

Caring for a child with severe learning difficulties can be a frightening and isolating experience. Torfield School has helped Maureen and Brian to overcome the barriers



Anna Pearce is eight years old and lives in St Leonards with her mother, Amanda, and grandparents Maureen and Brian.



Unbending support

In many ways, Maureen and Brian feel very blessed. Not only to be able to play a major part in bringing up the granddaughter they adore but because of the help and unbending support they have had from Torfield School. Nowhere else, believes Brian, could have addressed Anna's many needs so well and at the same time ensured that he, Maureen and Amanda were empowered in the challenge of looking after a child with Anna's difficulties.

No better environment

Anna has autism as well as many of the traits which can go with the condition. She self-harms, will abscond and can be aggressive, and until recently was largely non-verbal. "We were fortunate in that Anna's autism was picked up early so that by the time she was due to start primary school she had the Statement she needed for a place at Torfield," Brian says. "I don't really like to think about what we would have done otherwise; she would not have been safe in a mainstream school and it would have been a dreadful worry for us. As things are, Torfield could not be a better environment for her and it has been wonderful to see the progress she has made, and continues to make."

A learning curve

Maureen and Brian have been close and hands-on grandparents to Anna ever since she was born, learning by necessity about autism along the way. However, Brian admits it has been a huge learning curve for them and that at times they felt out of their depth. "We knew very little about the condition in the early days and even less about where to turn for advice. From our point of view, one of the best things about Torfield is that it has been such a valuable source of information and support, and has enabled us to better support Anna in turn. The staff have always fallen over backwards for us and nothing is ever too much trouble."

Peer support for families can be a lifesaver

Torfield has a policy of encouraging family participation and Brian has found this something of a lifesaver. "Other than through the medical profession and social services, we knew hardly anyone who had personal experience of autism and we did feel quite isolated, so the social events that Torfield runs for families have been absolutely invaluable. We have been on loads of courses such as gardening and sewing, and to coffee mornings, but the main point is getting people together, where we can have a chinwag and compare notes and experiences. The peer support is worth as much as anything, and is very reassuring – it makes such a difference to know you're not alone."

Strategies that work

Anna has made very positive progress, particularly in her reading and her speech and especially in the last year, and she has also become more behaviourally stable, something which Maureen greatly appreciates. "She can be very affectionate and it's so lovely that she will give us hugs and kisses more often! It is also much easier to take her out, to play parks or to the shops, with much less risk of a tantrum or meltdown, and we credit Torfield for giving her the strategies to modify her behaviour."

Confronting fears and gaining advice

Brian is very honest in admitting his fears and the insecurity he and Maureen have felt in the past. "It can be frightening to be confronted with a situation you don't know how to handle but one it is so important to get right. That is why we have been so grateful for how everyone at Torfield School has listened to our every concern and done everything in their power to address each one."

Maureen agrees. "Anna is our world and we want nothing other than the best for her. At Torfield, Anna is getting the best possible support and so are we. So many people don't understand what it is like to have a child with severe learning difficulties and I used to get upset when Anna was accused of being 'naughty'. Because of Torfield School, we are now in a better and more enlightened place.."



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