

Every child has the right to a great education, whatever their needs or abilities – and Nicola believes her children could not have done better than at Torfield School



Nicola and Andrew Carey have three children, Olivia, Henry and Ruben, who are 10, seven and five years old respectively. The family lives in Bexhill.



Instant attraction

Nicola believes that if it were not for Torfield School, Olivia and Ruben would not be at school at all. Both children are on the autistic spectrum and both have learning disabilities and, although Olivia managed well enough at her nursery, it soon became clear that there was no viable option in terms of mainstream primary education.

"As Olivia was our first child we had nothing to compare her to and for some time thought that she was just a bit delayed and would catch up later," Nicola explains. "However, when we visited the local schools we realised that they were completely unsuitable for her needs and accepted that we had to look for more specific care. When we walked into Torfield we were absolutely blown away – we knew immediately that it was exactly what we wanted for Olivia, and she has flourished beyond our hopes."

A new life-skill

From being completely non-verbal when she started at Torfield, Olivia now very rarely stops talking! Although she still suffers with anxiety she is sociable and bubbly, and she has learned to self-calm which is something Nicola is especially delighted about. "Previously, if there was too much noise or activity around her she would be unable to cope and go into a huge meltdown. The strategies that the school have put in place for her have worked incredibly well and she knows that when things get too much, she can take herself off into a quiet area, or put on ear-defenders. This is a wonderful skill for her to have attained and means that we can take her out and about without risking a panic attack."

Safety first: predicting the unpredictable

Safety is something that concerns every parent and in Olivia's case this is an even more important issue, as she has a tendency to run off unexpectedly. For that reason, Nicola is impressed with the security measures which Torfield takes very seriously. "Parents need to know that their children are safe at school, especially when they can be unpredictable. I know without a doubt that Olivia's welfare is just as important to the school as it is to us and I trust everyone completely. She even went on a trip to a London theatre and had a fantastic time; the staff consulted closely with us beforehand and the risk assessment they carried out was as thorough as I could have wished. This is another thing I like about the school – they really listen to parents."

Respect for parental input

The teachers at Torfield not only listen, but actively encourage feedback, such as with the design of the home/school communication system. "We were asked for ideas as to how best to maintain efficient and up-to-date contact and the result works wonderfully well," says Nicola. "Like many

families with children at Torfield, we don't get everyday face-to-face contact with the staff because we live some miles away but 'phone, email and the home/school book mean that we are in constant touch."

Big steps forward

Ruben has only recently joined Torfield but although his learning disabilities are more severe than those of his sister, Nicola hopes that he will benefit to as great an extent. "He is still not talking but has learned to communicate through picture cards, which helps a great deal. He is also a much better eater than before; he is encouraged to choose what he wants from the buffet-style lunch and has started eating things we hadn't been able to persuade him to try at home. His sensory phobias have also improved, to the extent that he has overcome his fear of water and is now happy to go swimming in the school's pool. He loves the Sensory Room and the softplay area; these are valuable therapies in themselves."

Support for the whole family

It is fair to say that Nicola is passionate about Torfield School, and what it is able to offer her children. "If I had had to home-school Olivia and Ruben they would have missed out on such a lot – friendships, life skills, many experiences and opportunities – and Andrew and I would have missed out on a great deal of support, too. I feel very privileged that my special children are in such a special environment."

Children say

Olivia: "I like being star of the week and I get to choose a prize in assembly. I feel happy and safe at school and I like playtime and music the best!"

