

Being Me

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30th anniversary 2015

Isn't it time someone heard your story?



The National
Autistic Society -
Helping everyone in
schools understand
autism better

Liam's diary for today

MONDAY 11.15am I'm on the school field and Chris is throwing the ball to Sam, who throws it to Tom, who throws it to Ed. I can't get it. They asked me to play and now I'm in the middle and supposed to get the ball but I can't. I look at Chris, who is holding the ball and Tom flicks me hard on the back of the head. When I turn to speak to Tom, Chris throws the ball to Ed and when I turn his way I feel another thwack on my head – Chris this time. I can feel my eyes stinging. This is why mum said I should go to the library at break. Chris has been mean before, I know, but him and Ed really did seem to want me to play today. I was hoping to ask them back after school. Now Tom is behind me again. I can hear him laughing but I don't know what's funny. When I go to grab the ball I land in a puddle and my trousers get all muddy. I get up and the next time I hear him behind me I turn and block him with my arm before he can hit me, but I catch his face. "Ow, no!" he says, holding his cheek. "What is wrong with you, moron?" Then Mr Gratton comes over and asks what's going on and Tom says I smacked him in the eye when we were playing ball and Mr Gratton asks me if that's true and I say 'yes' because it is, so he asks me to go with him to the office.



11.40am I'm still sitting in the office waiting to 'calm down', as Mr Gratton put it. I'm missing maths, and I like maths. How can I calm down when I feel this mad at myself for getting into trouble again? I'm not really sure what happened, but Mr Gratton says this is the third time I've hurt someone on the field so he's called Mum. When she arrives I can see her eyes flickering between Mrs Lowe on reception and me as she hears I got into a tussle at playtime. "A tussle?" she says. "Why is he so upset and who else was involved and where are they now?" I look at her, hoping she's not going to ask them to get Tom and Chris, but she just says, "Can I take him home? We can calm down at home."

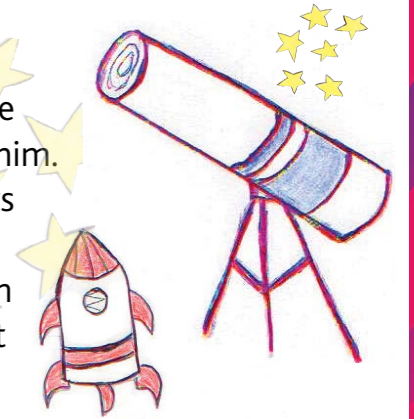
TUESDAY 7.15am I put on my joggers so I can go out with Mitchie our dog. I like to run round the block with him before breakfast, even when it's raining. He stays right by me the whole way and wags his tail even when it's wet and then rests his chin on my knee while I eat my cornflakes. I go and change after breakfast. I can't find my trousers, the baggy ones that don't cling to my legs. Mum must have washed them after they got muddy yesterday – so I get back into bed. I have a bad feeling about today.



8.45am Mum's giving me a lift in as I missed the bus because of what she calls 'the trousers debacle'. She's a bit cross because she's late for work, but she tells me she's definitely not cross with me and rubs my hair. I look in the mirror and flatten my hair down again and then keep checking in my bag to make sure my pencil case

is zipped up and then fasten my bag again. Sometimes when I go through reception the Year 9 boys grab my bag and if the pens fall out they get broken.

9am Mrs Lowe in reception is telling me how late I am. I see Sam coming in late too and wonder if I can walk to class with him. I wave but he just walks past and on to class and Mrs Lowe says nothing. I pick up my bag and try to catch him up. I wonder if he wants to see my new book about the Hubble Telescope. Sam visited the Space Centre when he was in the States which must have been amazing. I will show him my book.



9.30am In class we're working on our history essays. It's really noisy and Mr Gratton keeps telling everyone to calm down. Paper is being flicked across the class, and Ed and David in front of me are trying to get things out of their bags, and Mr Gratton is setting up the projector and tells everyone to be quiet, and I can't stand the noise. "Quiet!" I shout, "Quiet." The boys look at me and then carry on as if nothing has happened.

11am Mum has told me to stay in at break so I ask Sam if he wants to see my book, but I don't think he hears me, even when I speak really loudly. He's talking with Amar and Ed about a film they all saw at the weekend. "Have you seen Transformers?" I ask. They look at each other and smirk. "Got the DVD, mate," says Amar, and they carry on talking about their film. "What film did you see?" I ask. "Oh, nothing," they say, which seems an odd answer, as they obviously saw something. They walk out to the playground before I can ask them again. I take my book to the library, wishing I wasn't on my own but also hoping no one else is there.



