

A case study of two autistic children supported by the Accept Approach: a new acceptance based strategy

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Editorial comment

The author is a specialist teacher and autism advisor for Local Authorities in the West Midlands. He was diagnosed autistic at 30 years old and is a proud parent of two autistic children. In 2019, he began developing 'the Accept Approach' which is a new acceptance based approach aimed at helping to support autistic children and young people who do not respond to traditional autism strategies. This paper reflects on the impact that the Accept Approach had with two autistic children who were not attending school due to high levels of anxiety. Both children responded well and returned to education and feedback was positive from their parents.

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Introduction

In 2019, the UK All Party Parliamentary Group on Autism (APPGA) produced a report highlighting that, 'many thousands of autistic people who need support in the classroom, at home, at work and in every aspect of everyday life, simply are not getting it', and when considering why this is so, they found 'these unmet needs stem from poor autism understanding by professionals and a low awareness of the duties' (APPGA, 2019). The National Autistic Society (2018) has also warned of a lack of educational support for autistic children and stated that:

"without the right support, children can quickly become highly anxious and become so overwhelmed that they can't control their behaviour, which can be misinterpreted as being naughty or disruptive, when in fact they're actually extremely distressed".

Finding the right strategy to support autistic children can be difficult as every autistic child is different. What is generally agreed within research on autism is that a range of approaches is needed as there is no strong evidence to suggest that one strategy can work for every autistic child (Gulberg, 2017; National Autism Centre (NAC), 2009; Parsons et al, 2011; Bond et al, 2016). It is also acknowledged that over the past 50 years there have been two leading models of support which influence how autism strategies are developed and their rationale and implementation. These are the medical and social models of disability (Haegele and Hodge, 2016).

Clash of the models

The medical model generally views autism as a disability in the form of a deficit (Baron Cohen, 2019) suggesting that the problems autistic individuals face are a result of something broken inside and once these are corrected and fixed, it is believed that the individual can then function within society (Brandon and Pritchard, 2011; Massoumeh and Leila, 2015).

The social model however, views autism more as a difference. The belief here is that autistic individuals are unique and not broken or in need of fixing (Haegele and Hodge, 2016). The social model sees autism as a human variation which offers unique perspectives that should be valued and celebrated (Roush and Sharby, 2011).

However, it seems there is often a clash of these two models when considering which one is most effective in supporting autistic children and their families. Those who follow the medical model argue that supporting autistic children requires the focus to be on prevention and cure, whereas those who support the social model see autism as something to be accepted, and not to be pathologised (Baron-Cohen, 2019) and to adjust the social, physical and sensory environments autistic people encounter to accommodate their difference.

The problem

When a child is diagnosed autistic, parents and educators are often advised to try 'traditional' autism strategies. When looking at these strategies we see there are many (eg structured, visual timetables, now and next boards, Social Stories™, comic strips, take a break cards; emotional scales, and behavioural prompts, to name just a few. The idea behind these strategies is to help an autistic child cope better in a range of different situations (eg from helping them to know what is going to happen during their day, to improving their social understanding in order for them to function in society. These can be useful strategies and can work effectively.

However, working in many different education settings supporting autistic children, I have noticed a consistent problem with many of these traditional autism strategies. The problem is this: **not all** autistic children respond positively to them. There are a few possible reasons as to why this may be so. It could be down to a lack of understanding of autism, or that some strategies are not used in the way intended. For example, I see a lot of Social Stories™ being used specifically as a behaviour management tool – which can make the child feel criticised and lower their self esteem. This is not what they were intended for. The developer of Social Stories™, Carol Gray herself, writes that 'the most common misconception is that the goal of a Social Story™ is to change behaviour' (Gray, 2015).

Acceptance based strategies

I am always looking for effective ways to support children who do not respond to traditional strategies. During my investigations and research, I have been drawn to 'acceptance based approaches' such as those described by Vermeulen, (2013), the Low Arousal Approach (McDonnell, 2010; Elven, 2014), the Collaborative Approach (Greene, 2014) and in particular the early work of Carl Rogers (1960). In his book, 'On becoming a person' Rogers (1960) wrote:

"We cannot change, we cannot move away from what we are, until we thoroughly accept what we are. Then change seems to come about almost unnoticed."

