He has tried this before but has been laughed at when he gets anxious and starts to try and speak, so he doesn't. The smell of the food makes him feel ill when he is anxious and the environment is too loud. There are few people from his background and he doesn't have any friends. He then goes back to class hungry, anxious and distressed. His solution is to pick a fight, get excluded from the canteen and then leave school.

The LSA feeds this information back to the Head Teacher who rearranges the meeting to feedback and includes the Special Educational Needs Coordinator to discuss solutions and next steps to support Ramesh.

The skills, competences and knowledge to make a positive change

Head Teacher

The Headmistress recognised the seriousness of the issue and, in particular, the risk of harm that Ramesh could be exposed to. She made it a priority to develop a better personal understanding of the issues and tasked the SENCO with putting in place a plan to reduce the risk to Ramesh and to the school.

She invited the parents in to a joint meeting, giving them space and time to communicate their concerns before taking charge and arranging immediate fact-finding by people Ramesh most trusted to establish the causes of his behaviour whilst not assuming the outcome. Once the issues were ascertained she coordinated

a further meeting and was open to making reasonable adjustments to better support Ramesh's dietary and sensory requirements, developing a plan with his parents and Ramesh at its heart.

She accepted that there was very little option for vegetarians in the canteen, that they needed to provide more options and make it visually clear what is available. Ramesh's mother offered to provide a packed lunch for a period so he would not have the anxiety of trusting what he could eat and wouldn't have to go into the noisy canteen. The Head Teacher agreed that Ramesh can use his 'quiet area' for lunch and could take a friend with him so he didn't feel isolated or in trouble.

The SENCO suggested that Ramesh receives more support during breaks and, in particular, lunch times, and all agreed in the short term. When ready Ramesh could join the planned "Lunchtime Club" with other children in the library where there are supervised activities or have quiet time in the company of other children.

Recognising Ramesh's difficulty in speaking when he is stressed or anxious he is asked to create an "angry card" that he can show people when he is becoming overwhelmed as an indicator that he needs to withdraw to his quiet space, negating his fight-or-flight response. Ramesh will in turn become more aware of how sensory overload affects him and how to respond appropriately if he feels things are getting too much. His parents liked the idea and said they will also use it at home so it is used consistently.

The Head Teacher developed a team approach that made everyone feel included and part of the solution - she also requested of the Governors as a matter of urgency a school perimeter safety check and successfully secured permission for gates and electronic access in and out of school during school time.

Parents

Ramesh's parents felt able to express their feelings and also be an active part of the resolution. They felt their feelings were heard and validated and felt included in the team approach to the issues. They were able to advocate for their child and problem-solve with school. Open non-judgmental channels established between them and school decreased their anxiety allowing them to openly communicate Ramesh's needs and moods at home. They offered to use the "angry card" at home so its use was consistent, enabling him to safely communicate when things are overwhelming him. They suggested that they will put it by Ramesh's bed at night so he could show them when he cannot sleep. They also agreed to participate in a home-school diary system, ensuring open communication between both parties regarding Ramesh's current state of mind. His mother further offered to provide a packed lunch for a period so Ramesh could have confidence in his food and not have the anxiety of trusting what he could eat, coincidentally allowing a temporary break from the sensory overload and social anxiety Ramesh experienced in the main canteen.

This positive interaction led Ramesh's parents to be more pro-active in the future.

LSA/ SENCO/Teaching Staff

The LSA 1:1 time is extended until Ramesh has had his lunch.

The SENCO led a staff training session on "transition" and its challenges for some students and advised on things which could be put in place to help.

As a result, several classes started class visual diaries as well as bespoke ones for individual students.

A "Lunchtime Club" was created for students that needed a quiet supervised space away from the canteen in the library that Ramesh could join when he felt ready to be with the other children.

Outcome achieved for Ramesh

Ramesh stopped absconding from school significantly reducing the risk to him.

Supporting outcomes

- Ramesh was able to eat lunch that was suitable for his dietary requirements.
- He was able to avoid entering the canteen environment that caused him significant stress and anxiety.
- He was not isolated and many of the actions applied to a number of children.
- Ramesh was able to communicate his feelings without speaking when things were getting too much through the use of the communications card.
- Ramesh was able to buffer himself from his fight-or-flight response as his confidence grew and knew he had a safe space to go.
- He improved self-awareness of his challenges and take positive action both at school and at home.
- His parents and Ramesh were part of the solution working as part of a team, developing joint solutions and having open lines of communication through the communication book.
- The staff involved all felt appreciated and empowered to contribute towards positive outcomes for their students and for the school.