



Selworthy School



Emma and John Gibbs live in Taunton with their five children, ranging in age from 18 to 11. Jack is 14 and attends Selworthy School.

Emma's determination to find the right care for her son led her to Selworthy School. It has not let her down in any way

In denial

Emma freely admits that for a long time she was in denial about Jack's condition and remained determined to send him to a mainstream school. At two years old Jack was diagnosed with IP36 Deletion Syndrome and he suffers from a range of disabilities associated with this, including epilepsy, learning difficulties, compromised motor skills and heart problems.

Change of perspective

Nevertheless, Emma was reluctant to send him to a special school. "When a friend suggested that I at least went to look at Selworthy I was completely set against the idea but she persuaded me to go and I fell in love with the place instantly. I could see how the staff were with the children and realised that it would actually serve Jack better than anywhere else. We are so glad that we changed our view; in the time he's been there he has come on in leaps and bounds, far more than we expected."

A complex situation

Emma describes Jack as being like a little doll as a baby. "He is a complex little soul and although we loved him, we didn't really understand his needs. Being so different from his siblings, we were unsure of how to treat him but obviously we just wanted the best care available and we feel so lucky that that is what we now have."

A remarkable difference

When he started at Selworthy, Jack was unable to interact with the other children, to form friendships or engage with school life but within a fairly short period of time he started to show more awareness and interest. "He certainly knows what he likes and will let us know what he is comfortable with, and he has come a long way. He's formed connections with his classmates and members of staff and is happy in their company, and if there is a school inset day he gets very upset that we drive past the school instead of going in. The difference is remarkable."

Structure vs flexibility

What Emma values about the school is that Jack is allowed to express himself and to be himself, with a tailored education to suit his particular needs and abilities. "Even though there is structure there is also a great deal of flexibility so that if one day he enjoys science but is less keen the next day, for example, he can move to something else. The teachers understand Jack's limits and don't push him further than his own capabilities but they encourage him constantly, and it's paying off. He absolutely loves being there."

Strategies

As Jack is non-verbal, he uses picture cards to communicate and Emma acknowledges how useful the system is. "It was something Selworthy initiated and they showed us how to use

them at home," she says. "We obviously know Jack very well but the school has been wonderful in giving us strategies to support him and it is very much a two-way thing. They have also taught us how to be patient with him; not always easy with Jack!"

Part of the family

Emma describes Selworthy as almost part of the family, somewhere she and John are always listened to and can turn to for advice at any time. "I can go in or ring them whenever I need to and they will make time for me. If we see a member of staff in the street, they will make a point of greeting us, and if I ever need a shoulder to cry on when things are difficult they will hand out tea and tissues and sit with me for as long as it takes, and I have done that on many occasions. All our children are very special to us but Jack's vulnerability makes us that bit more protective of him and sometimes we need that extra emotional support."

Absolute trust

Jack has very recently undergone major brain surgery to help limit his epileptic seizures and, thankfully, it appears to have been successful. He still, however, needs to maintain his medication so Emma is glad to be able to trust the school to administer it as necessary. "It is very hard to entrust your child's welfare to someone else but I have every faith in the school's ability and preparedness to undertake the appropriate action, and to keep my son safe."

"The dedication of the staff and their focus on empowering the children is what makes Selworthy School the awesome place it is," concludes Emma. "I could not leave my child in the care of other people unless those people were getting everything absolutely right. They absolutely are."



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