This statement has had such a profound impact on me both personally and professionally because Rogers is suggesting that by accepting who we are, we can learn to naturally deal with our problems.

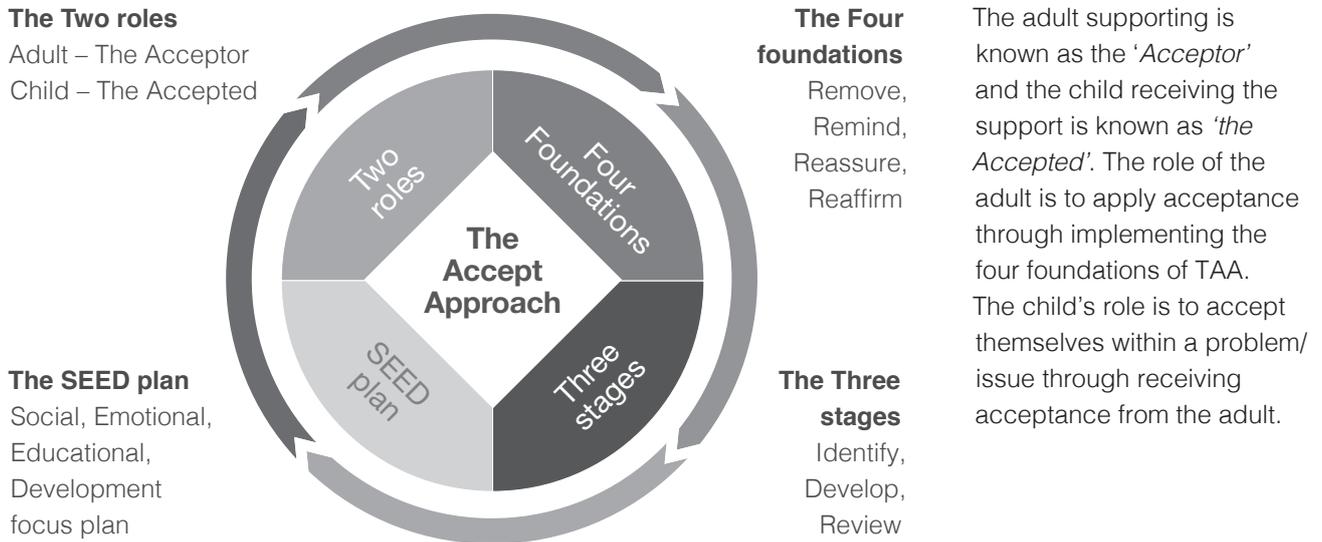
Aim of the study into the Accept Approach

The aim of this study was to see whether acceptance as a 'concept' could be applied practically and effectively to support autistic children who have not responded to traditional autism strategies. In an attempt to achieve this, I have used my experiences as an autistic adult, a parent of two autistic children and as an autism advisor within Local Education Authorities, to create a new acceptance based approach called the Accept Approach (TAA).

An introduction to the Accept Approach

The aim of TAA is not to view a problem or issue as a *deficit*, but instead to focus on ways a child can learn to accept themselves *within* a problem or issue and then to move naturally from it. TAA is separated into four main areas (see *Figure 1*) which are described in the next sections.

