

Billie-Jo did not want to accept that her son needed additional support but now she knows only Torfield School could have helped transform his life in the way it has



Billie-Jo Hancock and her partner Daniel live in Hastings with their sons Roman, five and Sole, four.



Keeping all the options open

Even though Roman was awarded a Statement of Special Educational Needs relatively early, at about three years old, Billie-Jo took the decision to enrol him into a mainstream primary school as she believed his difficulties could be addressed through the additional support she assumed he would receive. However, within a very short time she had to admit defeat.

"I was probably in denial, not understanding enough about his condition or his needs but hoping for the best and although we had looked at Torfield School we thought we would give mainstream a try. After only a couple of months we had to take him out – he was desperately unhappy and making little or no progress, but thankfully Torfield had kept a place open for him and it has completely changed our lives. What a wonderful school it has proved to be; I love it so much I almost wish that Sole could go there, too."

Transformation

Roman is diagnosed with severe autism and with a social communication disorder and until fairly recently either would not or could not talk. He was only able to express himself by shouting and screaming, demonstrating his frustration in tantrums and unwilling to do anything for himself. Within the two years he has been at Torfield he has, explains Billie-Jo, been transformed. "He is much calmer, more confident and able to engage in social interaction in a way he never could before," she says. "He used to hit out at people because it was the only way he could show his feelings, and he now wants to dress and do other things for himself that he didn't want to before. At Torfield, they really encourage independence in the children, helping them to realise they can do more than they thought, and this approach has certainly paid off for Roman."

Accepting the challenge

Living with a child who has autism is a challenge for any parent. Torfield School fully accepts this and provides families with as much support as it gives the children. Billie-Jo has taken several courses provided by the school, helping her to understand her son's condition more fully and to communicate with him in the most effective way, through sign language and pictures. She also greatly appreciates how well the staff keep in constant touch about every aspect of Roman's school life. "Each day I have a full picture of what he has been doing, what sort of mood he was in and even what he has eaten, through the Home/School Book and that is incredibly helpful," she says. "The school also asks me for my feedback and comments, too, and rather than just telling me what they think about Roman, they want to listen to what I have to say, so it's very much a two-way thing."

Complete trust

Being able to trust a school is important in any circumstances but perhaps especially so when such a vulnerable child is involved. Billie-Jo was at first nervous about Roman going by taxi – a necessity because of where they live. "The school is closely involved with the taxi company and the local authority makes absolutely sure that the drivers and escorts are suitable for a young lad with Roman's problems. Roman always knows who will be picking him up and I know that he will be looked after kindly and appropriately until he is left with a member of the school staff. That is worth a great deal."

Reaping the benefits of the right support

Billie-Jo could not be happier with Roman's progress and his achievements since starting at Torfield. "In many ways he is a very clever little boy; his understanding of numbers is amazing, and he can name and describe any planet in the solar system – these are things the school has used to encourage and expand his development. What Torfield has also done is to make him happier and more confident, with a real chance of a measure of independence in the future. For me, I now have a child who is able to give something back to me, and that is priceless. Each week, I see him improving step by step and it is hard to express how much that means."

