

Supporting the transition of a reception pupil into Park House School after an absence of formal education for 9 months

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Executive summary

School placements can break down for a variety of reasons, and the Covid-19 pandemic with associated 'lock-downs' had an additional impact on many learners across the country. The impact on SEND children has been especially problematic, leading to an inquiry led by the All-Party Parliamentary group for SEND.

This case study demonstrates the impact of the work completed by the BeyondAutism Outreach Team to support a pupil who was out of education for 9 months, detailing the work completed in the home, and the assessment process that was started before formally joining Park House School.

Introduction

The pupil is a 5-year-old boy who, at the start of the intervention, was out of education due to his mainstream placement breaking down. The new school had been identified, but he was unable to start his placement until there was space for him. To facilitate the transition into his new school, the Outreach Team started the assessment process, began teaching new skills while still in the home and facilitated supervised transition days to Park House School, before the official start date.

Two formal assessments were conducted (VB-MAPP and the Independence Framework) as well as two informal assessments of communication and play skills. The areas of need that were highlighted included his ability to make requests, to comment on items, to follow instructions and his ability to echo what another person is saying. The focus of the intervention in terms of teaching skills was to increase spontaneous communication (requesting preferred items), to follow adult lead activities and to tolerate interruptions.

By completing the assessments as much as possible in the home environment and starting to teach vital learning to learn skills and crucially, completing supported visits to Park House School before the formal start date; the pupil and school team were in a better position to start with reduced barriers to learning.

Method

The initial process that all pupils go through when they start at BeyondAutism Schools are pairing and assessments. By assessing the pupils, a profile is established that highlights the skills and deficits. For the pupil, communication was a key deficit and created a barrier for him to access further learning opportunities. The VB-MAPP assessment identified that he did not use words or alternative systems to make requests (mands) and only labelled a few objects (tacts). The outreach consultants trialled PECS, Makaton and communication boards (pages with up to 9 picture/symbols), with the communication board being the most successful. It was also recommended by the class Supervisor at Park House as a tool which they use in school, so it was determined to start with this at home and the transition to school would then be more successful.

Additional skills that were taught in the home were focused on the pupil following simple instructions and tolerating others joining in with his play. It was identified that he was able to complete many tasks and did not have particular barriers in terms of motor skills, however he was very self-lead and also had not had opportunities for parallel play with peers for a long time due to the lack of formal education and the lockdowns in place due to the pandemic. These skills were taught by exposing the pupil to a variety of different motivating activities and recording if he joined in just because he was motivated, or if he followed an instruction to join in. For tolerating other joining his play, the outreach consultants recorded any behaviour that challenge in response to them joining play that he initiated himself.

The final stage of the intervention involved transition days to Park House School. This gave the pupil an opportunity to practice the journey that he would be taking, getting used to the school environment and meeting the staff and pupils who would be in his class when he started. The time spent in school increased over the 3 sessions, and the pupil was able to join his peers for lunch, spent time alone with the school staff and played well with others.

Results

The results of the skills teaching to increase requests made (manding) were positive, as shown in Figure 1.

Total requests (mands) made per session went from a very low average of 10 in the first 3 sessions, to steadily increasing up to an average of 46 in the last 2 sessions. The data also shows the effectiveness of the prompt fading strategies used to teach the use of the communication boards. As the sessions went on, the percentage of prompted mands decreased and the percentage of independent mands increased. In the first 3 sessions, mands were prompted on average 63% of occasions, and during the last 2 sessions, only 28% of mands were prompted on average, 72% were independent.

For the other skills taught such as joining in adult activities, the pupil joined the adult in 12 of 17 opportunities because he was motivated. There were 3 occasions where he independently joined in when asked to by the adult and 2 occasions where he was prompted. Duration engaging in the activity was between 1 and 20 minutes, and this was not directly related to if he was prompted or not. There were only 2 occurrences of behaviours that challenge (kicking toys off the sofa and ripping paper). There was no behaviour that challenges in response to the adult joining in the pupils play, however he would reset the play to the way that he wanted it without escalating.

Following the successful transition days to Park House School, the pupil started on a part time basis, due to another Covid-19 related national lockdown. A few months into his time at Park House School, when his class supervisor was asked about how he was doing, she stated: "He has mastered a number of imitation skills and sitting at activities for extended periods of time. He has learnt to tolerate having his teeth brushed and is echoing a little bit more consistently". The pupil's mother was

also very happy with the transition and his new school placement. She stated that the transition days worked well and that he is happy to go to school, "it's a really special place".

Discussion

This pupil had some significant deficits in his skills, which was why a specialist placement was needed. However, the breakdown in his nursery placement and the subsequent extended absence from education, magnified by additional lockdown restrictions, meant that a significant period was lost. The Outreach Team at BeyondAutism have demonstrated that the service can provide vital input and facilitate what would be a difficult transition at any time, but especially during a global pandemic. In a short space of time, important learning to learn skills were taught and parts of the assessment process started, setting the pupil up for a smooth start in his new school.

References

Inquiry launched into impact of Covid-19 on SEN young people (headteacher-update.com), <https://www.headteacher-update.com/news/inquiry-launched-into-impact-of-covid-19-on-sen-young-people/228914/>

Figure 1

