

# **SUPPORTING PEOPLE WITH AUTISM TO LIVE THEIR LIVES**

**Supporting positive education experiences**

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**Zoe**

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## Background before support

Zoe is a 6yr old child with suspected autism who is midway through assessment at her local Child and Adult Mental Health Services. Zoe was unable to attend nursery school due to tantrums and anxiety-driven meltdowns. She is now at school but despite 1:1 LSA (learning support assistant) support she cries and screams a lot. When she is not crying, she appears to “zone-out” and fall asleep and doesn’t actively participate. Prior to tantrums she becomes increasingly agitated and anxious and no amount of reassurance appears to help. She is bright and whatever work she does produce, although small in quantity, is of a reasonable age-related standard. The crying and tantrums have been extremely disruptive at school although this behaviour does not happen at home. Her father who brings her to school is exhausted and tired of bringing her to and from school in a state. This behaviour has led to some unpleasant scenes with other parents at the school gates.

A new teacher that has had autism awareness training makes an effort to watch Zoe during lunchtimes and her arrival and departure from school. Based on her observations she believes that Zoe is struggling with transitions and asks Zoe’s parents in to school to have a 1:1 session with the LSA. She explains that in her opinion Zoe is experiencing sensory overload on arriving which leads to meltdowns and then shutting down post ‘hyper-stimulation’. Also, that the stress that Zoe is experiencing appears to be in-grained with reassurance having a negative effect, further heightening her anxiety.

Her new school year group is based in a small self-contained classroom, the teacher is known for her “down-to-earth” and no-nonsense approach. Zoe appears to settle better in the classroom but access to and from school remains a problem.

The improvement in Zoe’s behaviour could be as a result of having a smaller self-contained classroom instead of the open plan areas in the main building of the school, supported by greater routine in class that has resulted in less noise or distractions. Equally Zoe has shown signs of increased maturity as she is getting older, helping around the house at home.

Zoe’s teacher met with the parents to understand what they were doing at home that they may be able to adopt in school since they appear to have fewer challenges within the home environment. The parents advise that they use visual timetabling at home which works well and that they have adopted a “practical light-hearted approach” expressing low levels of stress and arousal towards Zoe’s anxiety instead of reassurance that appears to work better.

Sharing the experiences about what works and what doesn’t was helpful for the parents who were getting frustrated with having to ‘manage’ Zoe’s distress on returning from school and also enabled the teacher to problem solve with Zoe’s parents agreeing to trial several approaches that work at home in school. They agreed to include Zoe in this and include her as much as possible and would observe her natural preferences for relaxation and timeout, so they can try and include this as part of her school day. Zoe’s parents thought this was really helpful and provided their insight of what could help.

The teacher talks to the LSA who has been trying to reassure Zoe which is the approach she uses with her nephew who also has autism. She hasn’t had any formal autism awareness training and agrees to try the new approaches to support Zoe.

## The skills, competences and knowledge to make a positive change

### Teacher

She made sure that everyone worked together to provide a consistent approach for Zoe, becoming a part of a team with the LSA. The parent’s expertise was consulted to problem solve, which made them feel part of the team.

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As a result, an atmosphere of cooperation, no-blame, non-judgement and teamwork was formed by the teacher.

The teacher took the time to research and observe Zoe's behaviour, identifying any stressors or patterns. She involved Zoe's parents, giving them time and learning about what worked for them at home.

She made sure that everyone worked together to provide a consistent approach for Zoe, becoming a part of a team with the LSA.

The teacher also provided small reasonable adjustments to the day's schedule. She arranged for Zoe to come in to school 10 minutes later than the other children and leave 10 minutes earlier to avoid peak noise and stimulation.

She made a visual timetable with Zoe and the LSA so that she knew what was happening when, like she has at home.

The teacher speaks to Zoe's parents about talking with the SENCO (special educational needs coordinator) and the Local Authority and make sure that Zoe's Education Health and Care plan (EHCP) meets her support needs now and in the future to enable her to get the right support when receiving her education.

## **The Learning Support Assistant (LSA)**

The LSA changed her approach providing a firm-but-gentle distraction approach during times when she was unsettled but before she became distressed which worked for her parents and avoiding multiple reassurances. Zoe was given scheduled breaks in the day to allow her to express herself, running, bouncing, reading books and exercise. She was also given a sensory ball to provide some gentle stimulation and avoid her from switching off or shutting down.

The LSA was happy to work with the teacher and the parents.

She attended autism awareness training to further her skills.

She implemented the techniques and approaches that worked for Zoe at home where able.

She appreciated and accepted the uniqueness of all children including those with autism and that she needed to take into account the individual's strengths and challenges.

Recognising what works for one child may not work for another.

## **The Parents**

Zoe's parents were able to express their feelings and concerns with the people involved in her schooling.

They were able to impart and have their expertise validated and worked as a team around their daughter.

This empowered them as their child's advocate and felt better understood and confidence in the school improved.

The father felt more confident on dropping off and picking up Zoe from school.

Relationships with other parents at the school improved.

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## Zoe

Her self-awareness grew with maturity and engagement.

She was able to express her anxiety in a supported, calm environment.

She benefited from routine and consistent techniques and approaches.

She received the targeted support she required to manage her anxieties and stressors, reducing their impact on herself and her behaviours.

She developed in confidence to communicate earlier, preventing a meltdown and the reactive approach, making use of the breaks she had scheduled in the day to manage.

### Outcome achieved for Zoe

- Zoe's experience of school was significantly improved.
- Zoe was able to produce more work and access the curriculum better.
- Her confidence increased with a reduction in challenging behaviours or withdrawing (zoning out).

### Supporting outcomes

- Zoe was able to express her anxiety and frustrations in a more manageable way.
- Meltdowns were avoided by using an approach used at home by her parents.
- Reasonable adjustments were made on accessing and exiting school.
- She was able to design and choose activities or tools to relax/stimulate her. This increased her self-awareness and created a "tool kit" of coping strategies appropriate to her needs.
- The parents felt listened to and valuable and empowered part of a team at school.
- The school was flexible allowing slight adjustments to the day to help Zoe.
- The LSA was more aware and confident in being able to support Zoe in the classroom and at school by understanding Zoe better and attending autism awareness training.
- The LSA and teacher worked together mutually supporting each other with Zoe's best interests at heart.