



Case stories

He's one of us:
How can I help a pupil with special needs,
and help the class cope with his behaviour?

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After attending the **ecI** training, Senior Teacher assistant, Janet Aylesbury began to bring a new and fresh approach to her work with pupils with Special Educational Needs. Nathan, a pupil with Aspergers Syndrome and various other conditions, had presented Janet and the Headteacher, who also taught him, with some very difficult challenges.

By involving the whole class in an honest appraisal of the situation and in identifying the 'triggers' to Nathan's outbursts, Janet and Val succeeded in making the challenge one which belonged to everyone. His peers were allowed some control and ownership of the situation and understood their responsibility to help maintain calm for Nathan.

What was my question all about?

I'm a Senior Teacher Assistant at Crockerton Primary School. Nathan was a child at our school who had a huge number of problems and different syndromes. He could change moods very quickly and become violent. He had obsessive ways and was argumentative, but he could be very likeable. I had great empathy with his parents. They felt that they were being judged. And I could understand that feeling. As a result of the **ecI** training I had done, I began to realise that although we had problems with him at school, he was also part of his family.

He needed a sense of belonging and for it to be seen that he belonged in the class. Before the training I think that we used to deal with Nathan, and only Nathan. If there was an argument we were going to have it out with him. Eventually we realised that he was part of the class, part of the whole jigsaw puzzle in school, and without Nathan the puzzle wasn't finished. I think that's when things changed, although it was only small steps, and not everybody would recognise it.

What actions did I try?

One day when we knew Nathan was going to be absent from school, Val, the Headteacher and I sat down with the other children and discussed the impact that Nathan had on them. They had experienced a very difficult time with him in the past few days. They weren't learning, they couldn't

concentrate, and they were being distracted. Some were quite enjoying seeing him get into trouble and even found ways to 'press the right buttons' to start him off. But when we spoke to them they told us what they thought triggered off these tantrums, even some that we hadn't thought of.

They told us that the trigger could be as simple as the teacher coming in with a drink of hot chocolate, since chocolate was banned for the children. Nathan had very strong feelings about 'fairness'. Touching his pencil case was another trigger. We made a whole list of 'triggers' that caused him to get angry and then talked about how to help him. From then on things changed.

Nathan himself hadn't changed at all. It was the rest of us. Although he carried on being him, he certainly didn't have such a negative impact on the children.

What insights did I get?

The other children were able to step back from Nathan and see that he had problems that they could help with. After that they felt that they had a bit more control over the situation and ownership of what happens in the class.

They needed a 'vehicle' to be able to talk about him. They worked out a system to inform us about potential trouble, because he would have reacted very badly, even violently, if he thought they were telling on him. They just jotted down in a book when things were beginning to boil over and this helped them cope on bad days because they felt that they could communicate safely with us.

After a while they weren't even thinking of our list of triggers, they got into a way of life with dealing with Nathan. That session made the children and us, as staff, realise that Nathan's behaviour wasn't just his responsibility but it was also all of ours.



'I know in my heart that I've done what I can – but then I can accept that that is all I can do.'

Janet Aylesbury

How does your insight affect what you're now doing and what difference is this making?

I work with Key Stage 2 (8-11 year olds) and generally with the children who are 'less able'. I enjoy working with groups or individual children trying to sort out their problems. I have changed my way of teaching completely since the training I had with the **ecf** foundation on a residential course.

This training has helped quite a bit by helping me to accept that where the children at school are concerned, I know I can only do so much. I know in my heart that I've done what I can – but then I can accept that that is all I can do.

Words of Appreciation

'As a Headteacher, one occasionally has the privilege to work with parents who are truly prepared to be open minded and completely trusting, in order to do anything to help their children. The trust of these mothers was pretty terrifying and humbling and their subsequent honesty very moving. I am extremely grateful to them for enabling such a healing experience and one from which the school learnt so much. Thank you also to the girls for their trust, honesty and courage. And to Janet, my wonderful Senior Teaching Assistant, for caring so much.' Val Culff

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