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Riverside AP Gang: raising awareness of autism in a primary school

Riverside Primary is a large school with over 450 pupils, a Gaelic provision, a nursery and an autism provision. There are currently 23 pupils in the autism provision. A new head teacher started three years ago and introduced Senior Sevens; a chance for children in Primary 7ⁱ to take on leadership roles within the school. The objective was to help support skills for life and work by leading on something within the school. A group was set up to lead the work for each of the chosen areas the Senior Sevens focused on. There was a great interest in helping the children in the autism provision and the Autism Provision (AP) Gang was created.

Usually these groups has are made of 4-6 children, but due to the popularity of the scheme we have 13 pupils from Primary 7 in the AP Gang. Every year it remains the most popular group, as more and more children see the benefit of learning about acceptance and challenging themselves to step outside of their comfort zone and help others. Our school motto is 'Be the best you can' and we encourage autism acceptance as part of being a better person.

Each group had to create a vision statement and set objectives within an action plan. This year, the children chose to create games and a rota during play time to help the children in the provision socialise in the playground. They created a list of helpful tips, such as don't change the rules during a game, which Riverside pupils can use to support children with autism when playing games. They presented this at assembly and created reminders for each classroom. They have also provided information about autism to the whole school and set an example by giving up their own time to support the social skills of the children within the autism provision during golden time and during lunch. They have been shown how to use visual schedules, how to reduce language to support comprehension and how to use symbols to support communication. They have even begun to learn about how to use Lego to promote communication skills during play.

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The AP Gang are a group of children who want to accept and understand how to support the differences children with autism may have. The goal of this group is to promote acceptance and understanding. It is hoped that they will be leaders in acceptance within the school, which will then support discussions in the home about autism, thus continuing to raise awareness and acceptance. With this group, it is hoped that the skills these children are learning now will continue into secondary and that this will have an impact on their future understanding and acceptance of those with autism. We are trying to ultimately create a workforce that accepts, understands and can recognise the strengths that someone with autism can bring to a job. It is our aim to create a community that supports and understands those with autism.

Here are our top 5 tips for raising awareness of autism in a primary school:

1. Talk about autism. Children want to understand.
2. Be open and honest about autism. Some of the children have melt downs and different behaviour. Take the time to explain the behaviour. Children are curious and will want to ask questions. Give honest answers to these questions.
3. Keep the profile of autism up within the school and community through a variety of events.
4. Encourage children to talk about autism within the home through homework tasks or literacy tasks.
5. Keep an open mind and don't try to change anyone. Try to learn how best to support each individual within your school.

We have seen a great impact with this work; we now have pupils in secondary requesting work experience in the provision. Parents have commented that their child is accepted in the community and people are always saying hello and playing with their child in the park. We will continue to work with our pupils to create a community of understanding and acceptance within Stirling. It is a small drop in a large pond, but we hope that ripples will travel far. The AP Gang have recently been out to another school to talk to their Primary 5sⁱⁱ about how to set up their own AP Gang. We are looking to expand the concept of the AP Gang to other schools within Stirling.

This project is simply about giving children the credit they deserve. They want to understand and help, but if they are not given the opportunity, how are they to learn?

ⁱ Year 7 in England and Wales and P7 in Northern Ireland

ⁱⁱ Year 5 in England and Wales and P5 in Northern Ireland