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# Point of view: parent

## Recognising the problem

*Teachers didn't understand my bright sons' ASD, says Tania Tirraoro*

**B**oth my sons, Giorgio aged 12 and Luca, 13, have Asperger's syndrome, and both are extremely intelligent. Luca, however, struggled with understanding the norms of behaviour, was prone to emotional or physical outbursts and was virtually friendless. He needed to be first in everything and this constant rushing affected the quality of his work. Giorgio, a gentle soul, could read at three, but still struggles to write legibly. Group work was impossible and his original way of thinking made it hard for him to follow instructions. One teacher remarked that, "He has informed opinions which he expresses well but they are often tenuously linked to the subject matter."

Before they were diagnosed, their infant school tried behavioural charts for Luca, and eventually, after I insisted, a literacy software programme for Giorgio. However, when you don't know why a child is experiencing problems in the first place, it's difficult to put the right help in place. Interventions are less than effective when the child doesn't have the attention span to make use of them or the ability to change their behaviour because their underlying condition isn't being addressed.

I knew nothing about ASD at this stage. I was relying on the expertise of teachers to alert me to what might be a small part of a larger whole, but the teachers didn't have that special needs expertise and so I decided to consult a paediatrician.

Once diagnosed, Giorgio was put on School Action Plus and assessed by an LEA educational psychologist and an ASD outreach worker. However, their recommendations had little effect. He moved up to junior school where they did the best they could, but Giorgio was often an unwilling participant in their strategies.

Throughout, I helped at school in each child's class, so the teachers knew me, but no-one at school addressed the obvious issue: their interventions

### *No-one at school addressed the obvious issue: their interventions were failing*

were failing. For example, Giorgio was placed in a remedial English group because, although he read brilliantly, he still couldn't write, and the school didn't know what to do with him. This left him extremely distressed.

I asked about a statement but was told it would be extremely unlikely as they were both clever boys. However, having read the LEA's own ASD criteria, it seemed to me that they fitted the requirements for statutory assessment very well indeed.

I realised that they needed specialist help and we moved them both to an independent SpLD school for boys. There they have an individual timetable

and small classes. Social skills and learning deficits are addressed as part of the curriculum and over time, battered self-esteem is restored. It is a holistic approach.

I worked hard on their statement applications and they're both now funded at the special school.

I believe it is at infant school level that more expertise is needed to spot difficulties such as ASD early on. Giorgio's year one teacher should have realised that it was not normal that he could read fluently but not write a single sentence. I didn't want to be the mum always waiting to speak to the teacher after school, but it was only because of this that interventions were tried.

When a difficulty is identified, schools should ascertain if it is an isolated problem or whether there is a pattern of issues that must be addressed as a whole to make the intervention effective. I know there are schools where this already happens and I hope that soon all teachers will have the confidence and expertise to intervene sooner rather than later. **SEN**

#### **Further information**

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