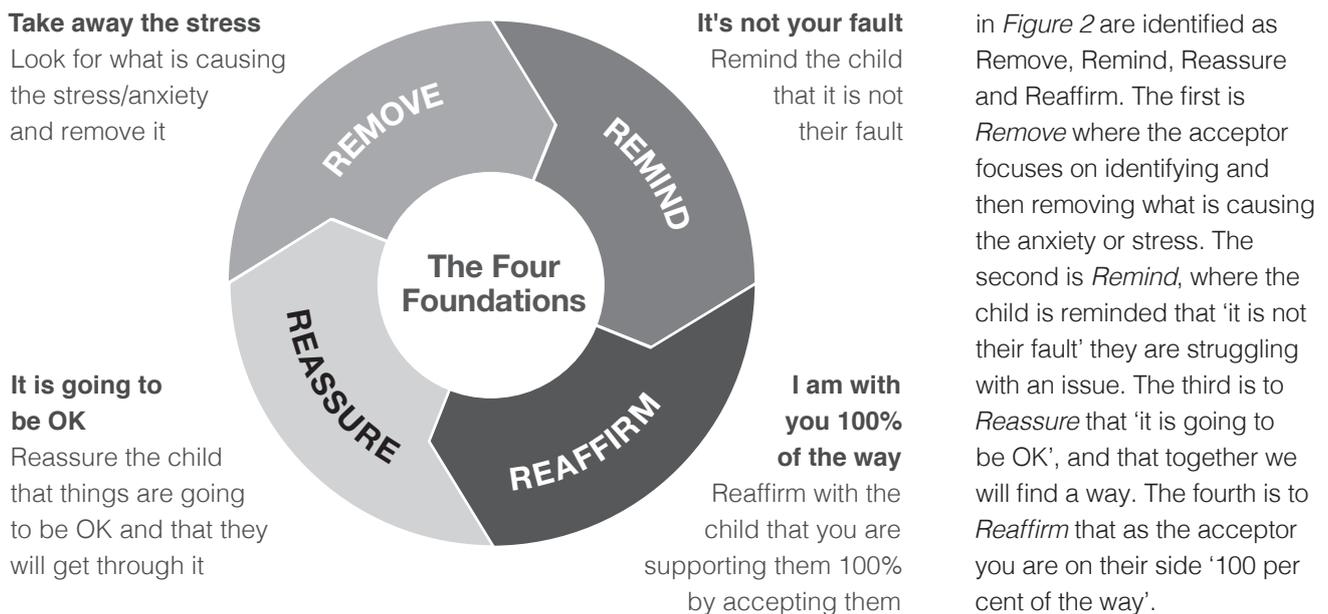
Figure 1: Components of the Accept Approach



1 The two roles

The adult supporting is known as the ‘*Acceptor*’ and the child receiving the support is known as ‘*the Accepted*’. The role of the adult is to apply acceptance through implementing the four foundations of TAA. The child’s role is to accept themselves within a problem/issue through receiving acceptance from the adult.

Figure 2: The Four Foundations



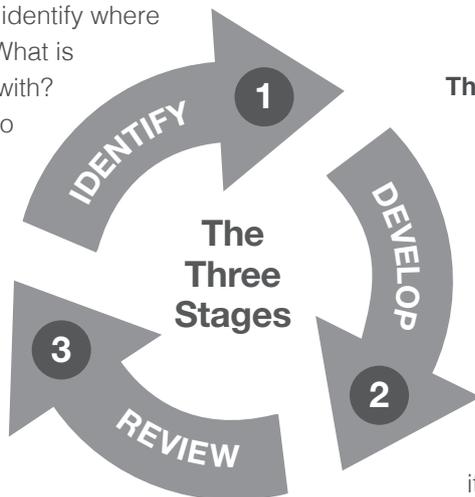
2 The four foundations

The four foundations shown in *Figure 2* are identified as Remove, Remind, Reassure and Reaffirm. The first is *Remove* where the acceptor focuses on identifying and then removing what is causing the anxiety or stress. The second is *Remind*, where the child is reminded that ‘it is not their fault’ they are struggling with an issue. The third is to *Reassure* that ‘it is going to be OK’, and that together we will find a way. The fourth is to *Reaffirm* that as the acceptor you are on their side ‘100 per cent of the way’.

Figure 3: The Three stages of TAA

The first stage is to identify where support is needed. What is the child struggling with? You are not looking to provide a solution. You are looking at what area of support requires acceptance.

The third stage is where you review support to see how things are going. The review stage is ongoing and repeated throughout.



The second stage is where you use the four foundations to establish what the support will be and what foundation you will focus on, eg reminding the child that it is not their fault, or by removing what is making them anxious.

3 The three stages of TAA

There are three stages you go through when applying TAA (see *Figure 3*). The first is to *Identify* the issue or problem which acceptance needs to be applied to. Once you can see where acceptance is needed the second is to *Develop* support by applying acceptance using the four foundations of TAA. The third is to *Review* the support which is an ongoing stage where you constantly re-evaluate and reflect on how the practical application of acceptance is going and what impact it is having on the child. The stages will continue in a cycle during your support.

