

Using an Acceptance-Based Curriculum to support autistic students, who have not engaged in the National Curriculum

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Conflict of interest

The author developed this approach which has had no independent evaluation, as yet.

Editorial comment

Aaron Yorke wrote an earlier paper published in the *GAP Journal* in October 2021 where he gave details of The Accept Approach™. He has continued to work on this approach with families and colleagues in local authorities and has now developed the Acceptance-Based Curriculum™ (ABC). In this paper, he describes this approach and uses two case studies of children who had stopped attending school and whose mental health was deteriorating. The Editor welcomes more papers from readers on understanding and support for children and young people who struggle to attend school and educational alternatives.

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Acknowledgements

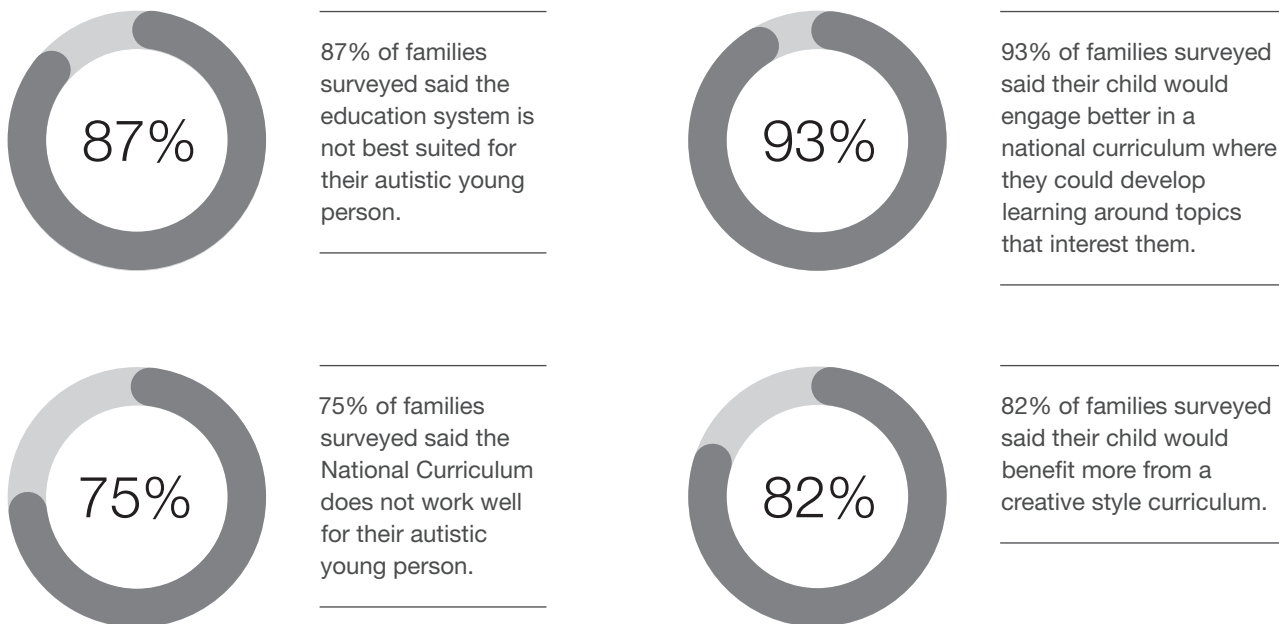
I would like to thank all the families and their amazing young people that I have worked with over the last few years. Without their help, I could not have developed the Acceptance Based Curriculum. I would also like to thank Jayne Yorke, my wife, for her invaluable guidance in helping me to write this paper.

Introduction

According to the Department for Education in 2021 (DfE, 2021), there were 163,041 autistic students in schools in England. It is estimated that 70 per cent of autistic students are educated in mainstream schools (Chance, 2021). There is also reported to be a growing number of autistic students unable to access the National Curriculum (NC) (GOV, 2021). The NC was created to teach the knowledge, skills and understanding that a society wishes to pass on to its children and young people (DCSF, 2008). Despite good intentions, there are many issues with the NC and there are groups of students who have not been able to engage with it. In a report by the National Autistic Society, Caroline Stevens, Chief Executive, argued that *“the education system simply isn’t working for autistic children and their families”* (NAS, 2021).

