

Cast study: How good support and preparation for an Annual Review reduces anxiety, improves communication and restores hope.

Peter is age seven with autism who attends a local mainstream primary school with support provided by an EHCP. He is working slightly below his peers in many areas of the curriculum, but is significantly below his peers in his writing, reading comprehension, and social/communication skills.

Peter's mother Kasia got in touch with the IASS on the recommendation of another parent who had a child in the same school. Peter's mum felt that IASS support would be important in order for her and the school to have an open dialogue about his progress and the support he was receiving in school. She also wanted to clearly understand what the school was meant to be providing for Peter.

Kasia sought support from the IAS service in advance of Peter's Annual Review. Despite having an EHCP for a year, Peter's mother was not sure if he was really receiving all the support in school that was outlined in the plan. Her relationship with the school was under strain because she had accused the school of using her son's learning support assistant to support other children in the class. Because of Kasia's manner of speaking in English (she is a native Polish speaker) she believes her remarks are often perceived by professionals as abrupt or critical and she described the school as responding in a "defensive" manner whenever she raised concerns.

We arranged to meet the week before the review. Before we met, I asked Kasia to remind the school to give her any reports before the meeting so that she could bring them to her pre-meeting with me. She was not aware that she should receive copies of reports in advance of the meeting. As English is not her first language I thought it would be especially helpful for Kasia to have support to read through professionals' reports with sufficient time to ensure she was fully aware and understood the content of them and consequently fully prepared for the Annual Review meeting.

When we met we were able to read through the school's report as well as reports from the Speech and Language Therapist, Autism Intervention Team and Occupational Therapist. I also went through Peter's outcomes with Kasia and we talked about the provision linked to the outcomes in the plan. Where Kasia was uncertain if Peter was receiving some provision in the EHCP, we highlighted this to raise in the Annual Review meeting.

Kasia was happy with the therapist's reports but felt that the school report exaggerated some of Peter's progress, while downplaying some significant difficulties he is still having with his attention and concentration as well as his social/communication skills. I helped her write down her concerns in a constructive way in clear bullet points. Together we talked about her priorities for Peter over the next few years. We thought of an outcome related to his social skills that Kasia could put forward at the EHCP Annual Review. I also encouraged Kasia to try to think of any positive things she might want to say about Peter's progress and how the support being provided in school might be helping him.

Upon reflection during our discussion about the school, Kasia agreed that actually communication with the school had been pretty good overall. She had been having weekly

meetings with the class teacher who had kept her informed over Peter's progress and given her suggestions for things to try at home to help to consolidate his development of certain skills such as reading comprehension.

Before she left, Kasia and I finalised her contribution to the Annual Review including her queries over provision, her comments on the reports, her priorities and suggested outcome, and her positive comments as well.

Kasia and I met outside of the school ten minutes before the Annual Review meeting. She was anxious but said that having my support was helping her to feel more in-control going into the meeting. We briefly looked at her contribution that I had assisted her to write down and I explained that I would be there to make sure we were able to raise all her concerns and questions.

During the meeting, Kasia remained calm and was able to go through all her questions, concerns and comments, using the bullet points and highlighted EHCP as a guide. In response to Kasia's question regarding how the school was ensuring Peter accessed all the provision in his EHCP, the school offered to produce a timetable of Peter's support and interventions throughout the week.

The school was pleased with Kasia's suggestion for an outcome and agreed to recommend that the LA amend the EHCP to include it. They listened to Kasia's concerns about his ongoing barriers to learning that Kasia felt the school had downplayed in the report. The school assured her they hadn't intentionally done so; they explained they had been trying to emphasise and include areas of progress rather than just focussing on his difficulties.

At times in the meeting Kasia became frustrated trying to express her concerns accurately; I was able to offer assistance at these times by elaborating on what Kasia and I had previously discussed or by referring to our written comments.

Overall the meeting was extremely positive and strengthened the relationship between Kasia and the school. Another meeting for Kasia to catch up with the SENCo and class teacher was planned to take place mid-way during the autumn term.

Afterwards, Kasia thanked me and told me how my support had helped her to remain calm and stay focussed in the meeting. She explained that she felt a great sense of relief at having achieved what she had hoped to get out of the meeting and to have left the meeting feeling better about her relationship with the school.

A few days later Kasia called me to tell me that the school had provided her with a timetable of Peter's support and interventions throughout the week. The class teacher and learning support assistant had gone through it with her and she found it really helpful. They had also agreed to provide her with the termly themes Peter would be covering and would provide a list of new words relating to these themes for her to be working on with Peter at home. Kasia went on to explain that she was feeling less anxious about Peter, had more confidence in the school's understanding of his needs and more faith in how they were supporting him. She was already using the timetable to discuss Peter's school day with him and she felt he seemed more relaxed about school of late too. Kasia actually sound excited during this conversation as if hope had been restored; hope being a vital ingredient to success!

I asked Kasia to keep in touch and let me know how things progressed; she promised she would.