

# Unlocking. that *special* child

Engaging with children with SEN can be a challenge, but a little creativity can deliver amazing results, says **Adele Devine...**

**H**ave you ever come across a child who doesn't seem to be motivated by anything? You've got out the dinosaurs, books, paints – even the snacks – and there hasn't been a flicker of interest. So how are you supposed to engage them? How can you begin to get them communicating or learning about 'appropriate' behaviours and routines? Is there a 'key' that will unlock these children?

#### KEY 1: OBSERVE

Note down everything the child does, whether it be spinning in circles, repeatedly flicking a bit of paper or fingering through soil. Do they cover their ears, avoid touch or gravitate towards a certain area? Do they show awareness of adults and/or any other

children? Get another member of staff to observe and then give their feedback. Is there any repetitive behaviour? Is there anything (no matter how unusual) that seems to be catching their interest? If possible, visit the child's home; they may change in a familiar environment.

#### KEY 2: INVESTIGATE

Talk to the parent/carer of the child. Ask about the child's interests. What do they like to do at home? Do they show any interest in a piece of music, television programme, toy or object?

#### KEY 3: CREATE

Think outside the box. Every child is different – each one is a unique puzzle. Getting creative is the fun bit. Take time to brainstorm with other staff and try out different ideas. Don't be

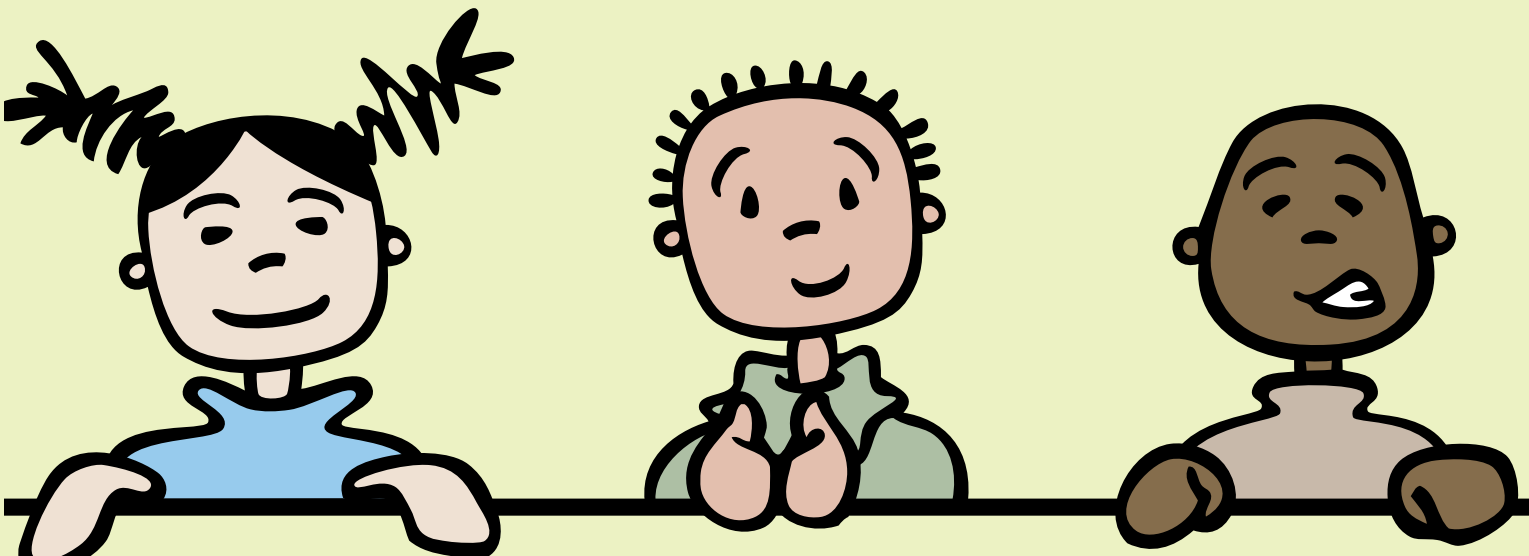
upset if things don't work; you are eliminating what doesn't work and constantly getting closer to what will.