I am part of Accepting Behaviour, which is an independent, specialist outreach service led by qualified specialist teachers and autism advisors with over 20 years of experience in SEN, based in the West Midlands. We work with local authorities, schools, and families to support autistic students and those with communication/interaction differences who have not responded to traditional support. In March 2023, we surveyed 205 families with autistic students from our Accepting Behaviour social media Facebook community group and identified 75 per cent of families who said the NC does not work for their children. When asked how their children might engage positively with learning, 82 per cent said they would benefit more from a creative style curriculum, and 93 per cent said their children would engage more if they could develop their learning around topics that interested them (see *Figure 1*).

Figure 1: Data from a survey of parents in a Facebook Community for Accepting Behaviour (see Appendix 1 for full results)



A solution to the problem

In an attempt to find a solution to this problem, I created the Acceptance-Based Curriculum (ABC) which aims to engage autistic students who have not been able to access the NC by providing them with a more bespoke and student-led programme of learning. The ABC is a continuation of my work on acceptance-based support. Recently, I shared my findings and success of our work at the Accepting Behaviour conference 2023, in Birmingham (www.acceptingbehaviour.com). The feedback was positive from many professionals and parents attending, and we are now working more closely with Local Authorities and schools to further implement these acceptance-based approaches.

The Acceptance-Based Curriculum™

The ABC supports the four main areas of special educational need:

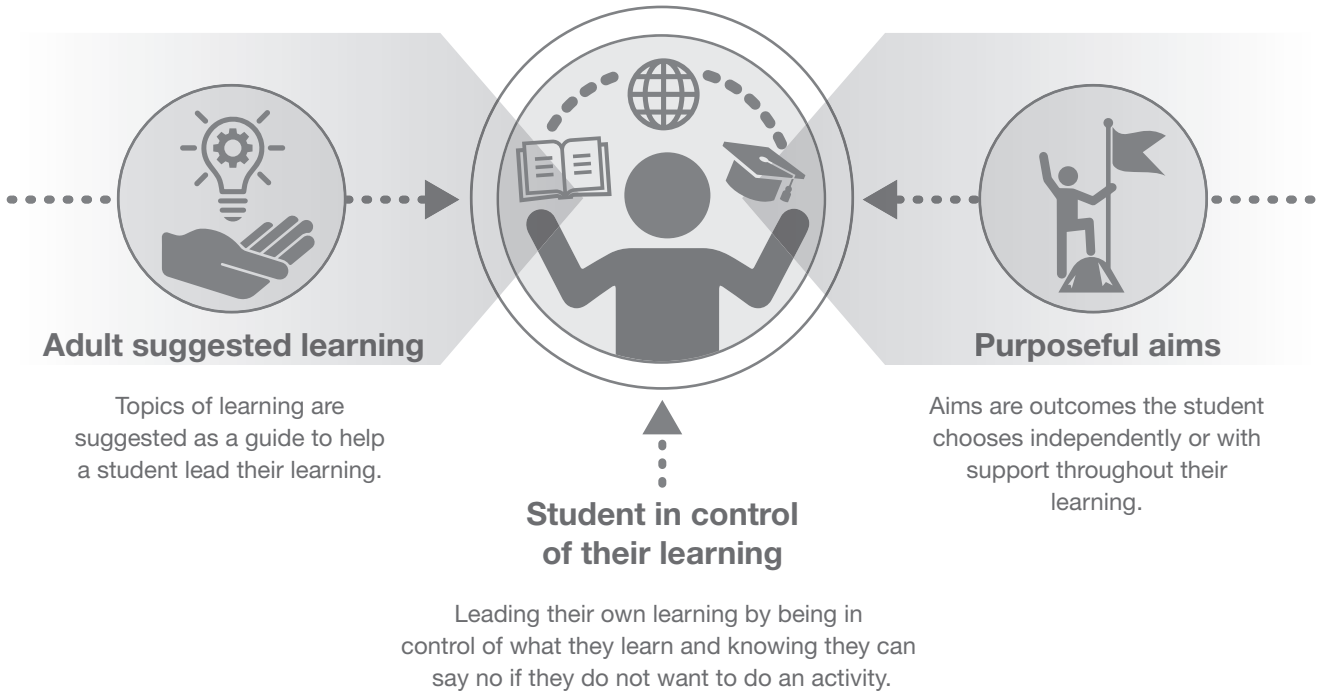
- cognition and learning,
- communication and interaction,
- social emotional mental health,
- sensory/physical