11.30am English, and Mrs Stephenson is telling us to get our pens out, and I can't find mine. She lends me her pen but the nib is all wonky. I need my pen. I see Chris passing it to Kuna. "Give me my pen back!" I shout. Mrs Stephenson tells me not to be silly and to get on with my work. My hands are too hot to write and I want to go home.

12.30pm After lunch I ask Kuna for my pen and he says I can have it if I play football on the field and that they need me on their team. I would like to play so I follow him, wondering if I should ask him and Sam back for tea. During the game they keep tackling me before I have even had a chance to get the ball. At one point when I dribble it down the field, ready to shoot, they all charge at me and I'm on the ground. I'm scared then and kick out with my foot and catch Tom's hand. "Moron!" he shouts. Everyone is looking at his hand and no one is looking at me and Mr Gratton comes over and asks what happened. I think he's going to help me up but then Tom says, "Liam kicked me, sir, when we were playing football." Mr Gratton asks me if I kicked him, and I say 'yes' because I did, even if I didn't mean to. Then he asks me to go with him to the office.

By Liam

Annika's story for you

BEWARE THE GIRL WITH CURLY HAIR

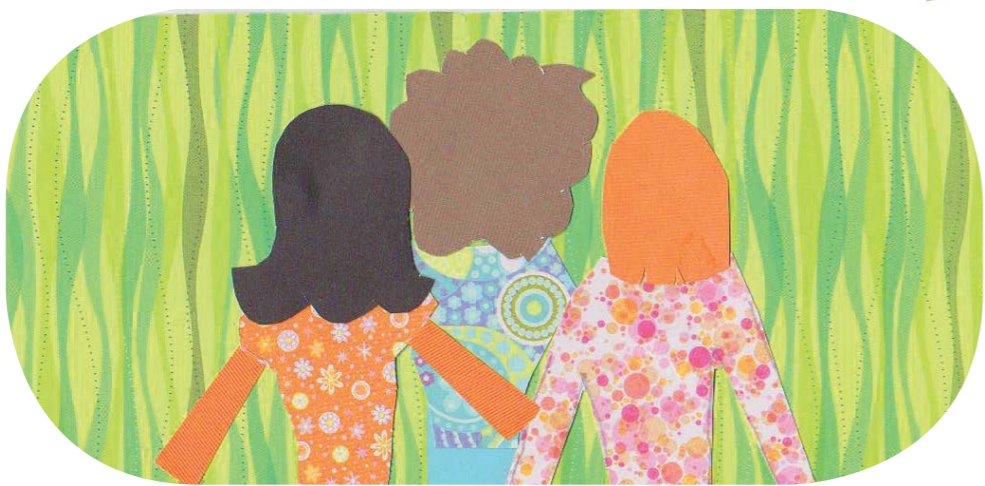
Today a new girl started at our school. Our teacher Mr Williams said she had curly hair – but we should all be really nice to her. 'But'? Why 'but'? When she arrived on her first day her eyes were red and she looked scared... Maybe it was because of the curly hair. It was all squashed into a scrunchy. Maybe she was embarrassed... That night Mum said a woman in her office had a son with curly hair. Then she started talking about how badly behaved he was and how difficult it was for his mum. She talked about him not fitting in at school. That some kids just don't fit in. It made me think there must be something weird about curly hair. The next day the girl with curly hair followed us down to the field, which is where me and Sally and Emma always go and talk about stuff while we make daisy chains. Emma was immediately annoyed as she said she'd heard the girl with curly hair was a bit odd.

"Odd? How odd?" I asked. "Just weird," said Emma. "I don't know. Just watch out for weirdness." I felt sorry for the girl with curly hair and asked her if she'd like to come to lunch with us. "Annika! Why did you go and do that?" wailed Emma when we were at our desks. "Because she's new," I said. "Well if you ask her tomorrow you can't sit by us," Emma moaned. I shut up then. I definitely want to go to Emma's party and if I ask the girl with curly hair Emma might cross me off the list.

The girl with curly hair is really clever, and when we were reading parts from our play she read hers with an American voice which made everyone laugh (in a good way). She did come to lunch with us but she ate really slowly and Emma said we were leaving before she'd finished. Later I saw her walking around the field on her own, until Maria and Sally asked her

if she wanted to play tag. First they chased her in a way that seemed a bit mean and then when she was 'it' I saw them run into the loos to hide. I saw the girl with curly hair looking for them for ages.