4 The SEED Plan (Social, Emotional, Education, Development Plan)

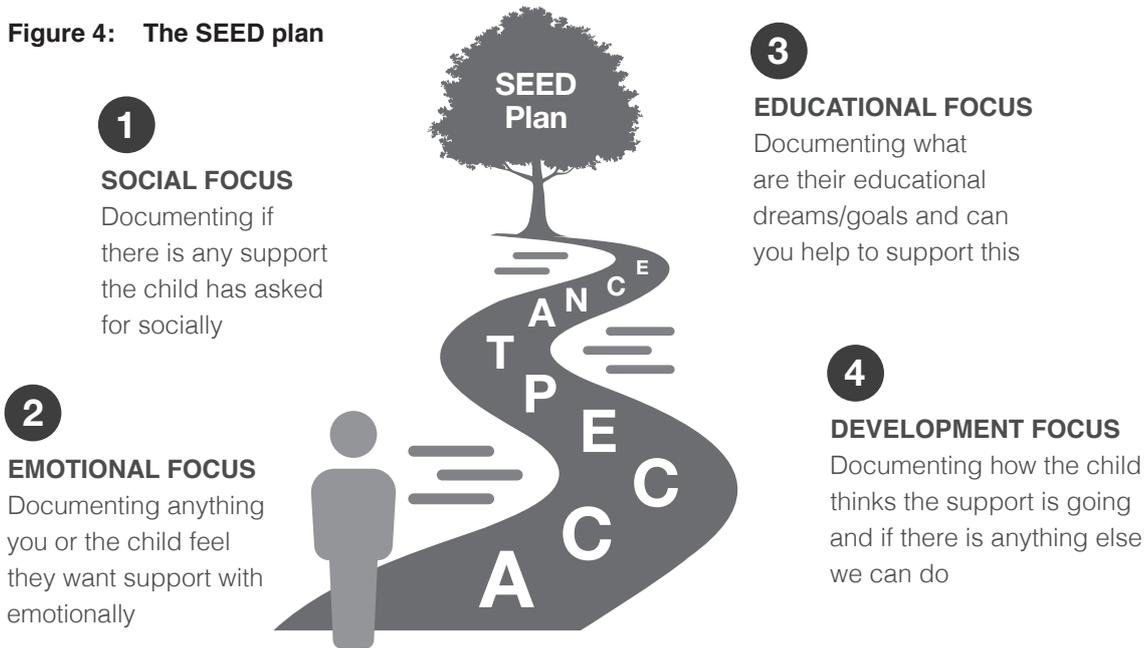
The SEED plan is the fourth part of TAA (see *Figure 4*). This is a reflective document the adult can use to write down what is happening with the child in diary form. It is more a record of the journey than a plan to show progression or to set targets. It is designed to help the adult see how they feel things are going. It is also something you do not have to use, because I often find the application of the four foundations is usually enough and problems/issues naturally fade away on their own as the child begins to understand the concept of self-acceptance.

However, where I find the SEED plan effective is with older children as it helps them to play a bigger part in the process as they are able to write down their views

and thoughts within the '*development focus section*'. There are four focus areas to the SEED Plan which are Social, Emotional, Education, and Development.

The SEED plan helps to identify the most important areas of need, which are **social** and **emotional**, *before* you begin to look at education. TAA belief is that if an autistic child is not coping within these two areas then they will not engage with education. Therefore, it is important to apply acceptance to these areas first, and to look at education after. The final part is the **development** focus and this is for the child/young person and/or their family to freely say how they are feeling about how the support is going. This section is great as it is a good way of knowing how support is going from their perspectives, and also to identify anything that you as the adult may have missed.

Figure 4: The SEED plan



Two case studies

To give more of an understanding how TAA might be applied, two case studies follow where I used TAA to support two autistic children who were unable to attend school due to high levels of anxiety and trauma.