This is implemented through supporting the student using three components (see *Figure 2*). These are:

- 1 adult-suggested learning
- 2 purposeful aims
- 3 helping the student to be in control of their learning.

Figure 2: Components of the Acceptance-Based Curriculum

The Acceptance Based Curriculum



Adult-suggested learning

Traditionally, the most common approach to teaching children is through taught and adult-led learning (Hammond, 2007). Adult-led learning is not the focus of ABC; instead we use ‘adult-suggested learning’. In adult-suggested learning, the adult is able to build on special interests which the students are usually already motivated to learn. For example, we have had success with a student who initially engaged only in train spotting, and we suggested developing a YouTube train enterprise channel, which he is now working towards. We have found that by taking away the pressure of the expectation to engage with the NC, our students are able to learn what they want to.

Adult-suggested learning has been found to be especially effective for autistic students who present with demand avoidance. We believe this has been effective because ABC focuses on removing any anxieties around learning and freeing the student through the knowledge that they are in control of what they learn. The adult’s role is to support what they want to learn and to guide them through suggestions when required.

Purposeful aims

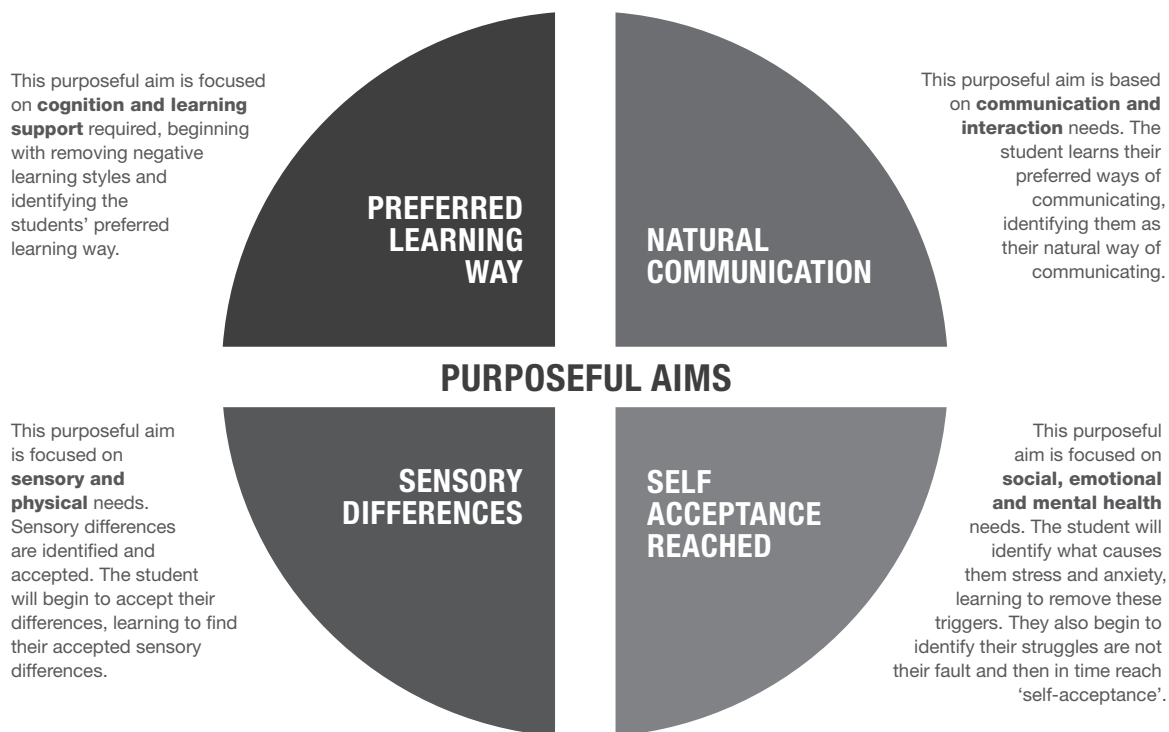
As the student begins to realise, they are in control of what they learn, they then begin to develop ‘purposeful aims’ with staff supporting (see *Figure 3*). Purposeful aims are written during informal conversations led by the student, and/or suggestions as a group with the supporting adult and parents (see *Appendix 2* for examples of these aims).

