



JUSTIN IS STAYING IN SCHOOL



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Case-Based Learning

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Justin is a nine-year-old boy who has been a pupil at a school for special education for the past three years.

When he is two years old, his parents reach out for help because his development appears to be delayed. His language and communication skills are underdeveloped and while playing, he is fixated on particular things. He cannot play with other children, and he is very restless and busy.

When he is three years old, he is placed in a children's diagnostic centre for further assessment. A child psychiatrist believes he might have autism spectrum disorder. Later on, Justin is also diagnosed with ADHD.

Justin is inquisitive, and he loves going to school. He likes being in the company of other children. He enjoys watching them play and would like to join in. The way he tries to make contact is usually rather boisterous and inappropriate, and often ends in screaming, kicking, pulling hair, and hitting. He is then no longer receptive to the guidance provided by teachers, and might hit or kick them as well.

The school believes that the whole educational situation is simply too much for Justin: learning itself, the subject matter, the demands of the subject matter, and the size of the class. He often begins a task with great enthusiasm, but unaided he will just walk away without completing it. An additional carer can sometimes help, but not always. He is often so rowdy that he is told to leave the class. At times, in a stubborn mood, he refuses and stays. His parents must then come and collect him.

This negative behaviour is disrupting his education and he is not really learning anything, although his teachers, his carers, and his parents all believe that he is capable of it. It isn't clear why it seems to work one day but not the next. His teachers wonder if this school is the best place for

him. His parents, on the other hand, really want Justin to be taught in a school environment.

IDIOGRAPHIC THEORY

Justin has a moderate intellectual disability. Due to a delay in speech and language development, he has difficulty processing language-based information. He is better at maths. But in general, Justin has trouble understanding what's going on around him.

Justin is an enthusiastic and spirited boy. He is diagnosed with ADHD, which is related to a sensory processing disorder.

This sensory processing disorder is expressed in different ways in each of his senses and impacts on the way he behaves at school.

We approached this part of our idiographic theory based on the tenets of Sensory Processing Theory. The premise is that in order to process information correctly, the senses must be neither overexcited (overstimulated?) nor under-excited (understimulated).

1. Justin is auditorily hypersensitive, so he is easily auditorily overstimulated. He gets distracted by sound, all day long. It starts in the van to school, with the clamour of the other children and the blaring of the driver's radio. At school, there is a lot of uproar as everybody arrives all at once, greets one another in the corridor and the classroom, and then makes their way to their places in the circle. Justin pays attention to everything that is happening and makes constant noises. He also reacts to things that aren't directed at him. For example, when the teacher is talking to a single pupil, rather than the whole class. He even reacts to auditory stimulus originating in other classrooms.
2. Justin is visually hypersensitive. So he is also easily visually overstimulated. He sees everything that happens in the classroom, and it

seems as if he keeps an eye on everything. And there is a lot to see and keep track of. The class is full of pupils, cupboards, tables and chairs, and toys. There are educational materials, murals, tablets, and a smartboard. The classroom is decorated with the pupils' artwork. And there are windows, both facing outside and facing the corridor. When Justin looks at a picture-book, he sees every detail. This is apparent because he names every detail in whatever picture he's looking at.

3. Justin is touch hyposensitive, so easily under-stimulated. He doesn't feel it when others touch him. But he touches others all the time. Justin supports his head with his hands when working at a table. He likes to play with oral toys such as a teething ring, and he likes to suck his thumb.
4. Justin is also hyposensitive with regards to balance and muscle memory. He has difficulty keeping his balance, and without any external pressure on his body, he cannot keep his mind on his work. Justin cannot keep still; he is in constant motion. He often adopts peculiar postures. During playtime in the construction corner, he will stand on materials because he needs to feel physical pressure.

The combination of his auditory and visual sensory processing problems and the busy school environment, results in Justin getting so overstimulated that it is difficult for him to process information.

Moreover, the hyposensitivity of his other senses also impacts his ability to focus his attention. He has to stimulate these sense systems himself in order to process information. This makes it very hard for Justin to understand what is happening.

