

# Reasons to be hopeful

The consequences of positivity and a willingness to respond to the needs of our special children can last a lifetime, says **Adele Devine...**

**C**ompelled by curiosity Pandora had to open that jar and "out flew all the evils in the world, but one thing remained - a tiny white flicker called hope".

A child with special educational needs may not start preschool with a label stating that they require extra help, but they can really change how things run. Perhaps they upset the other children by knocking down brick towers or struggle with following routines. Maybe you think the working day would be a lot easier if that child were placed somewhere more suited to their needs. But wait! Maybe your setting is exactly what that child needs and by seeing all their 'can do' possibilities you could change their future. Maybe you have the potential to be that tricky child's 'flicker of hope'.

## CASE STUDY

### 'Archie's special cushion' (Diagnosis: Autism)

Archie was easy to spot. He was 'the boy with the cushion'. After seeing him squiggling about, sliding and fiddling with the tassels on the cushion I asked why he had it. I was told that the autism advisory lady had said that children with autism would often sit better on a cushion and so Archie's mum had provided one. Archie had the cushion at all times. Whenever the children sat, he sat on his cushion, and he had been taught to carry it when transitioning.

The cushion concerned me. I knew the thinking behind it, but I could also see Archie was being singled out and wondered if, in the future, he would become dependent on it. I suggested we see how he was without the cushion. Archie was not bothered at all. He sat on the floor and did not seem any more or less fiddly or squiggly than before, but he did look more like one of the group.

I created some visuals for 'good sitting', 'good looking' and 'good listening' (you can find free printable symbols at [senassist.com/resources.html](http://senassist.com/resources.html)), making sure that we had different sitting visuals for the

floor and on a chair, as children with autism can be very literal; they will look and copy the visual exactly. I laminated the visuals, punched holes in them and put them on key rings so they could be available at all times. I also printed them out so they were in view next to the teacher at circle time and at eye level in the front of the assembly hall.

The visuals reminded Archie how to sit in a more effective and subtle way than the 'special cushion'. Think carefully about the individual child before you introduce any new strategy; discuss it with your team and keep reviewing its effectiveness over time.



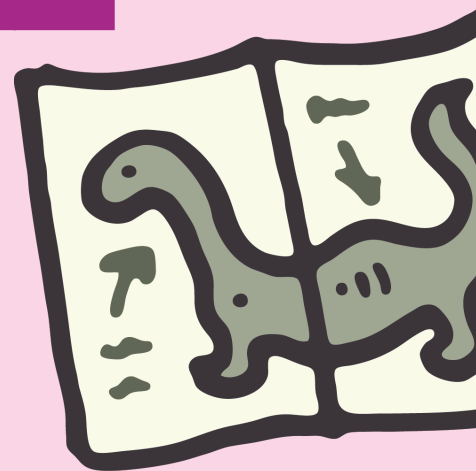
## CASE STUDY

### 'Eli's answer'

Eli was causing quite a storm in his little village nursery. The staff had never had a child like him. He seemed to enjoy creating chaos. His antics included throwing sand in other children's faces at the sand tray, knocking over brick towers, riding the tricycle directly into other children, tripping up, winding up, and making unnecessary noises during story time. The list of negatives went on and on...

His use of language was advanced. He was not afraid to ask questions loudly and his knowledge (especially of dinosaurs) was amazing. He was really bright.

Was Eli ever quiet, I asked. The teacher said he would sometimes spend long stints alone in the book corner. He loved looking through each book, taking in every detail. He had a particular fascination with one book. I





## HOPEFUL COMMENTS

SLIGHTLY ALTERING OUR WORDING TO BE MORE POSITIVE CAN CREATE 'HOPE' WHERE THERE WOULD OTHERWISE BE DESPAIR...

Change:

- 'Violent' to 'Challenging'
- 'Disobedient' to 'Anxious'
- 'Impossible to teach' to 'Individual learning style'
- 'Disruptive' to 'Developing play skills'
- 'Rude' to 'Assertive'
- 'Controlling' to 'Little leader'
- 'Lazy' to 'Laid back'
- 'Slow' to 'Gaining ground'
- 'Loner' to 'Enjoys own company'
- 'Non-verbal' to 'Pre-verbal'

Imagine how you would feel as a parent hearing the descriptions on the left as a list, compared to those on the right.

to behave at the sandpit, on bikes and teach him how to build bricks and turn take with another child. They should praise other children getting it right in an obvious way so that Eli could learn the expectations.

A month later I met with the teacher to see if things had improved. The teacher said that Eli was still looking at that book and still disrupting. She had not implemented any of the suggestions I'd made. It was as though she'd never heard them... I asked why and she explained that they could not do things differently for one child.

Sadly, sometimes you realise that the best thing to do is move the child to a place that has more understanding of SEN children and a willingness to meet their needs. Happily we found this setting for Eli and he has been supported brilliantly ever since.

**TIP:** Try this book - *How to Be a Friend: A Guide to Making Friends and Keeping Them* by Laurene Krasny Brown and Marc Tolon Brown.

### Final thoughts

As a child I was always drawn to the non-conformist, 'naughty' children. I once overheard a teacher complaining about my friends to an elderly nun, who supervised our school mealtimes. The response I overheard has stayed with me for life. Sister Hawkins told that

teacher very firmly, 'There is no such thing as a bad child.' The teacher, who had expected agreement or sympathy, was silenced. I skipped off with a smile on my face and a desire to prove that wise old lady, who believed in every child, right.

Your words will create ripples, so choose them with care. Ensure your comments are hopeful and positive, so that children remember you as that special someone who believed in them and loved them without condition. Be the person who that special child hopes to prove right.



### about the author

Adele Devine is a teacher at Portesbery School for Children with Severe Learning Difficulties and director of the award-winning SEN Assist Ltd. Visit [senassist.com](http://senassist.com). Her new book, *Colour Coding for Learners with Autism* is available now from Jessica Kingsley Publishers, priced £24.98. TN readers will receive a 15% discount on RRP by entering code T15 at checkout. Visit [jkp.com](http://jkp.com)

flicked through the book - *Don't Be a Bully, Billy: A Cautionary Tale* by Phil Roxbee Cox and Jan McCafferty - and saw what could be a problem. The story went through all the times when the central character, Billy, bullied other children and ended with him going off with the aliens in a spaceship. This story could be confusing. Eli was either getting ideas or trying to use it as a 'social story'. The pictures only showed unfavourable behaviours and were not going to help Archie get it right.

I suggested that the teacher remove this book as it was not helping and replace it with social stories, which clearly illustrated behaviours people want to see at school. They could also use visuals to show Eli how

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