The supporting adult will then write each aim making sure they are:

- useful
- meaningful, and
- purposeful to the young person.

The focus for each purposeful aim is to enable a learner to want to achieve an aim, instead of being given a target for them to achieve. In doing so, we have seen that students are quickly motivated to engage in learning as it’s an area of interest.

Figure 3: Overview of purposeful aims



Preferred way of learning

Cognition and learning is an important area of SEN because if we fail to identify support here, most students will not access learning effectively. We believe that autistic students do not lack the skills needed to improve their cognition and learning, instead we look to identify a student's *preferred* way of learning. This is achieved by helping them to naturally identify how they want to learn, whatever that may look like.

Natural communication skills

Based around 'communication and interaction', ABC does not view students as lacking social skills, instead students are accepted for who they are and how they choose to communicate. Staff follow their lead in all we do. In time, this leads to the student feeling more confident in their own learning styles, and their own natural way of communicating.

Sensory differences

To support sensory and physical SEN, the ABC, focuses on showing the student that they can accept what they can and cannot cope with from a sensory perspective. For example, they may need to learn in a quiet environment, or they may need to pace around a room instead of being expected to sit on a chair. The idea here is for the student to begin to feel confident in what they can accept in their environment and what they cannot, and then to be able to know that they can adapt their learning environment to what works for them.

Self-acceptance reached

Supporting social, emotional, mental health SEN are a very important part of the ABC, as all our students have come to us traumatised, feeling like failures, and often present with low self-esteem and mental health issues as a result of their past educational experiences. Within ABC, a lot of our support is focused on removing anxieties and anything that

has caused them trauma in the past. When the student realises they are in control of their learning, and we are a support for that, we see anxieties fading, and moods lifting.

Recently a student said to one of our teachers,

"Thanks for giving me my life back".

Another parent commented that,

"Grateful is the biggest understatement as to how we feel about you and your amazing approach that in our son's words, and in our hearts has saved his life."

The student is in control of their learning

The third component is what naturally occurs once the other components have been implemented. By removing demands to study subjects/topics they have previously not been able to engage with, the student will focus more on learning about what they are interested in. The student then begins to engage positively in their learning experiences, and begins to naturally develop skills such as problem-solving, critical thinking, and communication in more meaningful ways individualised to their needs. The ABC is preparing autistic young people for adult life by showing them they are in control of their learning. In essence, the ABC is a curriculum designed by the student and not for them, as they begin to control and make independent decisions about what and how they learn.

Case studies

As discussed, the ABC is developing into an effective tool that we continue to use on a daily basis, to help to support autistic students that have not responded well to the support previously offered. I now want to share with you the impact that the ABC has had on two autistic students aged 11 and 12 years.

Case study one

This first example is of an 11-year-old boy who was no longer able to attend mainstream school. He had always struggled with feeling different and his parents knew there was something else that the boy was struggling with. When I first started to provide support, he had recently been diagnosed autistic. He was not attending an education setting because he had severe mental health issues. He was traumatised about his recent diagnosis of autism and distressed that he could not access any type of learning.

