



Where Autism  
Professionals Connect

Exclusively sponsored by:



## Are we listening to our children?

*“Asperger and his colleagues aimed at nothing less than ‘to determine the innate capacities of the child, the alterable components of his personality, the causes of his pathological behaviour, what will best assure his personal happiness, security and social welfare, what his right place in family, society, what are his personal goals and ambitions, and how those can all be realized.’”*

Neurotribes. Steve Silverman 2015.

In this article I intend to outline the importance of recognising and celebrating the voice of the child in education, especially children with Special Educational Needs (SEN), and will give various suggestions/tips on how to easily achieve this in the classroom.

As educators, you come into your profession wanting to make a difference. We want our pupils to learn and walk away knowing more than they did when they arrived in our class.

When working with children with SEN, this education entails far more than the National Curriculum or any academic curriculum. This type of education needs to look at the child as a *whole* and as an *individual*, including:

- social skills
- independence
- communication (and much more).

I truly believe that for children to have an optimal education, they must trust their educators and their environment. Although this sounds quite simple, it seems to be an area that many classrooms struggle with. Pupil voice is already not heard enough across the board – but when you have a child with SEN it is heard even less. This is not because educators don't care about the children or want them to feel safe, but it is often because they just don't know *how*.

If we take a step back we will realise that often many of our most caring educationalists inadvertently step on pupil voice more than anyone else! This is because they want to help; they continually ask questions, answer them for the child and then do what they *think* the child

Author: Gianna Colizza  
Organisation: Headteacher of Gesher School  
Date of publication: 28 September 2017

wanted. The child is not getting a chance to *actually* communicate what they wanted and is simply going along with what was decided for them. This often happens in the home and school environment.

We zoom in on therapies, communication, national curriculum and all the things that *we* believe will give our children a better chance at an independent future. What we often forget is that although our children have additional needs, and they may need a lot of support in certain areas, they are *children*. We often don't give our pupils the chance to learn through their childhood because we feel as though that they can't or, that we as the adults, can teach them more.

This is a huge problem in the SEN world. Children need, deserve and have the right to a childhood - it is just as important as their education. Their childhood should be an area of their life where they are in control and they show us what makes *them* happy.

We all need motivation to do our best job at something! Why should we expect any less from children? I've heard some therapists say that a certain child 'isn't motivated by anything!'. This is not true; every child is motivated by something and it is our job as educators to figure out what that is and implement it into their day.

***“Never forget that a child’s perspective of the world is different from yours. Try to understand a child’s world before you expect a child to master yours”***

This is a quote that I carry with me everywhere as I feel that it is at the core of my beliefs as an educator.

How often do we take the time to ensure that the child's happiness is part of our curriculum or daily plan? Children get one childhood and they should be given the opportunity to live it to its fullest.

All sounds good and great, but impossible?

Here are some small tasks that can make a big difference:

1. My favourite. Plan three sessions of child-directed activities a day *where the staff take part*.

Autistic children can sometimes feel as though their unique and individual traits are weird and misunderstood. Let's take a child who loves to lay on the floor, roll a ball between his hands and stare at how it moves on the floor.

This is a golden opportunity for a staff member or parent to lay down beside them and do the same. No need to say anything, just join in. This sounds so simple – but these opportunities are often missed. This could be because people think that child-directed means the child must do the activity alone and uninterrupted, or staff feel they need to talk to the child about the ball

*Copyright: When reproducing this document, you must fully acknowledge the author of the document as shown at the top of the page. Please see Network Autism Terms and Conditions for details.*

Author: Gianna Colizza  
Organisation: Headteacher of Gesher School  
Date of publication: 28 September 2017

and what they are doing. A couple of other great examples are messy play, free play or in the playground.

Child-directed tasks can build trust, lessen anxiety and develop a common respect between two people. It's telling the child that they don't always have to join our world. What they do *is* good enough and sometimes we can learn from *them*.

Meeting them in their safe place can, in time, allow them to realise that we can be a safe place for them too. Of course this needs to be done in moderation as they do also need to attend to adult directed tasks throughout the day.

I ensure there are three sessions a day for different amounts of time depending on the child's age. This seemingly small intervention can have a massive impact – many pupils have made their first spontaneous meaningful words in these sessions

## 2. Silent lessons

I love to hear the feedback on the first time I ask one of my teachers to do a *silent lesson*. I constantly encourage staff to use less verbal instruction and more visual instruction (this is more than just using a visual timetables).

A silent lesson sounds tricky at first but can have amazing outcomes! Everyone tries harder to communicate in a way that is new and different – as educators we don't realise how much we talk sometimes. This also gives the educator a change to really hear what the child is communicating. The amount of amazing communication you hear from the children when we are quiet is surprising.

## 3. Have fun

One of my all-time favourite educators, Gina Davies, spoke in one of her sessions about how we often force children to listen to us in school because they *should*. She gave an amazing example of when she sat at a big table in a classroom, ignored the children and began to have a load of fun playing with a big bowl of water, sprinkles and fairy lights by herself. Before you knew it, every child in the classroom was sitting at the table out of curiosity and interest – what a way to start a lesson!! The children are interested before she even started the lesson.

All you have to do is have fun! If you aren't interested in what you're teaching, why would they be interested in learning?!

## 4. Teaching assistants involvement and support

Teaching Assistants often feel that they aren't doing their jobs properly unless they are looking at the child and continuously 'supporting' them in a lesson, when in fact this can often be quite distracting! I ask my TA's to be the *ideal student* during a group lesson where the teacher is directing.

Author: Gianna Colizza  
Organisation: Headteacher of Gesher School  
Date of publication: 28 September 2017

I want them to do everything they want the child to do, including being absolutely enthralled in what the teacher is saying – children often look at their TA's for support but that support can be as simple as showing them what to do rather than telling them. This works beautifully and quickly!

5. *Allow our children to have a voice*

*Allow our children to have a voice*, and then listen and follow through on what you learn. They know so much more than we realise! They are brilliant, but we often don't give them the opportunity to show us what they know as we are too busy directing them.

These things can be accomplished during the daily running of a classroom and with time it will become woven into the ethos and values of the school staff. Once there is a decision to take these things on board they tend to happen quite naturally. I am not saying that children should be allowed to do whatever they want, as boundaries make children feel safe (but that's another article!), but it does mean that we need to listen to them more and take their happiness into consideration more often. We *don't* always know best. I am completely against the idea of 'I'm big, you're small, so I know better'. I have learnt more from the children I have taught over the years than I could ever learn from a book or expert.

We have an opportunity to go to school and learn every day! Start taking advantage of the amazing lessons our pupils can teach us while building a trusting relationship with them. What more could you ask for?