

# WHY DID YOU **Sub** my son?



Fintan O'Regan looks at how schools can manage the sometimes unrealistic expectations of parents whose children have SEN...

**Y**ou can please some of the people all of the time, you can please all of the people some of the time, but you can't please all of the people all of the time." This age-old saying is certainly true of parents, and in particular those parents whose children have special educational needs.

Though the majority of parents of children with SEN will usually be grateful for empathetic and supportive schools and teachers, there are a minority that will have unrealistic expectations and may even try to intimidate schools into providing resources and services that are outside of budgetary constraints. Some parents may also use labels such as ADHD or ASD as an excuse, rather than an explanation, for inappropriate behaviour, or as a 'right' to go to the front of the queue.

A good example of this situation occurred in the summer of 2009 when a newspaper headline claimed that children with ADHD should be issued with "fast passes" on trips to theme parks. This is a tricky one, as on the one hand you could argue, "why not?". ADHD is a recognised disability that makes it extremely difficult for those who have it to wait or take turns. Not many people would deny a person with a physical disability his 'right' to go on the ride or receive his meal in advance of someone without a physical impairment. Why, therefore, shouldn't we make similar allowances for a person who has a mental health disability?

Arguments exist on both sides. However, looking into the future, what is a young driver with ADHD to make of the situation when he is stuck in a major traffic jam on the M25? If he has grown up always using the fast pass option in life, how will he be able to deal with waiting?

The question is: how do you balance addressing differences and disabilities with preparing children for the challenges they will face in the future?

## Reasonable response

**KEEP THE FOLLOWING STEPS IN MIND WHEN A PARENT NEXT APPROACHES YOU WITH AN ISSUE REGARDING THEIR CHILD...**

- **Listen and acknowledge – allow them to express themselves uninterrupted**
- **Ask them what they think they need in order to resolve the issue**
- **Agree to reasonable requests. Consider who will action them and when**
- **Give them a clear and realistic date when you will contact them with an update on their child's progress**
- **Thank them and remind them that you have their child's best interests at heart**



## What's his story?

### GAIN A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF SEN...

The five books in the **Stories for Special Children** series each centre around a child with a different SEN. Reading about the characters, such as Katie who has Autism and Daniel who has Dyspraxia, will reassure pupils who have faced similar challenges. Written by Paediatric Occupational Therapist Allison Harris, each book also contains valuable information for supporting children with SEN and enabling them to develop their potential. Contact [tts-group.com](http://tts-group.com) 0800 318 686



and others in the group in danger due to the variability and unpredictability of his mood swings.

## Parents of children with SEN will usually be grateful for empathetic and supportive schools and teachers, but a minority will have unrealistic expectations

### What is a school's legal duty?

One tool that is used by both schools and parents to make sense of the situation is the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA). Under Part 4 of the DDA 1995 (as amended by the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001), schools are required:

- not to treat disabled pupils 'less favourably';
- to make reasonable adjustments to ensure that disabled pupils are not at a substantial disadvantage compared to their peers;
- to draw up plans to show how, over time, they will increase access to education for disabled pupils;
- to comply with the DED.

Teachers must also take account of the Disability Equality Duty (DED) which forms Part 5A of the DDA 1995. It places a general duty on schools to:

- promote equality of opportunity between disabled people and other people;
- eliminate discrimination that is unlawful under the DDA 1995 (as amended);
- eliminate harassment of disabled people that is related to their disability;
- promote positive attitudes towards disabled people;
- encourage participation by disabled people in public life;
- take steps to meet disabled people's needs, even if this requires more favourable treatment.

The final point here raises a key question, which is what does 'more favourable treatment' actually mean? It bears consideration as parents have real power when it comes to disability. They are also not afraid to wield it by using legal options and other agencies to argue their case.

### How to balance children's rights

As a former headteacher of a special needs school I have championed the cause of children and families with SEN for many years, but I have also learnt there must be a balance.

In general, parents are not objective regarding their own children. I know this as both a former head and, more recently, as the coach of a successful under 11s football team. Were the parents grateful when we won the league and cup double? Not on your life! Every substitution of their child was greeted with a stare of disbelief, which confused me at first. Little did I know that the real competition was whose son would win the 'top scorer' award? It was not as important that the team won, but rather that their child won.

Parents of a child with SEN who have had to fight tooth and nail to get the support they need and deserve are usually very grateful for the services provided. However, some are in the football-parent department. Here is my three-step troubleshooting strategy to counter this:

#### 1. CLEAR SCHOOL POLICIES ON SEN PROVISION

This includes Anti Bullying, Teaching and Learning, and Health and Safety. The latter I believe can be used creatively to counter any argument presented.

**PROBLEM:** The parents' request that their child with Bipolar Disorder should be allowed to join an after school cycling club that uses local roads.

**SOLUTION:** This child, who has serious anger management and self harm issues, often leaves both the classroom and – on occasions – the school itself when he becomes upset. After a risk assessment the decision was taken that he could put both himself

#### 2. ALL STAFF TRAINED IN KEY SEN AREAS

Especially physical disabilities and learning and behaviour areas such as ADHD, ASD and Dyslexia.

**PROBLEM:** A child with ADHD who continuously rocks on a chair or fidgets with a cord hanging down from a nearby blind.

**SOLUTION:** Children with ADHD need movement to help them learn. However, it needs to be structured. Move them to an area away from the distraction of the blind and give them a manipulative, such as a tangle toy, in order to occupy their hands. This will reduce the need for movement by the hips.

#### 3. OPEN AND HONEST COMMUNICATION WITH PARENTS

This especially applies to parents whose children have mental health difficulties.

**PROBLEM:** A parent claims it's not Robbie's fault he has hit another child. He was being teased and 'that is what happens when you have ASD'.

**SOLUTION:** Remind the parent that ASD has never hit anybody, but Robbie has. Everybody is responsible for their actions and we will do Robbie no long term favours if he uses ASD as an excuse. Robbie has to make choices when he is teased. In this case he made the wrong choice, and we will aim to help him make better choices in the future.

I believe that inclusion means that all children have rights, including pupils with SEN and those without. Schools should be the guardians of observing that all children have the right to learn, and it is the responsibility of teachers to reaffirm and remind parents of this key principle.

## Find out more

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