Case study one: the pyjama kid

I first met the pyjama kid (a Year 5 pupil) after the school had asked for my input because he had been refusing to go to school for 5 weeks and he was becoming too anxious to leave the house. Autism specific support had been offered from the mental health team and educational psychology. Here is the advice they gave to the school.

1 Face his anxiety through continued exposure to school

Do whatever it takes to get him to school, because the more he gets used to school, the less anxious he will become.

2 Keep the school routine at home

By reducing his game time, and not allowing him to get too comfortable when not in school because the belief was that he would not want to return if allowed to do whatever he wanted at home.

3 The boy's parents were told he had to get dressed and must stop wearing his pyjamas all day

This was a very hard thing for him to do, because he loved wearing his pyjamas.

Response to these traditional strategies

These strategies actually caused more anxiety and his parents reported that his mental health issues increased. He became more anxious about school and could not leave the house. The professionals stopped being involved because they said he was not engaging with the strategies, and the school were at a loss, not knowing what they could do to help. The parents also felt helpless not knowing what to do.

First stage: identify

To begin applying TAA I needed first to identify his areas of need. I could see he was clearly anxious and was not able to attend school as a result of this. The first area was to look at how I could **support his anxiety**. He was also housebound and remained in his pyjamas on a daily basis and would only engage with playing games in his room. Therefore, the second area of need I identified was that **he may be experiencing trauma** and was trying to find ways he could manage this by doing only the things he was comfortable with.

Second stage: develop

Remove

The first foundation is about removing what is making the child anxious. Going back to school was the main cause of his anxiety. Therefore, I removed this by telling him he does not have to go to school if he does not want to. I then told him that 'he is the boss' and from now on he makes his own decisions, and that we will all follow whatever *he* decides to do. Both parents also shared this same message to him in between sessions. *Applying acceptance here is all about showing the boy that it is OK for him to not do the thing that is making him anxious.*

Remind

The second foundation is about reminding the child it is not his fault. During my sessions with him, I would mention that what he was struggling with was not his fault. We talked about autism and that his brain simply works in a different way. Again, his parents repeated this whenever he was sad or upset or anxious, reminding him it is not his fault. *Applying acceptance here is all about showing the child that what they are struggling is because they process things differently, and not because they have a problem which is in need of fixing.*

Reassure

In the third foundation I showed him it is OK to find his own way. To achieve this, I used an affirmation during conversations, and told the child it is going to be OK. I would repeat this whenever I could see he was anxious. *Applying acceptance here is all about using reassurance to help a child to build back their confidence.*

Reaffirm

Foundation four is about making sure the child knows I am on his side and that I am supporting him 100 per cent of the way. To achieve this, I told him he could wear his pyjamas all day and play his games as much as he needed to. Playing his games was his way of de-stressing, and wearing his pyjamas made him feel comfortable and calm. I also made it clear my role was to follow what *he* wants to do, and in every session I made sure things were based around what *he* wanted to engage with. *Applying acceptance here is showing the child you are standing by them in a non judgmental way. You are not there to tell them what to do, or what to improve.*

Third stage: review

I reviewed on a weekly basis how acceptance was supporting him, and here are some stand out moments where we could see the positive impact that applying TAA had on this child.

After just four sessions he said that **he wanted to go back to school!** His mum told me it was because he knew it wasn't his fault, and that he also didn't have to go back to school if he didn't want to. He started going back in the afternoons at first, for one hour a day, and his mother told me he kept saying, "I am the boss", which seemed to really change everything for him. His mother also reported that **his anxiety was almost gone at home**, and he was more relaxed during the day. She told me that it was because he knew he could wear his pyjamas and could play his games whenever he needed to.

After 6 months, his mother reported that *he was now attending full time in a new school and happily attends without any anxiety issues.* She said:

"He is doing great at his new school and he goes every day! I never thought we would get him there. Thanks for all your support that you gave us at a very stressful time of our lives. You are a star, thank you."

"I always tell him if he is anxious about doing something he doesn't have to do it, and it's OK! It still works and is really helping him!"

