



## Reflective Account

# How can we cope with our child who has severe learning difficulties?

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This account, written by a mother who in her own words was at the end of her tether in trying to cope with her son who has severe learning difficulties, but also an education service at her local authority that wasn't as responsive as she needed it to be. Her efforts to find a suitable provision were beginning to impair her relationship with the son she was trying to help – and also the other members of her family.

*'The more I had to fight for Laurence, the less available I was for my husband and our needs.'*

### **What was your question all about?**

In 2006, I was close to the end of my tether. Mother to Laurence, a six year old boy with such a lovely smile and willing spirit, I had a child who couldn't tolerate touch, who screamed in inconsolable terror sometimes three times a night and who continually left a trail of destruction behind him. He is on the autistic spectrum with delayed development, hyperactivity, dyspraxia, and severe auditory and visual processing disorders. For the previous years I had been totally caught up in firstly getting a clearer picture of Laurence's needs and, secondly, fighting for those needs to be heard by our Local Education Authority (LEA).

The more I had to fight for Laurence, the less available I was for my husband and our needs, and our three year old daughter was showing signs of our family's stress. I was often drained into isolation and numbness, and the pain was unbearable at times. Then I came across the **ecl** 'Dissolving Barriers to Learning' event and felt like someone had recognised my needs and created a workshop for me.

### **What did you try?**

Against all the odds, both my husband Rob and I made it to the workshop. We were surrounded by head teachers, social workers, school governors, playground assistants, a university lecturer, a journalist, wobbly parents, and others who were just interested. We were all bathed in open-hearted listening and support.

Rob and I presented our issue: my fight to get Laurence's educational needs met and immense frustration around not being heard in this by the LEA. Guided by the facilitator, we witnessed a powerful and moving mapping process of our situation that surfaced a number of hidden truths.

Specifically, I saw that my 6 year old son was very uncomfortable with us, particularly me, being too close. The penny dropped. How could I back off and literally give him more space?

*As our representatives step back from Laurence, he smiles, breathes and moves playfully, joyfully. He's totally aware of where his needs are met and turns to them.*

### **What did we learn and what insights did we get?**

Just these simple moves held enormous messages for me. Although painful, I could recognise that, in my fighting for Laurence, I was effectively on top of him all the time and somehow needed to 'back off'.

I was also guided to pause and "just look at Laurence and his needs". Having been so totally caught up in the fight with the LEA, I didn't see that he was actually all right. At that moment, his needs were being met, albeit privately through our own efforts and organisation. What an immense relief. And it didn't prevent me reaffirming aloud that I would continue to fight for Laurence. This too has been a source of strength, intention and support to me and to our family.

We also gained insight into what was happening for the LEA and how they were unable to move. It felt really helpful to acknowledge: 'yes, this is how it is and it's really hard.' We explored my relationship to the LEA further and I began to recognise an old personal trauma, deep, raw and clear to me in that moment. This wasn't explored or even named in that workshop – it didn't need to be. The facilitator acknowledged it and suggested that I keep it safe, looking at it when the time was right for me. My God, I could breathe. What a difference it made, and then incredibly, one of the immovable LEA representatives was able to make a small step forwards towards us!

*'This time, I felt safe and protected internally.'*

### **How has my insight affected what we're doing now – and what difference is this making?**

The following week was Laurence's Annual Review. We had a LEA representative, and I spoke freely of my frustration with the communication issues we were having with the LEA; the ineffective speech therapy service and occupational therapy provision; and the lack of holistic vision. There were no tears. There was no fight, only questions about how best to go forward for a very complicated, confused and fearful child. Our little boy who's so socially available and so willing a spirit.

For me, this was extraordinary – previously I'd not been able to cope with talking to them and would be fighting back tears the entire meeting. This time, I felt safe and protected internally. I'm sure the change came about as a result of the systemic work. It had pulled me out of my tunnel vision into a fuller picture of what was going on and hence changed my perspective. Beforehand, I had been totally intent on getting what I wanted from the LEA, approaching it as if: they 'should' do this for my child. Afterwards, I was more acknowledging that 'they weren't able to do this for my child', and so it became 'what is possible in this situation?'

*'a choice to grow upwards, against the habit of a lifetime.'*

It's not always easy, but here we are a year and a half later and Laurence has been accepted by the Local Authority into an independent small school of our choice where he is settling well. He's a lot less fragile; verbally and physically he's able to orient himself a lot better than he ever before; and he is able to cope with changes of routine that would previously have been unthinkable. Our daughter is demonstrating less stress and our marriage is stronger – also from having used systemic approaches in between to explore our relationship.

There was a moment in it all, where the loving support and direction was able to facilitate a choice for me – a choice to grow upwards, against the habit of a lifetime. As a consequence there has been a new presence for me, with my family, a true bonding. It is the greatest gift. This work is really helping us to live our lives more fully, and I'm deeply grateful to all the people, especially to Judith Hemming the facilitator of the workshop, and to her teachers, who have contributed to our journey.