

“This is so much more than just a good school. It has been a lifeline in so many ways”

Sarah and Brian live in the Weymouth area and have three daughters. Rose is 18, Robyn 13 and Esmay is 11.



Extra time

Esmay is in her final year at Chickerell Primary Academy, having taken an extra year there in order to help her catch up because of her additional needs. Robyn was also a pupil there until she moved up to a secondary setting.

All three girls are neurodivergent, with the two older ones on the autism spectrum and Esmay diagnosed with ADHD.

Hardship

This family has been through an extremely difficult few years. Aside from the fact that the girls all have mental

health challenges, the recent pandemic left both Sarah and Brian without jobs or income and they found themselves homeless through no fault of their own, and for a while were housed in emergency accommodation.

Struggling to survive

“It’s hard now to contemplate what an awful time that was,” explains Sarah. “We were struggling to cope, both financially and to care for three children with special needs. We moved to Chickerell during the early stages of the Covid crisis but needed a school for the girls. In a huge piece of good fortune, we found Chickerell Primary Academy and it’s not too much to say that I don’t think we would have survived without its support.”

A need for routine

Robyn and Esmay were enrolled at the same time and although their parents were not classified as Key Workers, were offered classes in school. “The people we talked to at the school realised that the girls needed to continue their education as much as possible, partly because they had previously missed quite a lot but also because the staff recognised that children with autism and ADHD benefit greatly with routine.”

Life-saving support

At this point, Sarah explains further why she feels so deeply grateful to Chickerell school: “It’s a fact that boys and girls with autism present in very different ways, and that girls are much less likely to be diagnosed. Girls tend to mask their feelings and appear compliant and calm, whilst suffering badly inside, and this can lead to greater problems further down the line. This was actually the case with Rose who, when she attended a different primary school, was not given support at any level and subsequently became severely anorexic, from which she nearly died.”

Revelation

When Sarah happened upon Chickerell school, saw how “they scooped up my girls and treated them like valued individuals”, she realised: “this is what a good school should be.”

Safety

Sarah has a lengthy list of the ways in which she says that she and her whole family have been helped by the school, including the outstanding SENCO team who immediately offered specialist help with pastoral care, more effective reading support and what Sarah describes as a safe place. The girls can suffer from social anxiety so are given the opportunity to benefit from breaktime and lunchtime clubs where they do not feel they have to interact with other children on the playground.

Unexpected generosity

Perhaps what Sarah and Brian have been most appreciative of, however, is the way the school quietly provided a completely unasked-for and unexpected resource in terms of help with food and utility bills, and holiday activities and Christmas presents for the children. “These things came out of the blue. Being unable to put a decent meal on the table, heat the house or afford something for the girls to unwrap at Christmas was just dreadful and yet we were able to do so thanks to the incredibly generosity shown to us.”

Looking to the future

Thankfully, the family now have a home of their own, and Sarah has a job she loves with an Alternative Education Provider where she finally feels she can make a positive contribution of her own. “My school actually works quite closely with Chickerell, providing much-needed care for other children who have fallen out of the mainstream. Having seen at first hand what a difference appropriate treatment can make to children in need, it’s wonderful to be able to play a part in that myself.”

Credit where it is due

Both Robyn and Esmay will be attending a specialist setting at secondary level, but Sarah is convinced that it is Chickerell Primary Academy which should take the credit for keeping them in a mainstream setting for their vital early education.

Sarah sums up her feelings thus: “The difference between Chickerell and some other primary schools I have seen is like the difference between night and day.”