The SEED plan for The Pyjama Kid

1. Identify support needed	2. Develop support – Apply Foundations	3. Review Support
<p>SOCIAL</p> <p>Struggling with school and is anxious about going.</p> <p>Choosing to stay at home.</p> <p>Not wanting to get dressed. Staying in pyjamas all day and night.</p> <p>Spending most of his day in his room on his gaming.</p> <p>Has not engaged with professionals and is refusing to speak with me.</p>	<p>REMOVE</p> <p>I have advised Mum and Dad that we need to take away the pressure of him thinking he must go to school. For the next few weeks we are going to tell him that he does not have to go to school if he doesn't want to. School will stop calling and parents will ring to keep them informed of how things are going. I will visit one session per week and inform school of sessions.</p> <p>REMIN</p> <p>During our sessions we will talk about autism and what it is. I will remind him that it is not his fault if he does not want to go to school. I told him he cannot help how he feels and I want to help him find out why he is anxious.</p> <p>REASSURE</p> <p>Self esteem is low so all activities will be focused on raising his self esteem. Reassure him it is going to be OK. We will find a way to help him feel less anxious. I suggested he wear his pyjamas all day and to not get dressed if he does not want to. It is OK.</p> <p>REAFFIRM</p> <p>Show him that we are on his side and will go with what he wants to do. We will focus and adapt sessions to support what he wants to do.</p> <p>ACTIVITIES</p> <p>Low demand, motivated by what he wants to do. Eg talking about super heroes, creating lego, walking around in the garden, watching him play a game.</p>	<p>Session one</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● He was anxious at first and refused to come downstairs as he thought I was going to tell him to go to school. ● Instead I spoke in length to the parents and we created a plan of action and I discussed a way forward focusing on the foundations. ● I called up on my way out and told him it's OK. I am on his side and he doesn't have to go to school if he does not want to. <p>Session two</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● He came downstairs to talk with me! We talked about things and he told me how he was feeling. I focused on telling him he does not have to go back to school and that it is not his fault that he is finding things difficult. We talked about his favourite things and discussed super heroes in great detail. ● Good session – he was happy to know he was the boss. He really embraced this strategy. <p>Session three</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Mum told me he was talking a lot about being the boss and making the decisions. He was calmer and less anxious. ● We had another low demand session. No mention of school and the conversation was all on his terms and we only spoke about things he was interested in. ● Good session. I feel he is less anxious than in session one.
<p>EMOTION</p> <p>He is very anxious at the moment and we need to focus on raising his self esteem and helping him to feel worthy again.</p>	<p>REMIN</p> <p>Keep reminding him 'It is not his fault'. We also decided that 'He is the BOSS' and we will do what he wants to do in his own time.</p> <p>REASSURE</p> <p>When he is too stressed and does not want to have a session, that is fine. We will reschedule.</p> <p>He can play his computer games if he needs to, as it calms him down. This is good and fine for him to do.</p> <p>Keep allowing him to wear his pyjamas all day and to not get dressed if he does not want to. Make sure we make a point that we know this is important to him.</p> <p>ACTIVITIES</p> <p>Low demand, motivated by what he wants to do. Eg talking about super heroes, creating lego, walking around in the garden, watching him play a game.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Mum said he is saying it's fine because 'He is the boss, and he does not have to go if he does not want to.' <p>Session four</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● He was talking about school and what makes him anxious! ● Mum told me he has even expressed an interest in going to school during dinner times to see his friends. ● Amazing turn around! His anxiety is less and he wants to try to go back to school.
<p>EDUCATION</p> <p>Leave this until he is ready to talk about school. No pressure. Follow his lead.</p>	<p>REMIN</p> <p>Remind him it is not his fault, and it is OK for him to not go to school at the moment.</p> <p>We will only talk about school if he wants to and when he is ready.</p> <p>Possible discussion about him going to dinnertimes only if he wants to when he is ready.</p>	<p>Session five</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● First session in school for dinner. He was quiet, but happy and smiling again. ● First discussion about a different placement with parents, as a consideration for the next steps. ● Continue with sessions and supporting him with the foundations.
<p>DEVELOPMENT</p>	<p>Conversations with Mum and Dad on a weekly basis. Feed back how he feels about the sessions and if he is responding positively to them.</p>	

Case study two: Batman boy

Batman boy was 12 years old, when I began supporting him. He had not been in any education for over 18 months and was very anxious and withdrawn, remaining at home and only going out on the odd occasion with his family. I was asked to support him in the home in an attempt to try and get

him to engage back into some form of education or learning. The support from school had mostly been to try to get him back into school. The focus was for him to overcome his anxiety and to face his fear of school. This did not work and he became more school avoidant and dropped out completely.

