



# Can you spot the difference?

You might think that being a teacher would make it easy to identify your own child's special needs. Think again. Trevor Averre-Beeson talks from experience

In a 26-year career in teaching, 12 as a headteacher in three London schools, I might have been expected to be able to identify my own daughter's special educational needs. Daughters one and two sailed through secondary school emerging with a string of As and A\*s. Victoria, now a teacher and Samantha, at university, made parenthood effortless.

Annie, who is 12, has had an altogether more challenging journey. From birth, she had one eye closed and the other rolling for many weeks. Annie was in and out of Hammersmith Hospital children's wing for her first three years as her muscles took years rather than months to strengthen enough to hold her head and learn to walk.

It was to be several more years before I would learn exactly what was meant by dyspraxia, nine years in total of Annie's life before a health worker or educationist would put us all on a road to help understand her world.

It was as a deputy headteacher at a school in Essex that I received a distraught call from my wife saying that the health visitor had said Annie, then one, may never walk or talk. Several months later in a specialist centre for children with mobility difficulties, the therapist told us that she would in all probability never walk. I asked how many times she had seen a child with very poor muscle control never walk. Several hundred, came the reply, how many times out of 100 have you been wrong? Two or three. Ok, I said, this is one of them.

Professor Muntone at Hammersmith delighted in Annie's progress and when the mylene sheath that covers the brain grew nearly three years later he said this was either a miracle or a "delayed-switch" in the brain.

By this time I had become head of Islington Green, rejected by the Blairs for their children and famed for its involvement in the Pink Floyd chorus "We don't need no education". I was dealing with pupils with extreme special needs and was determined to organise a Learning Zone to give intense support to some of these youngsters, motivated in part by my knowledge of Annie's struggle.

We decided to send Annie to a small prep school near our home – run by an order of nuns – because of her needs. Annie, by now seven, appeared delightful and all adults took to her. Immature by perhaps two or three years, excitable, wobbly on her feet, more or less blind in one eye, hopelessly unco-ordinated, handwriting like a knotted ball of string, she had to have a welfare assistant with her most of every day.

One of Annie's engaging qualities has always been a surprisingly mature grasp of language, making her almost like a little old lady. She also had an obsessive need to follow routines and a constant desire to plan ahead – what we now know are all typical signs of dyspraxia.

Dyspraxia is vaguely defined as a condition of delayed development and poor co-ordination, such that to varying degrees it inhibits normal progression.

My wife read a horrifying statistic that, if not helped, 80 per cent of people with dyspraxia end up living alone as

depressive drug dependants. Annie's prep school cared for and helped her, but had not identified her condition. We applied jointly to Essex County Council for a statement of special needs (and the resources that it brings) but were turned down.

At Islington Green things were going well, we had moved the school from being a failure to being described by inspectors as providing a good curriculum. The 350 exclusions for poor behaviour had all but disappeared. I brought Annie, now approaching her 10th birthday, in to be assessed by Paul Blum, the school's special needs guru.

Paul felt that her intellectual perceptiveness and self confidence would put her in the top-stream and I really believed that moving to a school of "hard knocks" could be a life saver. Her mother was less sure.

The eureka moment when we realised that Annie was dyspraxic came when I was talking to a journalist and describing what she could and couldn't do. As a family we bought every book we could find, downloaded articles and found the Dyspraxia Foundation's website.

It was comforting to finally discover what Annie was going through. It didn't make her suddenly different but we all felt better, we could help her more and provide

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support for her teachers. We now felt Annie could attend the good local secondary school that her elder sisters had attended. How disappointed we were. The school is lovely, the head caring and capable but the very act of having to negotiate 1,500 pupils, four flights of stairs and 14 different, differing teachers was too much.

Then Jane, my wife, read about Stanbridge Earls School near Southampton, set up for people with dyspraxia and dyslexia. Annie started as a weekly border in September, coming home at weekends. She loves it, and so do we.

The school has zero tolerance of bullying, arranges classes in very small groups (about eight) gives one-to-one maths, English, speech therapy, physiotherapy and practical support. It helps the children organise themselves, sort their own clothes and routines.

In the past, given the chance, Annie would always defer to adults to do everything. Now, in a supportive environment, she can do it all (or at least try).

Stanbridge Earls is living proof that if you can meet a child's needs with empathy, support and in a caring environment, you can succeed. Its bottom line guarantee is a 100 per pass rate at maths GCSE.

I can now see a clear future for Annie that was previously a fog of anxiety ■

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Trevor Averre-Beeson is executive head of Salisbury School in Enfield, north London

“ANIMAL RIGHTS DOES HAVE A BIT OF AN IMAGE PROBLEM, BUT I CAMPAIGN ALONGSIDE THREE OR FOUR OTHER TEACHERS” TEACHERS WHO PUT THEIR BELIEFS INTO PRACTICE, PAGE 14