#### Case study: **Billy the display ripper (Age 4, Diagnosis: Global delay)**

Billy's 'file' described him as non-verbal. He wasn't communicating in any functional way. I first encountered Billy as he was being shown around school with his parents. I noticed his mother had a tight hold of him at all times and there was panic in her eyes. What did she think he would do if she let him go?

#### THE OBSERVATION:

We didn't have to do much observing. By the end of day one, every display, every name



label and bit of backing paper was ripped. My lovely, bright room looked like it had been attacked by a mini dinosaur. My assistant looked as if she'd been dragged through a hedge backwards and had given up following Billy's trail of destruction with the staple gun. On a normal day we would have got on with the million jobs we always seem to have to do after school, but on this occasion we collapsed with cups of tea and looked at each other shell-shocked.

**THE INVESTIGATION:**

So far, as we had observed, Billy liked to rip down our displays. We had also noticed that each time he did it he looked to us with twinkling eyes and a cheeky smile as though expecting praise. What was he getting from the behaviour? Were we reinforcing it by running around after him? Was he wanting us to shout or even cry? Children who seek attention through negative behaviour may not be able to distinguish positive reactions from negative. So the first thing to do was control our reactions.

**GETTING CREATIVE:**

We knew it was pointless putting the displays back as they were, so we chose a different tactic. We decided that all 'Billy level' displays would be laminated with Velcro on the back. This way if they were ripped off the wall they could not be ripped up and we'd just put them straight back. Our hope was that this would deny Billy the reaction he was seeking.

Billy arrived the next morning. When he got to his peg he ripped off the name label and looked up at Alex. It was intact (having been laminated) and she picked it up and attached it straight back to the wall. Billy went into the classroom and discovered the same thing. Ripping displays was not having the effect he was seeking. Observing Billy, I felt a twinge of guilt, but what had clearly started as a sensory searching behaviour had become an attention-seeking one. We gave Billy a box of paper to rip up – no interest. Next we gave Billy a big box with layers of paper glued to the side of it and bingo – happy Billy ripping away and each time he tore some off we praised him.

Billy learnt to ask for his 'rip box' as we called it using a photograph in his PECS (Picture Exchange Communication System) book. It kept him occupied and happy during transitions and was a great starting point for 'intensive interaction'. He was getting his sensory need met in a positive and appropriate way.

**Case study: Rhianna's rice of many colours (Age 4, Diagnosis: Autism)**

Rhianna had emerging speech. She would sometimes sing familiar theme tunes like Bob the Builder's *Can We fix It?*, but never engaged in conversational speech. She would opt out of lessons in a quiet but definite way and often get 'stuck' en route to different places. She spent the majority of her time in the corner of the classroom, in the corner of the playground or in a corridor.

**THE OBSERVATION:**

One thing that came out of watching Rhianna was how expert she was at opting out. Two things that did provoke a spark of interest were the interactive whiteboard and watching cereal being poured at snack time. She didn't want to touch it or eat it, but she was entranced by watching it pour. When the box was left unattended, Rhianna was there with lightning speed pouring the contents all over the table.

**THE INVESTIGATION:**

After a long chat with Rhianna's mum, I found out that she liked watching things pour at

home too. Everything had to be locked away high out of her reach to avoid it being poured. Rhianna's poor mum – I could only imagine...

**GETTING CREATIVE:**

We made a selection of sensory trays for Rhianna to explore – pasta, sand, glitter, rice and flour. Rice was the clear winner. The rice tray became a great starting point for intensive interaction. Rhianna would even ask for it using her PECS. But rice was the only thing Rhianna would ask for and we wanted to extend her communication. She had mastered the sentence, "I want rice", but I wanted to see if she could extend this. Rhianna was motivated to get the rice, but never asked for anything else.

If only the rice could be different colours perhaps we could get her using symbols to request a specific colour. We dyed all the rice and put it in the trays to dry out. Our experiment paid off – Rhianna clearly liked her new coloured rice. She didn't do what I'd hoped, which was to select a favourite colour and ask for it, but she did like watching us add one colour at a time. In time this motivated Rhianna to extend her PECS sentence to, "I want red, yellow, blue, green, orange, purple rice."

You know that amazing feeling, that buzz when you do a truly great session? If you could only bottle that feeling – I would compare it to flying. Well, when you begin to fathom the puzzle of that special child and get them communicating, you will discover a whole new teaching euphoria.

**findoutmore**

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