

Scope profile: May 2007 (education)

'He's much more relaxed about life now'

Michael attends Scope's Beech Tree – a unit for children with special educational needs, including severe and challenging behaviour.

MICHAEL'S STORY

Michael, 17, came to Beech Tree when he was just six years old after his behaviour became increasingly difficult to manage at home.

Michael's autism means he cannot speak or process information quickly. Like most people with autism he finds new situations stressful. And in Michael's case he can react aggressively at times – lashing out and trying to injure himself or others.

When Michael first came to Beech Tree such outbursts were common. He'd head butt, kick or bite when distressed, and his family were struggling to manage this behaviour.

Shortly before joining Beech Tree he had seriously injured a family member. The level of support Michael needed was not available close to home.

The meaning of behaviour

Beech Tree is a unit for children with challenging behaviour run by Scope. Established in 1985, Beech Tree has pioneered behaviour support plans for children like Michael, to help them manage their behaviour and enjoy life more.

At Beech Tree, staff know that even violent and aggressive behaviour has a meaning. Their task is to understand that meaning for each child, and develop a programme of education and care that enables the child to learn alternatives to challenging behaviours.

Michael has made enormous progress since joining Beech Tree and his outbursts are much less frequent.

This has enabled Michael to enjoy trips out and about in the wider community and enjoy an improved quality of life.

Agitated by trips outs

Michael, who communicates using signs and symbols, used to become highly agitated during trips out from the school.

He'd sign furiously that he wanted to visit a particular fast food restaurant or eat ice cream or another favourite food. If the trip didn't involve these 'treats' he could become aggressive or self-injurious.

He also became agitated as the time came closer for a visit from his parents. Michael struggled to understand the reason he had to wait for these visits.

Struggling with time

All of this behaviour had its roots in Michael's understanding of time and sequencing. He was struggling to understand when things would happen, and in what order.

Staff at Beech Tree introduced a system, using pictures to explain the outing schedule in a way Michael could understand.

'A series of pictures showed the different activities for the day and order in which they would happen,' says Sonia Lemon, Senior Team Leader responsible for Behaviour Support. 'He'd look at the pictures in the order they were going to happen – for example bus, park, ice cream, park, bus, school.'

'Michael's agitation was reduced because he understood what was happening. And he'd know, for example, if today's outing did **not** include a trip to a burger bar.'

He also has a sleep chart which tells him four days in advance when he's going on an outing.

A new room

Recently Michael has moved to new accommodation in a different part of the school, in preparation for the time when Michael will move on from Beech Tree altogether.

He was introduced to the new room slowly, at first spending just a few minutes getting used to the new surroundings. But he loves it now.

'We hear him in his room giggling to himself because he's just pleased to be there,' says Sonia. 'Generally Michael is much more relaxed about life now.'

He's also spending more time out and about, taking part in a work experience programme at a nearby charity shop, for example, or learning about animals and how to look after them at a local agricultural college.

Staff are with him at all times though, because he needs one-to-one support to be able to access opportunities in the local community.

Moving on

Michael's more formal education is ongoing – he continues to concentrate on basic numeracy, for example – but the social side of his learning plays an increasingly important part.

Thanks to his behaviour support plan, several months now go by without Michael becoming aggressive.

Beech Tree is now working with Michael's family to plan the next stage in Michael's life, when he moves to a more independent setting.
