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# School's out

To conclude her series of articles on the challenges of parenting a child with ADHD, **Alison Thompson** looks at how effective different types of schooling were for her son

I've always been a big fan of integration in schools. I firmly believe that wherever possible, children should be schooled together because they all deserve an equal education, regardless of abilities or disabilities. However, in recent years, I've become an advocate for special education because our mainstream schooling system just doesn't work for all children, and integration can actually harm a child's right to a good education.

My son Daniel began his education in a mainstream infant school. He'd been at the attached nursery and had been diagnosed as "borderline ADHD", so the school were aware that he had some special needs and he was placed on the School Action level of support. This meant that he would receive extra support in class to ensure he could access the curriculum. He struggled

to concentrate or to sit still; he was temperamental and often got frustrated, angry or had meltdowns, and nothing the school did seemed to make a difference. Eventually, his support was upgraded to the School Action Plus level, which enabled external services to be involved, and he worked with the behaviour support team for a while, getting some one-to-one counselling and anger management training.

## The need for personal support

Sadly, things didn't work out for Daniel and, at the age of six, he was permanently excluded. The problem is, I fear, that children with SEN aren't always given the specific support they need in mainstream schools. For children with ADHD, you need to give them peace and quiet, so they can work without distractions. You need to be able to break

*The child quickly gets a reputation for being "trouble" and things can soon escalate*

down lessons into micro-chunks, and reward the child for every achievement made. You need to keep a close eye on the child to identify triggers that might result in a meltdown, and to manage that meltdown when it happens. In a class of twenty-five or thirty, with only a teacher and an assistant in place, it's almost impossible to give one child so much attention. Things that trigger bad behaviour are unlikely to be spotted, so the first sign that the child is not coping is often an explosion. The child quickly gets a reputation for being "trouble" and



Changes to school routines, such as school outings, could be very worrying for Daniel.

things can soon escalate – the worse the child feels about himself, the angrier and more frustrated he gets and the more regular and violent are the meltdowns.

Lack of structure in mainstream schools can also be a huge issue. Yes, lessons are timetabled but teachers often like to make things fun by throwing in some surprises, or mixing up the routine a little. Most children thrive in this environment but change can be very different for a child with SEN. On one occasion, Daniel had a meltdown because the teacher decided to abandon the regular Thursday morning maths test. He'd gone to school knowing what to expect and when the routine was changed, it threw him into chaos. Special events like sports days and outings can have the same effect too. Something that most children would look on as a treat can be a scary, frustrating venture into the unknown for a child with ADHD.

And it's not just the child with SEN whose education suffers. When lessons are frequently disrupted by the behaviour of one child, everyone loses out. A child with ADHD having a meltdown is a frightening sight and he is often so unaware of what's going on that he lashes out blindly, sometimes hurting other children in the process. And if teaching staff have to give extra attention to one child, the rest of the class can feel jealous, or simply don't achieve as much as they should.

### Home time

But what is the answer? For some people, it is home education or home tutors. We tried both during Daniel's two permanent exclusions. I am an intelligent woman, a university graduate, but I found home educating my child incredibly challenging. For example, I don't know the school curriculum well enough to know what he needs to learn; I can have a go at teaching him about dinosaurs, planets or numbers, but ultimately I'm never going to know as much as

someone who is trained to teach. What's more, I don't have the necessary skills to motivate a hyperactive, inattentive child – and parenting a child with ADHD is stressful enough anyway, without adding the extra pressure of home education. In many ways, school has been our saving grace, a chance for some respite – both for me from my son, and for my son from me.

We also had home tutors for a while, supplied by our local authority, while Daniel was awaiting a statement of SEN. Every day, someone would come round for two hours to teach Daniel basic maths, English and science, or to take him on an educational outing. The first tutor confidently told me that other children with ADHD had really benefited from this one-to-one attention and, for the first few days, everything went well – until the novelty wore off. Daniel felt isolated. He missed his friends and the school environment, and he was bored. His response was, as always, to get angry and frustrated. His behaviour quickly declined and he started refusing to do any work, meaning the two-hour sessions became a drawn-out battle between him and the tutor to see who would cave in first.

After several months of struggling to teach Daniel at home, the tutor decided that to continue would endanger Daniel's mental health. He was bored, lonely, depressed and angry and the tutor didn't want to make things any worse for him. The tutor put pressure on the local authority to hurry up with the statementing process, so Daniel could go back into full-time education, and then retreated, leaving me to work with Daniel until term ended.

### Special solutions

And so we come to the final stage of our educational journey: special school. For some reason, I felt that there was a real stigma about special school, but once Daniel's statement had been completed

*When lessons are frequently disrupted by the behaviour of one child, everyone loses out*

we visited our local EBD (emotional and behavioural difficulties) school and I was amazed at how fantastic it was. The difference between special and mainstream education was obvious straight away. At the special school, children were in classes of no more than eight, with a teacher and an assistant, so there was plenty of opportunity for one-to-one support. The small class size meant that teaching staff could really get to know the children and were therefore much better placed to spot the triggers that could lead to meltdowns. Work was done in small, manageable chunks, with praise and reward at every stage. The pressure to perform was lifted, with children encouraged to work to their own level. When children are treated so individually, they thrive; the difference in my son has been incredible.

We are now five years into special education and Daniel has changed from being a depressed, frustrated, angry boy to an intelligent, caring young man. He's studying for GCSEs and working towards Grade 4 on the drums; he plays football and basketball and has discovered a passion for weight training. And he has plans for the future too – to be a teacher in a school just like his, helping children just like him. I couldn't be a more proud mum. **SEN**

### Further information

Alison Thompson is the author of *The Boy From Hell: Life with a Child with ADHD*:  
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