

## **Re-thinking Education in Autism – experiences from Covid-19 lockdown**

(Please note that the child's name has been removed for privacy reasons.)

Hi. My name is Alice, I live in Brighton, and I am mum to [child's name], who is 11. [child's name] has recently been diagnosed on the autism spectrum. And, she is currently in the process of being assessed for ADHD. I am here today to talk about our experiences education during covid. I'm bringing a positive message because we have a really positive story about educational experiences during the pandemic and how that's impacted [child's name] positively, unusually. So [child's name] was diagnosed about a year ago. Prior to diagnosis, she had a lot of difficulties in school, and she was picked up late because, like most girls, she was flying under the radar, her masking's quite well.

She had a very traumatic time in school, particularly in year five, she was excluded five times, which was obviously really traumatic for her and very difficult for the school. I put in to get her an education, health care plan and once she had an education health care plan, things started to get better. At least we had a framework to work with her. We identified her needs and then obviously provisioned to meet those needs.

We've had lots of school refusals and lots of difficult behaviors, the whole range of things that an autistic child might experience being in a mainstream setting, from sensory issues through to the social personal dynamics of the playground, friendship issues.

So [child's name] went to school throughout the pandemic, I think it's from March through till June or July. She was in 4 to 5 days and of those day maybe sort of 9 to 3. It was a very, very positive experience for her. So the reason it worked for her was higher adult-to-child ratios, so there were lots more adults around. There was lots more access to freedom. Because there weren't so many children around, there was more space. There was more freedom for her to roam. She benefited from the structure, so the routine of going into school, but also slightly different sort of structure. It wasn't so rigid and it was more informal environment that it would usually have been. She also benefited from there being less children there. She was also one of the older children at the school, so she benefited from that sense of responsibility and in some cases, some leadership. I think the teachers gave her particular task or particular responsibilities and that gave ownership over her kind of environment and pride, really.

I saw a total transformation. There had been a minimization of the sensory triggers that cause her a lot of difficulty. The noise, the bright lights, all of that sort of stuff had been minimized. She was up bright and ready. It impacted on her social development, things around self-care, physical care. She would start to get out her clothes, lay her clothes out, take pride in her appearance. She would have showers and stuff like that we would have to drag her into the shower previously.

She was cycling. She got her bike out, something she would never, never usually do. That environment where there was less stressors, less demands being put on her physically, emotionally, sensorily, more adults, more TLC (tender loving care) has really, really, really benefited her. The structure that maybe some children with SEND wouldn't have had because they didn't go into school. Her having that structure of going into school, but not as structured as it would normally be, that really worked.