‘The Zone’ @ West Kirby School and College – an alternative approach to enabling learning

West Kirby School and College, provides highly specialist education and care for a range of children and young people from 5-19 years with complex communication difficulties associated with autism and other co morbid diagnosis and additional learning needs. The school received Autism Accreditation from the National Autistic Society in 2012.

How The Zone was created

Despite West Kirby School’s highly specialised educational setting, some of our pupils still found the small classroom environment too difficult. They displayed distressed behaviour, such as meltdowns and aggression or school refusal and withdrawal. These behaviours are often the sign of high levels of anxiety associated with diagnoses of autism spectrum disorder (ASD), attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), etc.

To meet these pupils’ needs we created an area called ‘The Zone’ which provides bespoke, intensive 1-1 intervention programmes and support.

The Zone includes:

- a social kitchen dining area
- quiet teaching spaces
- a therapy area including light and dark sensory rooms
- an art space
- a motion activated floor projector to help with sensory development.

We aim to reduce anxieties and build positive relationships with the pupils so that they can start to trust adults and develop strategies that enable them to feel safe and relaxed. Only then can we start to rebuild their self-esteem and their relationships with peers to enable them to work

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How it works

There are 4 stages to this model:

1. The pupil is in the Zone full time and with 1-1 support at all times. All activities are likely to be completely child led.
2. The pupil is in the Zone full time and with 1-1 support at all time. The child is able to follow some adult led activities
3. The pupil is beginning to access some activities within the main body of the school with support from Zone staff
4. The pupil is back in the main body of the school in a class group, supported by the normal school support systems.

At present, there are 3 pupils based in The Zone, but since we started this model of working we have expanded to include other pupils on bespoke timetables with 1-1 support with other designated personal environments. It has become apparent that it is the approach to learning that is important. So many pupils are unable to access the traditional school environment because of the impact of their difficulties associated with autism, such as:

- sensory overload
- difficulties with social communication
- understanding and interaction
- lack of flexibility of thought etc.

Their world is confusing and unpredictable and they often live in a constant state of anxiety. Based on the ‘Pyramid of Learning’, unless we address all these issues first, a child will not be able to achieve academic success.

Case study

Here’s an example of how The Zone helps our young people make progress:

Our pupil had been in several schools before he joined us in 2015. At first he was in a class of four, but was unable to tolerate the classroom environment or the other pupils and was unable to take direction from adults. He displayed distressed behaviour that resulted in physical interventions. In October 2015 he moved full-time into The Zone. The model described above was implemented.

Initially he was at stage 1, unable to respond positively to any adult instruction or interaction. He is now very definitely at stage 2 of the model. On occasion, he is able to take part in other
activities with other pupils and in different environments, but this is very much dependent on his levels of anxiety and tolerance at the time.

There have been no physical interventions during this academic year and he is able to take instruction and advice from key staff. He can regulate himself using strategies that he has been involved in developing. He is beginning to engage in learning, has made significant Maths and English progress and is able to apply his learning to functional activities such as cooking and shopping.

In July he successfully attended his first overnight residential trip with his class peer group, having never been away from home before.

Overall, The Zone’s personalised environment and curriculum provided by West Kirby School enables our pupils to take part in school life, begin to experience success and take steps towards achieving their potential.

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