Identify support needed

- **Mainstream school placement has not worked**
Out of school unable to access any kind of learning.
- **Mental health issues**
Depression, anxiety, consistent hand biting, suicidal tendencies, family stress.
- **Masking issues.**
Is not able to say how he feels and struggles to say no to engaging in things he does not want to do.
- **Unable to accept his autism diagnosis.**

2. Apply the Acceptance Based Curriculum

- **Preferred way of learning**

Saying 'no' when he is too anxious and leading on which activities he wants to do.

- **Identifying natural communication skills**

During our sessions we identified that there were times he needed to be able to play on his online games before activities began. This was 100 per cent accepted and staff would wait until he was ready. The boy became so confident in knowing that we were following his lead, that he was able to naturally communicate with us when he wants to learn.

He led in conversations, and all communication was based around him leading. There was not an expectation for him to learn how to communicate with others, because he was already able to do this, by leading the conversations.

- **Acceptance of sensory differences**

We also found that there were times he needed to calm himself down through doing physical activities (e.g., bouncing on his gym ball and moving around; going upstairs to hit his wardrobe). These were all accepted, and he was not expected to mask or hold back his emotions. By doing this we noticed after he had engaged himself in his natural ways of calming down, he would return more confidently, and with less anxiety.

- **Reaching self-acceptance**

We can see below the positive impact the ABC has had on this student. He is more accepting of who he is, and he is now more confident in seeking to return to school.

3. Impact of ABC

Sessions October 2022 – March 2023

- Student was able to increase his engagement from 2 hours to 12 hours of support.
- He is now returning to a school on a part time basis, and no longer requires our support.
- Mental health issues have decreased dramatically. He was hand-biting on a daily basis, and this is now rarely an occurrence.
- He no longer talks about suicide.
- His family are a lot happier and more confident; their son is going to be OK.
- A reduced level of stress it caused him before. He is OK with being different and has grown in acceptance of what he can and cannot do.
- Masking has reduced dramatically. He now confidently tells us when he is able to engage and when he cannot.

Feedback from his mother



This morning my son said to me that he feels happy, really happy... These are words I couldn't have dared dream of in February this year after he was diagnosed with autism. He is just not the same child as he was back then. He wanted to die, he hated, loathed himself and wished he was dead every second of every day following diagnosis and having to stop going to school. He felt a failure, a burden to us, his family, and the world. I spent hours in A&E with him when he was suicidal which is the most traumatic and devastating thing to see your child go through.



Case study two

This 12-year-old boy was not able to engage in any communication with me initially. He had disengaged from all school activities, was not leaving his house and was unable to speak to professionals at the home. He was only able to tolerate being in a room with someone if he was hiding under a blanket. He would sometimes communicate with trusted family members when under his blanket when anxious, however this too was limited.

Identify support needed

- **Mainstream school placement has not worked**
Cannot engage with learning due to trauma from past school experiences.
- **Mental health issues**
Not able to sleep, very anxious and housebound, unable to leave the house.
- **Not engaging with any professionals**
Hides under a blanket when anyone visits him.
- **Masking issues.**
Is not able to say how he feels and struggles to say no to engaging in things he does not want to do.

2. Apply the Acceptance Based Curriculum

Student was able to manage three hours a week for the first month, then building up to 12 hours per week.

- **Preferred way of learning identified**
Leading on what he wants to engage with (e.g., walking, photography, board games, Sudoku, music creation, air soft, filming).

Saying 'no' when he is too anxious.

Length of sessions determined by how much he can cope with.

- **Identifying natural communication skills**

When he learned in our sessions that it was not his fault that he had struggles, his blanket was nowhere to be seen. Over the coming weeks, he began feeling more confident in our sessions and slowly started to begin saying no to activities during our adult-suggested learning sessions. This was brilliant because he then started to realise it was OK to say no to things that made him anxious. What we found then, was that he actually has a very relaxed and humorous character, and once the barriers were removed, he was able to show us his natural ways of communicating, which were joking around, controlling conversations, and leading his learning.