Justin is diagnosed with ASD This only exacerbates his information processing problems, which are already being attributed to his intellectual disability. But in addition, Justin has trouble dealing with all the changes and transitions that take place over the course of a day. And a day at

school is almost nothing but changes and transitions, one after another...

The class programme is comprised of many different activities taking place at different moments: listening, speaking, working in separate corners of the room, working at your desk, being allowed to move about, being quiet. Justin needs help to understand what is expected of him, and that help is not always immediately available. It's also not always clear to him when it's his turn to ask something of the teacher. This is difficult for him. Justin cannot bear when things happen differently than he thinks they should.

Justin is being overburdened, and that results in anxiety and stress.

Because of his ASD and ADHD, Justin struggles with social interactions, and of course there are many of those at school. Throughout the day, the pupils' ability to adjust to the variety of activities on the class programme, to their classmates, and to their teachers, is being challenged. And then there are transitions such as the transition from one class period to the next, recess times, and when entering or leaving the school. These are all situations that include a lot of social interaction. Justin doesn't understand this social behaviour and often gets into trouble. On top of that, due to ADHD, he is uninhibited, and he reacts to children who are loud and active. He wants to play with them on the playground, but the other children then do not understand his boisterous and impulsive behaviour. Justin responds by getting physical with them, and yelling at them, and he is then rejected or corrected. This means more anxiety and stress for him.

While in class, he expresses his anxiety by yelling, getting up out of his seat, walking about the room, and disturbing the other children.

He's then taken out of the classroom and put into a separate room, to complete his assignments in the company of a carer.

This lowers his anxiety, and after a while he is allowed to return to the classroom. This cycle is often repeated many times over the course of a day.

He's also anxious in the schoolyard. He yells and grabs the other children, isn't understood, and his behaviour devolves into kicking and hitting. He is then also taken out of this setting, but when he returns, the behaviour is resumed.

At a certain point, there comes a time that he can no longer be calmed down, and serious conflicts with the other children are the result.

The school then can't see any way to resolve this and asks that Justin's parents come pick him up. His parents are always willing to do this and have actually organised their jobs such that they are always able to. Justin can then keep up with his lessons, coached by one of his parents. In this environment, Justin's anxiety level goes down rapidly. The next day, he returns to school and starts his day with a smile. But Justin's parents' anxiety level remains high.

Justin's parents are called to pick him up quite regularly. This is unpleasant for everyone concerned. Justin doesn't like it because he likes being at school. His parents don't like having to be on stand-by every day. And the teachers don't like it because they can't give Justin the education he needs and deserves. This is especially hard for them because they know he can be taught. After the cycle has repeated several times, everyone is wondering whether Justin should be dismissed.

INTERVENTIONS

INTERVENTION 1 OVERVIEW IN SPACE AND TIME

The first intervention is - in light of Justin's ASD - aimed at providing structure for him. Lack of clarity about *where* and *when* something will happen quickly leads to anxiety and stress for Justin. Structuring the day chronologically starts when Justin is at home. There, he is prepared for what the school day will bring. The trip on the bus, arriving in the schoolyard, hallways, and in the classroom. And when the school day draws

to a close, the same will be done. Justin's parents and the school constantly coordinate with each other and check on Justin's responses. Together, they are making sure Justin has clear, unambiguous continuity.

Activities - alternating between work and play - are introduced with pictograms. And the amount of time spent on each is tracked using a timer.

Justin is also given more structure in the physical environment. In class, he is assigned a designated place to do his work, and a different spot for play which is equipped with a carpet and a beanbag with a weighted cuddly toy.

The physical space in the schoolyard is also structured for Justin. He is told where he can play and where he can ride a bicycle. A carer oversees his playing with two or three classmates. Even the school's recess periods are adjusted so that fewer classes have recess at once and Justin has less to deal with.

INTERVENTION 2 REGULATING STIMULATION

Justin is easily overstimulated, both auditorily and visually.

In order to decrease his auditory stimulation, he is given headphones to wear during class.

In the schoolyard, stimulation is reduced by having him bike a permanent route, which is visually marked.