It reminded me of Thomas. The boys used to do that to him. Everyone would chase him until he was furious he couldn't catch them, all hide, and then laugh when he got furious about that. The teachers used to tell us to leave him alone because he didn't like to play, but he always wanted to play so that didn't really make sense. Thomas was absolutely



nuts about trains and talked about them all the time and people called him Thomas the Tank Engine in a mean way. Sometimes in class he said he couldn't concentrate because of the noise. He left at the end of Year 7 and everyone was glad and said he was annoying. Mum said he had autism and it was best that he'd left as he didn't really fit in. I never understood what autism was. Come to think of it, I don't know what makes girls with curly hair different either.

I asked Mr Morgan at break what was wrong with the girl with curly hair and why he asked us to be nice to her. "Nothing is wrong with her," he said, looking surprised. "I want you to be nice to everyone. I just mentioned her curly hair so you'd know who she was when she arrived."

"Nothing weird or different about her then?" I asked. "You're all different and you can all be a bit weird," said Mr Morgan with a smile.

I decided to find out more that night. First I searched online for 'curly hair'. It turns out scientists think that curls are largely determined by the shape of the hair follicle, which seems to be controlled by a gene. That made their hair curly, uncontrollable and prone to dryness. Huh! Was that it? Mr Morgan was right. There was nothing wrong with curly hair. So I searched 'autism'. It turns out children with autism have a disability that affects how they communicate and relate to other people. They might have problems expressing how they feel, and might not pick up body language or jokes. They can take things very literally, and sometimes find unfamiliar situations really difficult. It said that sometimes people with autism hate a lot of noise. Even buzzing noises from the projector can make them feel like a stick is being scratched on a chalkboard... I stopped reading because my teeth were on edge thinking about the chalkboard.

I wondered why no one had mentioned any of this before. I wondered where Thomas was now, and if I could say sorry for not sticking up for him. I wondered if his new school understood that some of the things he did were because he had autism, and not because he was annoying. On the bus the next day I was revising for a test on Henry VIII but I was still thinking about what I had learned about autism and about the way we'd all treated Thomas. It was almost as crazy as the way people reacted to the girl with curly hair – judging her before they'd even got to know her. I wondered what would happen if we were told to be careful around girls who were obsessed with ponies (watch out, Amarjit) or to avoid boys who put gel in their hair (Neil thinks he's so cool) or girls who dance (like me, like Emma). I wondered about a lot of things that day. And before I went to bed I told mum that she was wrong. It wasn't that some children don't fit into schools. It's that some schools don't let children fit in.

Annika



Author and actress Jane Asher is President of The National Autistic Society



"It is wonderful to go into schools and see the difference the right support can make to children with autism. To see the difference in children's confidence and their parents' happiness when the support and understanding are in place. To see the difference it can make to the whole school..."

Information for teachers

The National Autistic Society (NAS) is the UK's leading charity for people affected by autism. There are around 700,000 people with this developmental disability in the UK but it is still relatively unknown and misunderstood. This means that many children with autism (and 70 per cent are in mainstream schools) get nothing like the level of help, support and understanding they need. Often, because of their disability, autistic children get bullied. The NAS knows that much of this bullying happens simply as a result of children not understanding their peer's autism and the challenges they face. As a result many students never really get to know the child behind the 'behaviour' and benefit from all they have to offer the class (e.g. their loyalty, insight and intelligence).

Bullying mostly happens in free time at school when children with autism find the unstructured activities a real challenge. They are often targets for backhanded bullying, where they are invited to play or offered friendship by those who find it funny to mislead them, wind them up or even intentionally get them into trouble. Children with autism find it difficult to know when someone is

being genuine but often go along with suggestions hoping they can be accepted into a social group.

Too often, teachers think they can help children with autism by separating them from the class, or by encouraging them to modify their behaviour so they don't attract a bullying response from their peers. However well intentioned, this can highlight differences rather than promote inclusion and understanding. Instead, teachers should help all children in their class or school understand what autism is (the NAS has a wealth of resources to help here). They also need to encourage them to get to know the person behind the 'behaviour' or 'idiosyncrasies' and introduce strategies to support children with autism, to avoid them getting into difficulty. Many strategies are targeted at that free time in the school day which pupils with autism find so difficult. Structured play, lunchtime clubs or designated quiet areas can work brilliantly. These ideas are relatively easy to implement, but they can all make a huge difference to children with autism and to children who struggle socially in any way at all.



Beyond the behaviour: the NAS knows children with autism simply want to be understood and valued by their peers



If you would like to find out more about The National Autistic Society and how they can help your school support children with autism, visit <http://www.autism.org.uk>