- **Acceptance of sensory differences**

He was able to accept that he has sensory issues throughout our sessions. For example, if he was eating food, he was confident to tell us to go away so that he could eat on his own. He would also sit around in shorts and a t-shirt when he needed, as he found them comfortable, especially when the pressure of getting dressed was too much for him. During our trips out, he needed to sit in certain seats in the car and we had to go to certain places and if things were too much we would immediately leave. By accepting his sensory differences, he could see that he could enjoy many more of our activities.

- **Reaching self-acceptance**

We can see below the positive impact the ABC has had on this student. He is more accepting of himself and has completely removed his blanket when communicating with staff and is beginning to independently explore topics of interest such as photography and airsoft.

3. Impact of ABC

February 2022 – March 2023 (approximately 1 year of support)

- He has removed his blanket completely and within three sessions and he was comfortable to engage in his learning.
- He was not housebound anymore. His mother reported that they go out often now because he knows that he can come back if it's too much for him. He enjoys going to his favourite restaurants and cafes and he has now taken up Airsoft with his dad, where he goes on a monthly basis. His dad says that he eats like a different child, he talks, he communicates, he speaks with strangers, he has laughs with them, and that it is amazing to see.
- He takes control of his learning and telling us how he feels. He also tells us now when he's feeling either anxious or too tired to engage due to lack of sleep. Where previously he would try to mask and would just be stressed and frustrated, this has now gone, and he is confident in leading his own learning.
- More recently he has started talking about possibly wanting to go back to a school, or extending his sessions with us, and we are now able to explore these options, whereas at the beginning of our support, this would not even be a consideration.

Feedback from his mother

““ *My son said he really enjoys your sessions as you are helping him to accept and love who he is. This is helping build his confidence and self-esteem and knowing none of his issues are his fault. That was huge for us; the impact has been massive for our son. Since you have been coming to see us, he is realising that it's not his fault if something is too much, too hard, or just too overwhelming for him.* ””

He is expressing himself so much more, leaving the house, gaining more independence, and wanting to do more himself like dressing, sometimes prepping lunch and making a drink. You are also giving us confidence as his parents to trust our gut, work with our son and by doing this he is slowly building confidence and independence that we were not sure we would see for a very long time. Our funny, beautiful, witty child is slowly coming back to us.

Feedback from other parents about the approach

A survey was sent out to parents who had been engaged in the ABC approach. Four comments received are given below.

““ *This is DEFINITELY the key strategy that school find works best for him. Usually at school it is removing him from the classroom or hall for assembly etc and going to the sensory room or for a walk or to go and see his favourite grown-ups for a chat! He then quickly forgets the issue and begins to self-regulate. This has only been possible because he has a 1:1 TA and she bought into the Accept Approach.* ””

““ *Accepting behaviour has been my lifeline, all be it from a distance through social media. The difference the accepting behaviour approach has made to my child's life has saved her and us as a family. I cannot thank Aaron enough for the help he has given us and the impact he has had on our lives, which is crazy when he hasn't even met my daughter! A real hero in my eyes.* ””

““ *Since the first introduction into TAA (The Accept Approach) and the Four foundations of TAA, it really has been life changing. Not only has it given our child a voice, but the confidence to express if he is finding something too much and knows his feelings are validated. This has built his confidence to engage with others, start to re-engage with family at their homes as he knows it's OK if he needs to leave. He will say his safe word or sign home and we leave, no questions asked we just go. Family life has been so much calmer, we seldom have a meltdown, we have been able to have family days out, family over for meals and family holidays. The most important thing out of TAA is that our child is seeing his worth, understanding it is not his fault, he has so much to give and is back to his happy, hilarious child he used to be. Thank you.* ””

No negative comments were made by the parents, however, one mother of a 19-year-old said,