First stage

He was anxious because of a *fear of school and being bullied*. He was very traumatised by his school experiences and could not talk about school or engage with the possibility of going back.

He did not want to work with anyone in his home and his mother was worried that he may not engage with me because he would not leave his room.

He was also *very resistant to any type of school learning* and did not want to do any type of learning at home.

Second stage

Remove

School caused him the most issues so during the first sessions, I removed anything relating to school, and only focused on talking and doing things he liked which I found out were super heroes, history and making Lego. Because he also did not want anyone in his house working with him, I told him this was OK and I would not attend if he did not want me to. I told him I would arrive for my sessions and we could see how he was feeling on the day. I said whenever he was OK to have the session, I would still only stay for as long as he wanted me to.

Remind

I told him during our early conversations that it is not his fault he could not cope with things at the moment. We talked about autism and how it was OK for him not to do things he did not want to. His mother repeated this whenever he was sad or upset or anxious, by reminding him it is not his fault. At first, he seemed to struggle to understand this as his mother said he thought it was his fault.

Reassure

I reassured him that he was in control and as the sessions increased, we would do whatever he wanted to do. I told him things will be OK and we will work at this together and at his pace. One way I did this was to print off a photo of Batman and cut it up into pieces, like a jigsaw. He agreed that whenever he was feeling more confident he would put a piece on the jigsaw to build back Batman. We discussed that when Batman had been put back together again that meant he was ready to talk about school.

Reaffirm

He needed to know I was on his side 100 per cent of the way and the Batman jigsaw was a good way to prove this because he was in control as he decided when to stick a piece onto the jigsaw. The sessions were also based around what he wanted to do and not what I wanted to do.

Third stage

We reviewed the progress weekly and during the third week we were in the living room playing with nerf guns during a maths session that he was happy to engage with. I remember he was laughing and smiling and seemed to be having a great time. After a short time, his mother came in and asked if she could speak to me. She began to cry, and told me that **this was the first time in the last 2 years she had seen him smiling and laughing**. This was a positive turning point and good evidence to show the boy was slowly starting to respond to TAA as he was beginning to accept himself more.