Justin isn't really sensitive to tactile stimulation. He is provided with something he can bite on or gnaw, and by using this tool to stimulate his tactile sense, it becomes easier for Justin to focus his attention.

To stimulate his proprioception, activities are scheduled which let him use his muscles and feel his body. This is the reasoning behind play on the mat, the beanbag with the heavy cuddly toy, playing in the construction corner, and bicycling in the schoolyard.

Teachers are consulted about their role in regulating stimulation for Justin. When they want to interact with him, they must first touch him and make eye contact. Only after this stimulus has been processed can they proceed to giving verbal (auditory) instructions. By then asking if he has understood the instructions, they can check to see if this stimulus has indeed been processed into meaningful information. For all of this to succeed, the teachers must take their time and remain very calm, because stimulus processing is time-consuming for Justin.

And yet another way to reduce overstimulation for Justin was discovered during the interventions. Once teachers notice that Justin is starting to raise his voice, that his movements are becoming restless, and that he is beginning to rock back and forth in his chair, the teachers will establish contact with Justin by showing him their hand. They will then hold their fingers up in the air and count and have Justin count along out loud until he calms down.

INTERVENTION 3 THE SCHEDULE FOLLOWS JUSTIN

The class programme and the activity schedule is adjusted to suit what Justin is capable of and what he can handle. So, Justin starts off every day sitting in a circle with his classmates, but as soon as he shows signs of overstimulation, he is switched to his individual programme. To keep his sensory processing balanced, the programme tries to strike a balance between activities which are relaxing and activities which require effort.

INTERVENTION 4 PREPARING FOR CHANGES

The programme must always be predictable for Justin and therefore, it must always continue.

Although providing structure in space and time lowers Justin's stress, it is unavoidable that unforeseen changes will at times occur, due to illness or alterations in the class schedule, for example. Justin often understands why

changes are necessary if it is explained to him often enough. To minimize ambiguity, changes are explained as soon as they are known, ahead of the school day, by everyone involved. So close cooperation between the school and Justin's parents is vital.

INTERVENTION 5 TALKING ABOUT THE DAY

Every single day, Justin's teacher will discuss how the day went with him. Much is made of everything positive that happened. This helps to reduce any stress Justin has felt. Justin is allowed to draw what he felt went well that day, and then he takes his drawing home with him. He is also told what the teacher has written in the notebook which he also takes home with him.

RESULTS

Justin now stays in school for the entire day. The teachers no longer have any doubt that this is how it can and should be.

In addition, Justin is a part of his class again, and everyone acknowledges that he belongs with his classmates. The behaviour which used to be seen as merely disruptive is now a signal for teachers that Justin is getting overwhelmed and needs different stimuli.

Also, Justin can now be relaxed in the classroom. And during recess, Justin plays with the other children, supervised by a teacher. Conflicts are almost entirely a thing of the past.

And best of all, Justin is learning, in the classroom, and he is enjoying it.

LESSONS LEARNED

Teachers have learned how both sensory and information processing can contribute to challenging behaviour. Once they know that Justin is hypersensitive to auditory stimuli, they understand why things become too difficult for him. They now can help him by giving him his headphones, and

by speaking softly and less frequently to him. And because they know that tactile stimuli help to keep him focussed, he is given this help during class. The newly acquired knowledge of Justin's heartfelt need of education has had a positive knock on effect for the other pupils.

Justin still needs intensive guidance and extensive care, but this is now deployed *before* problems occur, proactively, because everyone has adjusted to meet his needs.

Because of their efforts to cooperate and coordinate, Justin's teachers and his parents now understand and trust each other more. This kind of cooperation between schools and parents is absolutely essential for pupils like Justin.

The school head needs to be on board to provide the prerequisites for this kind of approach. This holds true for physical modifications such as changing recess times, reorganising the schoolyard, and rearranging the classroom, but also for boosting the levels of specific expertise in the school's employee team as a whole. Expertise and training in sensory and information processing is now part of the school's curriculum for personnel.

CONCLUSION

Justin's teachers' motivation and curiosity proved stronger than their reservations. Justin is staying in school.

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