“ I have seen positive steps being made although not consistent. My daughter is still struggling with accepting herself. It has taken most of the arguing between us away. No shouting at each other. Despite this, we are continuing to support this young adult to help her with her low self-esteem in which we are seeing improvement. E.g, she had not been out of the house for 2 years and has recently had trips out with staff to a coffee shop, and to visit charity shops. The barrier we are having is that at the moment she is still struggling to see it for herself. ”

The engagement with a 16-year-old who presented with situational mutism took longer than for other students. It took five months of regular weekly visits, before he was able to speak to the team. He now feels more comfortable and is talking a lot more during the sessions and is able to pursue his learning goals. For the first few weeks, the author would just make a brief visit and then leave. By being a consistent adult and showing acceptance, he was able to trust the support offered and was able to move forward with him. This student had not been in any education or learning for over two years when the team first started supporting him.

Concluding comments

These two case studies and work with other students have shown that it is possible to engage autistic young people in effective learning through using the ABC approach. There are some limitations to this study, as the work is personal to me, and I have developed the ABC 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, the ABC appeared to be an effective tool in helping to support two autistic children who had not responded to the National Curriculum and traditional autism approaches.

The ABC also supports and adds to the principles of the ACCEPT Approach (Yorke, 2021), which has been shown to be effective in supporting autistic students who were initially withdrawn and anxious, helping them to return to a place where they can consider engaging with learning. The author would welcome views from readers on the ideas expressed within the study. To find out more about the work we are doing with families and schools, please visit www.acceptingbehaviour.com.

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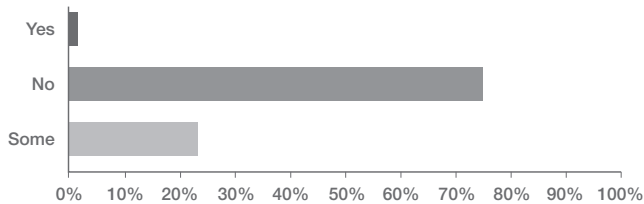
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Appendix 1: Data from parent members of an Acceptance Approach facebook community

Q1: Does the National Curriculum work well for your autistic young person?

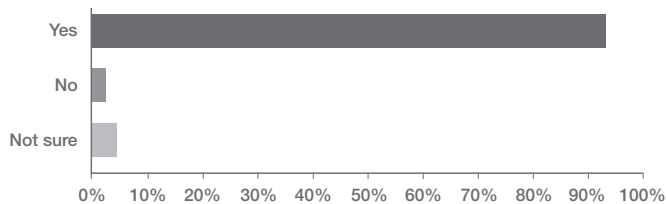
Answered: 205 Skipped: 0



Answer choices	Responses	
Yes	1.46%	3
No	75.12%	154
Some	23.41%	48
Total		205

Q2: Would your child engage better in a curriculum that they can develop themselves around the topics that interest them?

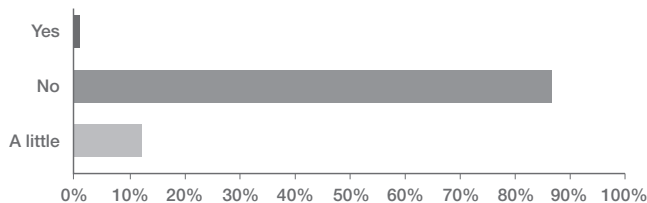
Answered: 204 Skipped: 1



Answer choices	Responses	
Yes	93.14%	190
No	2.45%	5
Not sure	4.41%	9
Total respondents		204

Q3: Do you think the education system is best suited for your autistic child?

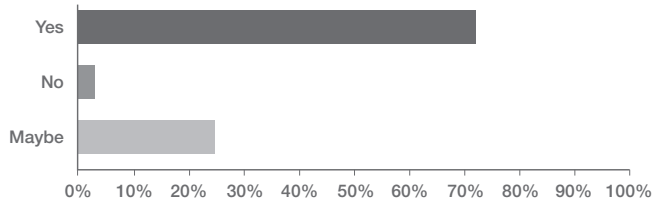
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Answer choices	Responses	
Yes	0.98%	2
No	86.83%	178
A little	12.20%	25
Total respondents		205

Q4: Would your child engage more in the National Curriculum if they could choose the subjects themselves?

