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Autism and flexi-schooling

Sadly, many parents of autistic children will recognise the misery of ‘school morning syndrome’ and the child who comes home from that same school exhausted and unable to take any part in family social activities. We can also privately acknowledge the number of days ‘off sick’ that we allow our children to take, when we know that in reality their only illness is the need for a break from school.

Of course there is a great deal that schools can, and do, do to support autistic children to access schools successfully, and there is some excellent provision to help autistic children to be included. Yet Mary Warnock, that great advocate for inclusion in education, agreed with Lorna Wing that for some autistic children there is no such thing as true inclusion in mainstream school (2006, In ‘Included or Excluded’, edited by Ruth Cigman. Routledge Press). For some, full time mainstream school by its very nature may be so challenging, exhausting, isolating and downright frightening that they experience no true inclusion at all.

Some parents of autistic children feel forced to withdraw their children from school and home educate. It is not known just how many choose this option as there is no register of home educated children in the UK.

Yet we do not all want to home educate, and many of us continue to recognise the many benefits that school brings to our autistic children:

- access to teachers who are specialist in their subjects
- opportunities to learn alongside peers
- the general shared cultural experience of education.

We know that many schools are developing expertise in autism that can give very real support to our children as they grow up. We do not want to reject all of this, just because we know that our children find it – full time – more than they can manage.

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There is a third way: neither full-time school, nor full-time home education, but a combination of the two. Back in 2010 Parsons and Lewis suggested that education should 'be sufficiently flexible to accommodate children's changing needs over time, for example, through offering a mix of school and home-based provision'. In 2018 this sharing of education between home and school – sometimes called 'flexischooling' – is still seldom offered to parents of autistic children.

Let us be clear: what is being described here is very different from the wholly illegal practice of a school saying that an autistic child must go home for parts of the school day or may not attend certain events or school trips. The flexischooling that I am describing is something very different, where school and family choose together to share the child's education in a negotiated, agreed, respectful, informed and professional manner, placing the needs of that child firmly at the centre of all they do.

We shared the education of our son, Sam, between home and school throughout his school career. How we managed this varied, according to his changing needs:

- at KS1 he attended for half an hour for story time, three times a week
- at KS2 he attended for most mornings and spent the afternoons at home
- at KS3 and 4 he attended on a reduced timetable
- at KS5 he completed three A levels at school and one through home
- he is now at university studying Psychology.

We can never, of course, prove that this rather odd schooling worked 'better' for him than either full-time school or full-time home education. All we know is that he has been, and is, happy. Now that he is older, he is very clear that he believes this happiness was achieved through his shared education. He enjoyed his time in school and did not feel overwhelmed or defeated by the many elements of it that he found difficult. He also enjoyed his additional time at home, and we enjoyed sharing that time with him.

The 'at home' time of Sam's education was very much spent with me as a parent. It gave us time to interact, to learn to build back and forth conversations and to develop our relationship. It enabled us to practice skills like queueing, choosing, cooking and shopping. It gave us the chance to work on projects, to share his interests, and sometimes to move him on from those interests to develop new ones. It gave us an opportunity to work with his teachers to sort out some of the things he found confusing at school, put them right and enable him to access education from a position of strength and calm. And it gave Sam time to recharge, and to come to understand, accept and value his autism.

Clearly this is not an option which will benefit every child or something to be considered by every family, but I remain convinced that for some it can be of benefit, and that it should be something else to add to the menu for discussion as each of us tries to do the best for our individual children.

Flexischooling – shared education – is a legal option, but not a right. It is undertaken at the discretion of the headteacher and to make it work parents, headteacher, class teachers and SENCo all need to work together. They need to be patient, to be respectful of each other's

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perspective, to keep an open mind to provide an individualised, personalised and joined-up care which puts the ever-changing needs of that child at its core.

But then, I would argue that those attributes are features of all good education.

Further Reading

Clare's book, *'Autism and Flexischooling – a shared Classroom and Homeschooling approach'* is published by Jessica Kingsley, and her PhD research thesis is available at <http://shura.shu.ac.uk/16597>. Her other books are available through Amazon.