

Disruptive, or just DIFFERENT?

Letting pupils sit under tables might be the best thing you do for SEND progress this year, argues **Adam Dean**...

What if I told you that letting a pupil sit under the table while you teach could improve their learning, reduce workload, and make your classroom more inclusive?

I've been asked to give you tips on how to support neurodivergent pupils (specifically pupils with autism) to meet their greatest potential in mainstream schools, without relying on increased funding or staffing levels. Well, I've gone a step further. I have some easily applied

potential. Some of these strategies might seem counterintuitive to you, but they work. Sadly, in my experience, there's still a tendency for schools to discourage these things because they're seen as disruptive or because it's 'not fair' for the autistic pupil to behave one way and the neurotypical pupils to behave another way. But, sorry, this isn't equality; it's discrimination and refusal to implement reasonable adjustments. If this were an employee, they'd be taking the employer to tribunal.

It's also making your job more difficult. I'm not talking about anything unreasonable here, just going with the flow. Let's look at a few examples.

Some pupils might find that sitting under the table helps them to focus. Again, it's not typical, but it helps. Group work can be draining for some autistic pupils. But that's okay; some of our brightest minds work better alone or with short, snappy interactions. Some pupils need to flap or draw or chew their shirt sleeves. If that's

the case, please let them, they're hurting nobody. Finally, eye contact is hard. I run a school, and when I'm thinking, I close my eyes and look away. It's never been a problem.

Ask yourself this: is it dangerous? Is it severely disruptive? If the answer is no, then it's probably fine, will help the pupil to learn, and make your job smoother. Our job is to teach, not to force conformity. Let's not make pupils use a wrench when they already have a spanner.

"Let's not make pupils use a wrench when they already have a spanner..."

strategies you can use in your mainstream classroom that will make a tremendous difference and actually reduce workload. I'm excited, because I've been delivering autism training for almost 12 years, but I'm also about to go through my own autism and ADHD assessment. So, I'm coming at this from a fresh perspective, even for me.

Is it dangerous?

One of the amazing things about pupils with autism is that they often have special interests and their own coping strategies. They've developed techniques to help themselves reach their



Teach what matters

Potential looks different for everyone. For pupil A, playing the next Sherlock Holmes could be the goal; another might want to design a gene-sequence machine for cows that produce cool chocolate-milkshake straight from the teat. At Chatten Free School, we phrase it as 'happiness, independence, respect and being part of the world in a way that is meaningful to them'.

What I'm getting at, is that learning is hard; it involves being outside of your comfort zone, therefore, it must have a purpose that means something to the pupil and helps them to reach that potential.

For example, if Jonny doesn't have spoken communication and finds transitions distressing, forcing him to write his name

hand-over-hand probably isn't a good use of your time or his. I'm not saying Jonny doesn't have that potential to learn to write; but it might not be most productive approach right now. Essentially, it comes down to teaching the skills that will help children to meet their full potential, as opposed to the skills the DfE tells you to teach.

But surely this involves a whole separate curriculum, which would require more work on your part, plus access to specialist knowledge? Well, yes, and no. Maybe to start with. Ultimately, though, you have the EHCP to work from; that is your curriculum, and I would encourage you to feed into local services such as school improvement partners. Once you have something up and running, it won't take a huge amount of maintenance.

This is going to save all that time you spend trying

to force relevant learning around an irrelevant topic. Your child will do work that is specific to them and their journey. If you're not sure what this looks like, the Chatten Curriculum would be a great place to start. It's on our website, and it's free (tinyurl.com/tp-Chatten).

Empowerment over conformity

My final takeaway point is that, inevitably, you will spend a lot of your time on situations where dysregulation leads to behaviour that challenges. But the great thing about this approach is that by being flexible and allowing pupils to use their self-management techniques while also teaching relevant skills, the likelihood is strong that pupils with autism will be far less stressed, and you'll see less of those behaviours.

When you consider the skills pupils need and allow them to use their own coping strategies, you don't just help them to reach their potential, you empower them and give them permission to be proud of what makes them amazing. **TP**

8 RULES TO LIVE BY

- 1** Don't force conformity. Instead, let pupils use their own coping strategies.
- 2** Ask yourself: "Is it disruptive, or just different?"
- 3** Use special interests to drive engagement. You won't believe the difference this can make to a pupil's time in school and their engagement.
- 4** It can also be useful to focus any reward system you have around these special interests and give pupils time to engage and explore them – they might just lead to employment in later life.
- 5** Prioritise EHCP goals over a generic curriculum – this means teaching what a pupil needs to thrive, not what the curriculum tells you to teach.
- 6** Please don't use isolation booths or isolation rooms.
- 7** When supporting behaviour (with any pupil), consider what the pupil is saying rather than jumping to detentions/breaktimes, etc. That pupil might be struggling and need help.
- 8** If you are working with a pupil who can communicate vocally, ask how you can help them to learn and what they need to meet their potential – honestly, this might be the most important thing I've said here.



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