

SUPPORTING PEOPLE WITH AUTISM TO LIVE THEIR LIVES

**Supporting young people planning for
the future and education**

Robert

Background before support

Robert is 16 and has a diagnosis of autism. He has until recently managed school well with minimal support interventions for his autism in the school environment. He is clear about his priorities and what he wants to do, and recently earned mock-GCSE grades that suggest these are achievable for him. Robert is about to sit his GCSEs, in preparation for which he has agreed to accept some learning support intervention as appropriate, including extra time for sitting and a prompter during exams so he can keep himself on task.

Robert had been settled and happy undertaking a reduced number of GCSEs and plans to progress to his local FE College after the summer and study for a Diploma and A-Levels in his favourite subjects. With two months to go before the exams Robert starts to show signs of extreme stress, developing temper outbursts at school and having a fight with some other students in the canteen. He refuses to engage in any conversation with the school support system so his parents have been asked to come into school and Robert is asked to go home. This causes him additional stress as he will miss a study class for one of his exams and he is also aware of the risk of being suspended the following day.

His parents attend and are disappointed and angry. They have been also struggling to engage with Robert at home over the past few months; he has been rowing with his father and withdrawing to his room, refusing to talk and playing loud music. He hasn't been studying as he should, nor eating and has been sleeping poorly. He has become focused on his X-Box, staying up late into the early hours of the morning, saying he has lost track of time. He has stopped caring for himself and is no longer showering or brushing his teeth or hair.

Due to the breakdown in communication at home Robert agrees to speak with his English teacher, with whom he has a good relationship. The aim is to try and establish what has gone wrong and what can help Robert in order to develop a way forward.

The skills, competences and knowledge to make a positive change

English Teacher

The teacher knows Robert well. He was his Form Tutor during the period he received his autism diagnosis and is fond of him. As a result, he undertook some basic autism-awareness training and had been an advocate for other staff to do the same.

He arranges to see Robert in a room of his own choosing at the school, where he feels comfortable and is a quiet environment. He allows Robert space and time to shout and vent his frustrations in a safe environment with "no judgement." When Robert has quietened the teacher talks calmly in short sentences, allowing time between questions for Robert to process them and formulate responses. No mention is made of the trouble he is in or the possible consequences. Together they investigated the timing and causes Robert's frustrations. Robert was unsure why the anger started but he did communicate his fear and concerns about leaving the school he has been at for 6 years, the worries and uncertainty of what is to come and his ability to cope.

They talked about his anger being a reaction to his anxiety around leaving his "known" environment. Robert recognised that his fighting and outbursts have been unacceptable but doesn't know what to do to make them stop as things feel like they are getting worse as the exams get closer. He is also worried about not doing as well in his exams as he knows he could do, which is only increasing the pressure he feels and is having a negative impact on his relationship with his parents. The English teacher suggests to Robert including the SENCO and his parents in the discussions - he would be happy to explain the problems to them and they could then all work together to help Robert get through his exams and plan his next steps. Robert agrees.

SENCO

On hearing the English teacher's interpretation of recent events the SENCO felt bad - she had planned to meet the transition students in 2 weeks' time. She apologised to Robert and explained that, based on his previous minimal level of intervention, she had failed to adequately account for the increased pressures on him during this stressful period. She listens to Robert and says she will plan a strategy for supporting him to negotiate what will happen next, what he needs to do and what assistance she and her team can offer. The SENCO, the teacher and Robert's parents accept his anxiety and no judgment is made.

The SENCO arranges a further meeting with Robert and his family to plan what needs to happen over the coming weeks of the exams and post-exams, and the support the school will provide him. Robert was happy with this as he wanted support but didn't know what help he needed or how to ask for it. They agree that they will visit the new college for a tour and meet the new teachers and student support before he starts and as soon as possible, the SENCO will also speak directly to the college student support in preparation so he didn't need to go into detail straightaway, which Robert was pleased about.

Robert's Parents

Robert's parents had felt lonely and frustrated coping with his behaviour on their own and had no idea that things were also bad at school. They were angry however that the situation had got so bad and were fearful of the impact it might have on his GCSE grades. Following the conversation with the English Teacher however (whom they also knew and thought well of due to his previous involvement and support), they agreed to work with the SENCO and Robert in planning for his exams and the next steps transitioning to his new college.

It was recognised that Robert's recent behaviour had been unusual for him and they had all underestimated the impact the impending transition would have on him. They were also disappointed that they not managed to have this conversation with him. Robert agreed to provide a signal or write down when he is finding things difficult but is struggling to communicate it verbally. The whole family agreed that they will all do their best not to raise voices and will work hard to develop a calm environment that will be more conducive for everyone.

Robert's parents agree to facilitate the visits to the new college and place emphasis on his positives, provide him with a timetable to study, including times to go on his X-Box, eat and sleep and to remove as much of the organisational stress from him as possible during this time.

Robert recognised that it was important for him to look after himself and would start to shower now he didn't have to worry so much about sorting things out.

Head Teacher

The Headmaster decided to keep a low profile so as not to escalate the situation unnecessarily. He understood the particular set of circumstances that had led to the deterioration in Robert's behaviour and trusted the English teacher and SENCO to manage the situation. He did however require reassurances that the situation that had taken place in the canteen would not happen again and underlined that this was unacceptable. Robert apologised for the incident and the matter was dealt with by no further action.

Outcome achieved for Robert

Robert was not suspended. He was able to complete his school year and sit his GCSEs and then progress into college with a clean student record.

Supporting outcomes

- Robert was able to continue to undertake his exams and plan for his transition to college with the support he needed.
- He was able to communicate his fears to someone he trusted and put a plan in place that he was involved in developing.
- He had identified why he was anxious and being angry was a reaction to this.
- He accepted and owned the impact of the anger and acting out and recognised that it wasn't a constructive way forward.
- He developed greater self-awareness especially regarding his response to transitions and found new ways of communicating with his parents.
- Robert now has increased understanding of the challenges he may face and how it may manifest itself in his behaviour. He appreciates the power of a team approach to solving issues.
- The teacher took time to look at what feelings were influencing Robert's behaviour and gave him time and space to express his fears and anxiety and then link these to his behaviour. He also involved the parents and SENCO to find a solution to help both school and home situations.
- Involving the parents helped them feel a part of the solution. It validated their challenges and made them a constructive part of the solution.
- Robert was involved in the solution and problem solving without judgement regarding his behaviour, enabling him to participate without fear and anger.
- Roberts SENCO realised that in future would develop more bespoke approaches to all her students on the autism spectrum facing transitions no matter how "settled" they might appear.
- The new college and staff were open to accommodating the individual needs of a new student and to liaise with and employ the experience of his previous educators.