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Organisation: The Rainbow Project
Date of publication: 7 April 2017



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The Rainbow Project: supporting autistic pre-school children

How the Rainbow project began

It all started with one little girl. I was working as a support worker at the time, and I used to spend six hours a week with her. She was four-and-a-half when we began, and she taught me so much about autism, teaching, and life in general. She was very quiet, with very little interaction, virtually no eye contact, and no ability to sit still!

Gradually, though, over a period of about three years, we've developed a relationship and through that relationship she has grown so much. She now can't get enough of people, she loves to interact, and she has some hard-won skills that will help her throughout her life (such as dressing, going to the toilet, and eating a non-beige diet), as well as academic and concentration skills. Through her, and many others whom I have worked with, I learned about [visual schedules](#), [PECS](#), the [TEACCH method](#), and [Intensive Interaction](#), and I developed a love of reaching these kids in whatever way works for them.

I learned about early intervention and realised how important it is to reach children on the autism spectrum as early as possible. The aim is to hopefully improve their communication, social, and play skills so that their level of frustration and anxiety is as low as possible and they will grow to be effective learners and self-advocates.

I realised that there was very little support for very young children on the autism spectrum in the local area. I set my sights on a nursery, and registered myself and my home with Ofsted. I christened it "The Rainbow Project" and have been providing 1:1 autism-specific intervention and support for children aged 2-5 since November 2015. I also started a Master's degree in Autism at the University of Birmingham in September that year.

The methods I use

I am using mixed methods, but my main focus is on the [DIR/Floortime](#) approach along with other developmental methods such as Intensive Interaction. I also use a TEACCH approach and

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the environment is structured to provide lots of opportunities to communicate, as well as the methods to do so (primarily through the use of PECS). For each child, I create individual learning goals (in the form of an IEP) in collaboration with the child's parents; we then work on these goals for 6-12 weeks and when they are achieved more are created.

DIR/Floortime

The DIR approach puts sensory and emotional regulation at its heart, stating that a child must be regulated before a child can engage with the world around them. I have a trampoline, peanut ball, large spinning bowl, swing, and other equipment which I use with the children to help them receive sensory input before I expect them to engage with me. One little boy, for example, used to wander around the room without engaging with toys or with me; since I began using sensory strategies (the trampoline and weighted vest especially) his attention span has increased and he is more willing to interact with me.

TEACCH

Almost all of the children are using a visual schedule, some completely independently and others in a now-and-next-type format. For those for whom it is appropriate, it helps reduce anxiety and provide structure, enabling them to learn more effectively. Each child also has a work box with structured work tasks, working on skills from their IEP.

Intensive Interaction

One little boy was quite isolated and did not interact with the adults around him except to pull them to things and scream or cry. Through the use of Intensive Interaction, this little boy has gone from not noticing if someone was in the room with him, to actively seeking them out to play!

Use of PECS

PECS has been used effectively with almost all of the children. One little girl could speak, but did not use any speech to communicate. Now, through the use of PECS, she is starting to say the words along with pointing to the pictures. Another little boy used PECS in the same way, and now speaks non-stop!

Debrief with parents/carers

Every session ends with a debrief with the parents where I tell them about the Wow! moments (of which there are plenty) and provide the space for them to troubleshoot any issues they're having, as well as showing them how to use the methods too, which I think they really appreciate. I attend meetings with parents, write reports, and am constantly thinking about the next steps for all the children.

Since it started, the project has gone from strength to strength, gaining more children and more recognition by the month. I currently serve eight families, and the amount of progress the children have made is remarkable.

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Examples of progress

Thomas' imaginative play has gone from three or four different actions to multi-step and highly creative. He now notices and reacts with real empathy when I try to hide my proud cry, is affectionate and emotionally connected in a way he wasn't before, and he invites me joyfully into his play.

Lily has gone from no functional communication to verbally joining in with songs, using PECS (often saying the words), being excited about people, and gaining independence.

Jamie has gone from totally non-verbal to using two-word combinations, having emerging joint attention skills, playing and making up stories with small characters, and has positive attention-seeking behaviours (all in 5 months!)

I love the work that I do and I feel privileged to be a part of these children's and families' journeys.

(All children's name have been changed)

Further information

For further information please contact amanda.haydock@gmx.com)