

Autism support: an interview with Gina Davies

1. Can you tell us how you first became interested in autism?

Well, I am getting on a bit now and I have to say that when I trained as a speech and language therapist, autism wasn't even mentioned in my speech and language therapy training. 'Cause it was considered to be so rare that I was very unlikely to meet anybody with it.

And then in my first job, which was in a long stay hospital for the mentally subnormal, and that shows you how old I am 'cause we're not allowed to say those things anymore, there was a hospital school, but actually there was a group of children who didn't go into the school but went onto a ward where they were kinda contained for the day. And those were the children with autism.

And I became very interested in why weren't they in school and what could be done to support these children. But I didn't know what to do because I had no skillset available. But I started asking around and began to understand, yes, this was autism. This was likely what I would see. But I found it really difficult to find anybody who could tell me actually what to do with them to improve the situation.

And then I left that job and worked in the community for quite a long time. And then I got a job in an autism specialist school because I found I was beginning to see some of these children in the community clinic that I was involved in and I still didn't have really any useful information to give to the parents and certainly I couldn't make the standard therapy work.

So I went to work in the specialist school and there I was very lucky in that the teachers began to show me what strategies would work. And then there was just a little bit more information coming out of the speech and language therapy field. And I began to put the two together to try and find a way of getting a connection, getting connected with the kids first so that you have some kind of interaction that you can build some communication skills into. And then see if we can build some social interaction around that.

So it was kind of an emerging fascination and then I've been very lucky in my career. I've met people who have coached me, mentored me, allowed me to experiment with new techniques, given me feedback, and what I do now is really based on everything I've learned cumulatively over my career.

2. Can you tell us about your current work?

Well really my fascination with autism continues and is developing all the time. At one point in my career, I ran, with a colleague, a teaching colleague, a nursery for children on the spectrum or children who were kind of in the prediagnosis stage where we developed an early intervention model with a small team of colleagues.

And I think we got pretty good at what we were doing and we were very proud of it. But the trouble was the politics were changing and everything moved away from specialist intervention to mainstream inclusion, and I began to feel that although there is definitely a place for specialist early intervention, is that we had developed a model that would work if we could transport it out of that setting into other places, so the nursery continued but I left and began to look at how we could find the best practise that we'd developed there and begin to glue it into something that would work for a much wider range of children, both in terms of age range and in terms of setting.

And that has developed to become the Attention Autism Programme, which I now run training in and I use myself and we run it in schools and clinics and actually in care homes in some situations and specialist colleges, and it's really a framework for building connections with the children or young adults and then using that framework once it's established to deliver whatever curriculum is appropriate for them.

On a slightly wider basis, I'm also an autism sleep counsellor and I've developed a real interest in the difficulties that families and individuals on the spectrum experience with sleep and the knock on, secondary effects of sleep deprivation, so I'm very interested in that. And then I work with a small group of families and children on an ongoing basis.

3. What is meaningful engagement?

I think perhaps it's possible to say that over the last few years, we've been very involved in data collection, in setting smart targets, measuring, evaluating, collecting data, and yes, I do think it's very important that we know what we're doing and that we have some evidence for whether what we're doing is working and how we can use that to reflect and adapt what we're doing to make it more successful.

But I think perhaps we've come to the, sort of the peak of that cycle and now the smart targets are beginning to drive what we teach and I think that can cause us a lot of problems because things become sort of divided into very discreet skillsets and that can be hard, particularly for people on the spectrum to see how the skills would mesh together in real life, in the real world.

So this morning I was perhaps using an opportunity to step back a little bit and think about what's the why here, why are we doing it? Why are we intervening? And I think it's because we want to make a difference. We want to help the individuals build a really good bank of positive experiences and good relationships that underpin the building of knowledge and expertise that then they can progress forward with throughout their lives to develop a lifelong love of learning.

And we can do that through reward systems, but that is fairly short term because we know motivation works in more complicated ways than just an extrinsic reward. And we need to

look at how can we get the individuals to buy in to the learning opportunity we've got on offer.

Well, for a start we need to make that whatever it is we're going to offer them, whatever opportunity, whatever activity we're going to offer as good as we can possibly make it, make it look fabulous, make it be interesting, buy into it ourselves, care about what we're doing, and then I think we give, we need to give ourselves licence to enjoy what we're doing and to find it fascinating, rather than getting completely caught up in the data collection.

As we design the activity, let's design the activity first, make sure the curriculum is certainly in there, we are teaching something valid and useful, and then you've got to commit to your activity and the sharing of it with the individual, and then you look at whether it worked or not.

But you've actually got to commit to it, and one way you can get buy in is to make it fun. If it's fun and it makes you laugh, it makes it very appealing. Of if it's fascinating, you want to know what's happening, you want to know what's happening next. You get completely engaged and absorbed in the activity and that's a very good place to develop learning for life. So that's what I was trying to do this morning, talk about that.

4. You work with autistic children – can your approaches be adapted for autistic adults?

Most definitely yes. The original idea began in the nursery, so it was being developed and practised every day with children between the ages of two and sort of 4 1/2.

But as soon as we moved out of the nursery and began to look at where else we could use the programme, we realised that the framework can work across the ages, you simply change and adapt the language you use and the activities you use, because those must appeal to the age group and match the curriculum, whatever that is, that the students and young people are working at.

Now that doesn't matter whether you're learning how to make a cake or build a bird box or perhaps explore ideas around planets and star systems. It's a question of the structure and the delivery of the activity and the framework, understanding how to make the learning opportunity accessible. It's not about age at all, and certainly the programme is being used up the age range.

5. Can you tell us how some of your strategies have been implemented in a classroom setting?

I think we have to answer that in two parts. One is kind of in a specialist school setting and one is within mainstream school settings. So within a specialist setting, the programme can actually become the framework for how you deliver your curriculum. So that's one way of doing it. So you could deliver your topic work directly through the Attention Autism

Programme or you can use the strategies that are embedded in the programme across your school day.

So we use a lot of drawing. Instead of using symbol time tables. Symbol time tables are fine, haven't got a problem with those, the thing about drawing as you go is that it can be more dynamic, so you can approach particular issues actually in that moment, you can break them down a little bit more than is possible with symbols. You can individualise it a little bit. Or you can take advantage of something that's just happened in the moment that you want to, an idea you want to go with.

So we could use, certainly, the strategies of drawing. Also the understanding of how attention skills develop. That kind of understanding can be applied across the day to make sure that every time there's a learning opportunity, that actually the young person on the spectrum can see it and engage with it in order to learn from it.

And in one of the core strategies that the children and young people learn is how to learn something by watching. So if you can learn by watching a demonstration, so many things become possible regardless of your language levels. So that, in a special school it can be that the basic strategies are run across the day and/or the programme is used for curriculum delivery.

Within mainstream settings, it can be used in several ways. One is to give the children on the spectrum an opportunity to focus and engage their attention on key aspects of what's being delivered in the class to be sure that they've really got a grip on it, and that they understand what's going on here and therefore much more likely to engage with it when they're back in the class.

Or it can be used perhaps with a group of peers from the same class to produce a social communication context that has a meaningful function. So we all go to the club because we're doing experiments with explosions, not we're going to learn social skills, which is not appealing to young people, particularly in secondary. But we're going to the club because we're gonna do science experiments. And of course, the way that they're structured means that the social skills and the social communication that we need to practise is within a meaningful peer framework.