

Social Work Online Team Training (SWOTT) toolkit - Facilitator Notes

An Introduction to Neurodiversity

CASE STUDY 1: SUPPORTING A NEURODIVERGENT CHILD – MAYA

Learning Objectives

- To explore how to effectively support nonverbal neurodivergent children in educational settings.
- To explore strategies for fostering collaboration between families and schools to create inclusive conversations about difference.

Q&A

1. What do you observe in relation to Maya, and her parents and teachers' perspectives of her potential autism, and what is the impact of these perspectives?

- The key adults in Maya's life utilise medicalised perspectives to talk about her difference. They talk about Maya's potential autism as a "problem" that needs to be fixed.
- **Impact:** Particularly when Maya is present, this reproduces medicalised narratives and focuses on what Maya 'can't' do. This is likely to impact Maya's self-esteem and could even cause trauma and significant mental health challenges as she grows up.
- Her parents are resistant to her need for support at school.
- **Impact:** Based on TED and the spiky profile, without support to certain tasks and environments, it is likely that Maya will experience challenges. This is not to say there is anything 'wrong' with Maya. We all need support with certain tasks and in certain environments.
- Teacher's describe Maya's behaviour as 'challenging', 'naughty' and 'disruptive' even though these may simply be expressions of frustration or overwhelm.
- **Impact:** Maya's needs may not be met in the classroom, which is being demonstrated by Maya's behaviour at school. She could be experiencing sensory overwhelm, or challenges with change. Maya's behaviour could also be an indication that there are co-occurrences, such as ADHD.
- Her parents describe her as being 'behind' despite there being no evidence of her academic ability or intellectual achievement.
- **Impact:** Maya might be meeting intellectual milestones and if she is held back, this will impact her ability to succeed in the future.



2. Could cultural or societal influences affect Maya's parents' and teachers views of autism as something to be "fixed" or something that equals "disruptive" behaviour? How could this be approached sensitively during conversations?

- Maya's parents may never have had any particular experience of neurodivergence or autism. Therefore, it is important not to be judgemental about or reprimand their perspectives.
- Furthermore, diagnosis is particularly challenging, and her parents may be resistant to explore this option. This is not to say that Maya is not neurodivergent and still requires support.
- Encourage and model more positive language around autism and neurodivergence in front of Maya, her parents and teachers. Talking about Maya as being 'autistic', about her Spiky Profile and most importantly, her strengths.
- Look at ways to highlight Maya's strengths in her educational setting, not just focusing on her challenges.
- Provide information that is neuro-affirming about autism and neurodiversity to help educate her parents.
- Answers to this question should highlight the importance of identity-first, neuroinclusive language and the impact that this can have both in conversations with parents, teachers and other professionals, but also in reports and assessments.

3. How can Maya's voice and preferences be recognised in decision-making?

- Just because Maya does not use verbal language, does not mean she is not able to communicate. The fact Maya is pointing and perhaps using other forms of 'nonverbal' communication, demonstrates this.
- Furthermore, Maya's 'challenging' and 'disruptive' behaviour could be seen as a form of communication. She may be trying to communicate that she is struggling in her current environment or with certain tasks.
- Maya's use of communication does not mean that she is "behind" or that she lacks the same level of intelligence as her peers. As such, there is consideration to be given surrounding whether a specialist educational setting is appropriate.
- Social workers can model using short, clear instructions broken into steps, particularly when communicating with Maya and her parents.
- Visual aids and written reminders could be provided to reinforce spoken directions. Spoken directions should still be used; just because Maya does not use spoken language, does not mean that she doesn't understand instructions. Whilst appreciating that Maya is 8 years old, it is important not to infantilise her further.
- Recommend best practices to support Maya and share these with teachers. For example, tools like picture cards and a "feelings board" could be used to express her emotions. Social worker should encourage those who support Maya to use these during challenging periods, especially.

4. How can social workers work collaboratively with Maya's parents, teachers and school to advocate for an Education, Health and Care Plan that meets her needs?

- Create a EHCP that recommends adjusted working practices that will assist Maya but also might assist others in her educational setting.
- Regular and consistent communication is maintained between Maya's parents and the school to review these strategies and discuss her progress.
- Create a EHCP that is solution-focused, and strength-based, using progressive language, whilst also recognising Maya's challenges.

5. How can social workers advocate for schools to implement sensory-friendly spaces and neuroinclusive practices for neurodivergent children?

- Though it is important to consider sensory-friendly environments in the school environment, it is also important to consider sensory-friendly environments for home visits and other places where meetings might occur.
- Social worker could review the classroom and home environment as part of the EHCP. Consider low- to no-cost adjustments that could be recommended in Maya's mainstream classroom, such as a consistent timetable, lesson outlines and plans and ear defenders.
- A designated quiet place in the classroom could also be made available for Maya when she feels overwhelmed.
- A conversation to occur about how Maya should indicate when she is feeling overwhelmed. She could have a notice on her desk that she could touch when she needs a timeout.
- Maya may struggle with change. Social workers can contribute to this including when doing home visits. Minimise sudden schedule changes and prepare Maya in advance if changes are unavoidable (e.g., using visual schedules).
- Conversations around disclosure – just because Maya is 8-years-old, does not mean that her teachers should tell the rest of her class about her diagnosis. Encourage teachers to talk about neurodiversity and autism with the class in a more general forum, so as not to single Maya out, but also to provide basic education about difference to others.
- More general recommendations for neuroinclusive classrooms: minimise clutter and distractions, make consider colour choices, provide movement breaks for all students or although students to stand up if they need to, consider emotional regulation and allow time for decompression and engaging in specialist interests, use of fidget equipment, promote different ways of thinking and communication.