



Selworthy School



Nicolette and Chris Venning live in Taunton with their large family of 15 children. Nathan, 12, Nicolette Junior, eight, and Robert, five, are pupils at Selworthy School.

Nicolette despaired for the mental health of her son until Selworthy School transformed his life, and that of his brother and sister, too

A difficult start

From an early age, it was clear to Nicolette and Chris that Nathan had a range of learning difficulties, although without an official diagnosis they had little choice but to send him to a mainstream school. "He struggled from the start," remembers Nicolette. "He was making hardly any progress and he was picked on and bullied because of his problems. We tried another school but the same thing happened there and I decided he would have to leave and be home-schooled instead. He was dreadfully unhappy."

Shut off from the world

For some considerable time, Nathan refused to leave the house and insisted on all the curtains being closed because he was so frightened of the outside world. Despite constant reassurance and care from his parents and siblings, his mental health had deteriorated so badly that Nicolette feared for his future. "His school experience had affected him to the extent that he was terrified of strangers, of anyone in authority, and he had absolutely no self-confidence. Despite his learning difficulties he didn't reach the criteria for a diagnosis of autism and so we had no help at all."

A life-changing move

Eventually, three years ago, Nicolette and Chris managed to get a place for him at Selworthy and this has, says Nicolette, changed their lives. "It took Nathan quite a while to settle in but what was so wonderful was how the staff understood him and worked to his strengths. Gradually, with a sensitive and sensible approach, they managed to break down the barriers he had put up around himself and restore his confidence, so that he actually started to want to learn. They concentrated on what he was good at and what he enjoyed, and now he is starting to read and write, and enjoying it. He no longer feels different, but accepted for who he is."

An unexpected talent discovered

Nathan is learning a range of life and social skills, such as personal care and appropriate behaviour, and has discovered a fascination and talent for cooking. "He absolutely loves the cookery lessons and is really, really good at it!" laughs Nicolette. "It's another thing which makes him feel good about himself and an example of how the school takes the time and trouble to find a way of getting through to children with additional needs."

The chance to blossom

Like Nathan, Nicolette Junior also started in the mainstream system but she suffers from a range of physical disabilities as well as learning difficulties. With Chromosome 16 disorder, cerebral palsy and epilepsy, she, too, found school challenging and it was a relief when she was accepted into Selworthy last year. "Selworthy had done such an amazing job with Nathan, I knew it was the right choice for Nicolette as well," says her mum. "She has some way to go but is starting to blossom and the facilities available have been such a help. The hydrotherapy

pool is wonderful for exercise and for strengthening her muscles, and music therapy is perfect for her love of performing and singing. Although she talks a lot at home, she wouldn't do so in a group setting but now that is changing as she becomes more confident."

A clever approach to learning

Robert's difficulties are somewhat different, and can present particular problems for the family: at five years old he has an energy which his parents find hard to keep up with. "Robert has autism and is non-verbal but what he doesn't lack is strength and speed! Even his teachers say they have rarely seen anything like it but fortunately, the outside space at Selworthy is perfect for him to let off steam. He is having speech and language therapy and occupational therapy, and uses picture cards to help his communication. Cleverly, he is being taught to count by using his favourite toy dinosaurs and he's improving because the method engages his interest."

Transformation

Whilst Selworthy School has been a huge help to all three children, as well as constantly supportive of the family as a whole, it is mainly for Nathan's sake that Nicolette is so grateful. "Last year Nathan had the lead role in the school's production of The Snowman. To see my scared, withdrawn and sad little boy up on the stage, singing his heart out and full of confidence was truly astonishing. For me, that transformation sums up Selworthy School!"



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