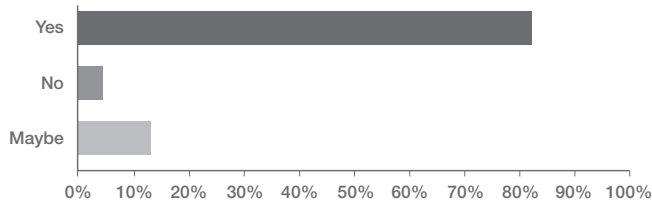
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Answer choices	Responses	
Yes	72.20%	148
No	2.93%	6
Maybe	24.88%	51
Total respondents		205

Q5: Would your child benefit from a creative style curriculum?

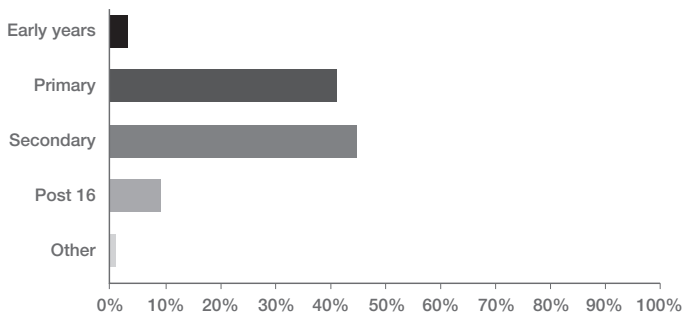
Answered: 205 Skipped: 0



Answer choices	Responses	
Yes	82.44%	169
No	4.39%	9
Maybe	13.17%	27
Total respondents		205

Q6: What age group does your child fit into?

Answered: 205 Skipped: 0



Answer choices	Responses	
Early years	3.41%	7
Primary	41.46%	85
Secondary	44.88%	92
Post 16	9.27%	19
Other	0.98%	2
Total respondents		205

Appendix 2: Examples of purposeful aims

Preferred way of learning (cognition and learning focus)	Purposeful aim development		
	Not there yet	Almost there	Self-Acceptance
I can decide what I want to learn			
I can control my own learning by suggesting topics that interest me			
I accept I do not have to do learning activities which make me feel anxious, frustrated			
I can confidently engage in what I want to learn			
I can say to someone when I do not want to learn something			
I can spend time in learning without feeling frustrated for longer periods of time			

Natural communication (communication and interaction focus)	Purposeful aim response		
	Not there yet	Almost there	Self-Acceptance
I can accept and interact with adult-suggested learning			
I can communicate I am feeling anxious			
I can communicate I want somebody to stop an activity using my own words			
I can communicate to stop an activity using a non-verbal gesture (e.g. shaking head).			
I can interact confidently with adults who are supporting me with my learning			
I do not have to mask how I feel with adults supporting me			
I can communicate it is not my fault when I am struggling at a task			

Reaching self-acceptance (social, emotional mental health focus)	Purposeful aim development		
	Not there yet	Almost there	Self-Acceptance
I can tell an adult I feel anxious or depressed			
I can engage in learning and not feel frustrated for a short amount of time			
I can engage in learning and not get frustrated for a longer amount of time			
I can recognise if I am beginning to feel anxious			
I can recognise why I am feeling anxious (e.g. I know what might have triggered my anxiety)			
I accept my frustration is not my fault			

Sensory differences (sensory and physical focus)	Purposeful aim response		
	Not there yet	Almost there	Self-Acceptance
I can tell an adult I feel uncomfortable in an environment.			
I can engage in learning by accepting my sensory differences.			
I can tell an adult I don't want to do something because of my sensory differences			
I can recognise if I am beginning to feel anxious because of my sensory differences			
I know I can say no to doing an activity that may trigger my sensory differences			
I can decide before doing an activity if I may have some difficulties with sensory issues.			