The SEED plan for Batman Boy

1. Identify support needed	2. Develop support – Apply Foundations	3. Review Support
<p>SOCIAL</p> <p>Out of school as a result of too much pressure and expectation. He also experienced bullying in school.</p> <p>Housebound, unable to do much else.</p> <p>Spending most of his day in his room on his gaming.</p> <p>Has not engaged with professionals.</p>	<p>REMOVE</p> <p>Focus the support on helping him to feel good about himself again. No mention of education or learning unless he wants to. Build a good relationship slowly, take time to follow his lead. I will respond when he is ready and our sessions will be for as long as he wants. The anxiety is around talking about education and learning, so I will not do this and take this away.</p> <p>REMINDE</p> <p>During our sessions we will talk about autism and what it is. I will remind him that it is not his fault that he feels anxious and withdrawn. I told him he cannot help how he feels and I want to help him find ways to help him feel happy again.</p> <p>REASSURE</p> <p>Self esteem is low so all activities will be focused on raising his self esteem. Reassure him it is going to be OK. We will find a way to help him feel less anxious. Limit the time of the sessions. Starting from 15 minutes and adding to this if he responds positively and requests longer sessions.</p> <p>REAFFIRM</p> <p>Show him that we are on his side and will go with what he wants to do. We will focus and adapt sessions to support what he wants to do.</p> <p>ACTIVITIES</p> <p>Low demand, motivated by what he wants to do. Eg lego making, talking about Batman and his characteristics.</p>	<p><i>Highlights of sessions</i></p> <p>Session one</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● He told me he didn't want the session. ● Instead I spoke with Mum and we created a plan of action and I discussed a way forward focusing on the foundations. <p>Session two</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● He came downstairs and we had our first session. ● Very relaxed. All conversations were motivated around his interests. ● He loved talking about Batman so we went with that and I noticed he loved the emotions that Batman had. In some way he said he related to him. <p>Session three</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● We created a Batman jigsaw as a way of him being able to communicate how he is feeling. If he had a good week he would stick a piece of Batman on the jigsaw and build this up as he feels he can. Each week he would add to the jigsaw, and when it was completed that was his sign to use that he was ready to talk about school. <p>Session four</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● We started playing a session using nerf guns in his living room. He wants to do Maths so I set up sums and placed the answers around the room. He hid behind the couch and I asked a question, eg 12+50. he then jumped up and looked for the answer, shooting it with a nerf pellet. He had so much fun and was laughing and smiling a lot, so much so that his Mum came in and asked to talk to me. She had tears in her eyes and told me this was the first time in 18 months she had seen her son smiling and laughing. This was a real turning point.
<p>EMOTION</p> <p>Low mood, anxious and withdrawn. Parents are very worried about his mental health.</p>	<p>REMINDE</p> <p>Keep reminding him 'It is not his fault' and we are going to go at his pace. If he wants to talk about his issues at school such as pressure and bullying then that is OK.</p> <p>REASSURE</p> <p>When he is too stressed and does not want to have a session, that is fine. We will reschedule.</p> <p>He can play his computer games if he needs to, as it calms him down. This is good and fine for him to do.</p> <p>ACTIVITIES</p> <p>Low demand, motivated by what he wants to do. Eg lego making, talking about Batman and his characteristics.</p>	<p>Session seven</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● This session was great as we saw a lot of movement with his Batman jigsaw. He had completed it and told his Mum and I that he was ready to talk about going back to school!
<p>EDUCATION</p> <p>Leave this until he is ready to talk about school. No pressure. Follow his lead.</p>	<p>REMINDE</p> <p>Remind him it is not his fault, and it is OK for him to not go to school until he is ready. If he doesn't want to go back we can explore other options. It is fine to do this.</p>	<p>Session eight-ten</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● We found a place for him and I spent a few sessions visiting the school with him. ● He seemed very positive and accepted a place! This was such a proud moment for his Mum. He was happy and content to return to school after two years of being out of education.
<p>DEVELOPMENT</p>	<p>Conversations with Mum and Dad on a weekly basis. Feed back how he feels about the sessions and if he is responding positively to them.</p>	

Within the first few month of sessions, I also began to notice that *he had started building the Batman jigsaw back together*. His mother had placed it on the kitchen fridge and left it there. Slowly each week, he chose to stick a piece on, showing us he was getting ready to talk about school again. He then completed the Batman jigsaw, which told us he was ready to talk about school again. *He then became less anxious and started to talk about wanting to return to school.*

We visited some schools and **he was happy with one school and asked to go there**. After about 4 months, we secured him a place at this school and after some initial transitioning, **he began attending full time education**.

He also **started leaving the house more** with his family, and was less anxious at home.

I received feedback from his mother after my support had finished.

“Aaron has effected such a change in my son, it has been quite extraordinary. Aaron’s ability to engage my son, to make him feel safe, valued and worthy of achieving is astonishing.

“My son is looking forward for the first time in far too long. He is opening his mind to possibilities around his learning and his future. My son is actually believing that he’s worth something as an individual. From a personal point of view, Aaron has been transparent and encouraging to all of us as a family. Recognising the real dilemmas in parenting while reassuring us that we are getting it right.”

Concluding comments

There are some limitations to this study. Firstly, only two case studies were discussed and both were male. The work is also personal to me, with no external observer or evaluator and there is no guarantee that a different researcher might not come to different conclusions. However, despite these limitations, TAA appeared to be an effective acceptance based strategy in supporting two autistic children who had not responded to other traditional, autism approaches.

TAA seemed to have a profound and transformative effect on supporting these two children who were withdrawn and anxious and helped them to return to full time school, happier and less anxious. The author would welcome views from readers on the ideas expressed within the paper. To find out more about the work Aaron is doing with families and schools please visit www.acceptingbehaviour.com

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