



Ann and Philip Parsons live in Basildon with their two sons. Callan is aged eighteen, and Jacob, aged twelve



In the face of almost insurmountable difficulties, Ann had no-one to turn to until Castledon School pulled out all the stops to help

Invaluable intervention

To say that Ann and Philip have had problems over the last few years would be something of an understatement. With both of their children having a wide range of complex mental health issues, they have faced enormous difficulties in obtaining the support they so desperately needed to ensure the boys' wellbeing and Ann believes it is only because of the intervention of Castledon School that she is still able to retain her own sanity.

Complex needs

Both Callan and Jacob attended mainstream school until the age of seven, largely against their parents' wishes but because their problems were not deemed sufficiently severe for a place in a special setting. "Between them, the boys suffer with ADHD, OCD, Tourette's Syndrome, Asperger's and autism," explains Ann. "Perhaps because they are also very intelligent, their symptoms were not seen to be serious enough and yet Callan's mainstream school continually excluded him because of his behaviour. He is unable to make eye contact and can be hyperactive but this was seen as naughtiness rather than a result of his condition, and the school could not or would not accept this."

A life-changing experience

Eventually, Callan was allocated a place at Castledon and that, says Ann, has changed his life. "We fought to get that place and it was worth the fight. Within a couple of weeks he was a different child. At his previous school he was only allowed to go in for an hour or so every day and even that he felt hard to cope with. When he started at Castledon he went straight into full days, took to it like a duck to water, and absolutely loved it. Because of how he had been treated before his confidence was at rock bottom; before he left Castledon he was awarded a Gold Medal in the Jack Petchey Awards for achievement. That is how far he has come."

A sibling of a sufferer of autism or Tourette's is believed to have a 40% chance of also inheriting one or other of the conditions and when Jacob was

about 18 months old, Ann was quick to recognise traits similar to those she had earlier seen in Callan. "Once we realised that Jacob was similarly affected, we knew we had to get him into Castledon, too," she says. "The boys are very different but Castledon had done so much for Callan we knew it was what Jacob needed."

Excellent and effective support

Whilst Callan has very successfully moved on to college and achieving very well in his chosen field, Jacob still has a long way to go but Ann is convinced that he is in the right place. "It's not just that Jacob is receiving excellent, sensitive and effective support from the school, but that we as a whole family are supported incredibly well. I truly believe that if it were not for the care and understanding we have been shown by everyone at Castledon School I would not have been able to cope to the extent that I have. Jacob still has huge difficulties and those have affected us all greatly, but because I have such amazing back-up from people who completely understand, I can keep going."

A positive approach

Perhaps the thing that Ann values most about Castledon School is the faith it shows in the power of positivity. "All the boys' teachers emphasise the fact that they can achieve what they want if they are prepared to work for it, and that they are not doomed to failure because they have certain problems to overcome. I love the fact that each and every child at the school is allowed to recognise their individuality and appreciate each other for who they are, rather than being stigmatised for being different."

Every step of the way

Caring for a child with such severe problems, however much loved the child is, can be physically and emotionally draining and that is why Ann has nothing but gratitude for the teachers and support staff at Castledon who have been with her and her family every step of the way. "They have pulled out all the stops and the family support network has been amazing - they have become like friends to us. When you have a fight on your hands - as we have - it's invaluable to know that you have someone fighting alongside you."



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