

Enter the Cabin – a safe place for autistic students

JEMMA GARDNER visits Comberton Village School where they are helping children with autism cope with mainstream schooling by giving them support and their own space where they can go during breaks. The approach is being rolled out to other schools.

More than anything else – while everybody here is autistic – it's a place they feel they belong," says Peter Allcock.

That safe space falls under the provisions which support students with autism spectrum conditions (ASC) at The Cam Academy Trust, here Mr Allcock is a director.

The Cabin at Comberton Village College was created more than 18 years ago to bring students with SC into mainstream schooling.

A purpose-built building on the school site, the Cabin is somewhere students can develop independence and life skills, and integrate into mainstream education with the support they need to help them cope.

The building, which has multiple small and medium-sized rooms, offers a safe space where students can go when they are feeling overwhelmed.

"We strive to provide a broad and advanced education for all of our students as well as a supportive environment to fully develop their academic and social potential," Mr Allcock explains.

"However, students with complex needs can often find the classroom very stimulating and confusing. This can result in them becoming increasingly demoralised, anxious and isolated in their school community.

"The Cabin has made a huge difference to their lives as the unique space and academic opportunity has given them the confidence, support and skills needed to progress while remaining in the wider school community."

Over the years, the Cabin has evolved from supporting students to access mainstream lessons, to include pastoral and academic concerns. The trust now has cabins at Melbourn Village College and St Peter's School in Huntingdon.

This is because there is an increasing number of students with ASC who are not accessing primary education and subsequently arriving at secondary school not having had sufficient support.

You have a specific place to return to where you're part of special, dysfunctional family where we are very aware of what's going on

Jane Hynton
Head of the Cabin

Many of them also suffer from mental health issues, including self-esteem and inability to interact with their peers.

The trust is also developing a Cabin provision at its primary school at Gamlingay to support students at a younger age.

Some 83 students receive support from the Cabin at Comberton, of these 51 have education, health and care (EHC) plans. About one in 15 of the college population has ASC.

The main aspect of the Cabin's work is offering a safe space for children with ASC (but not exclusively) during break and lunch times.

Head of the Cabin Jane Hynton, who helped set up the provision with Mr Allcock, explains: "When we started we learned very quickly that one of the most difficult times was always break and lunch, the unstructured times when people are hanging out.

"We wanted to make sure we had a space where there would also be an adult around who could intervene. Then we developed that with chess, a games' club, music clubs, and art clubs. We found very early that doing something at lunchtimes enabled them to be able to get through school."

Mr Allcock continues: "A lot of the time the students can manage lessons as they're highly-structured.

Jane Hynton



Peter Allcock outside the Cabin
Picture: Keith Herrpell

It's the other bits, playtime and outside that they find the most difficult.

"Most students, when I go to other schools, I find them in the corner of the playground on their own. What really makes it work here is the belonging.

"More than anything else, more than all the stuff we do, all the teaching aids we put in place, is that while everybody here is autistic it's a place they feel they belong.

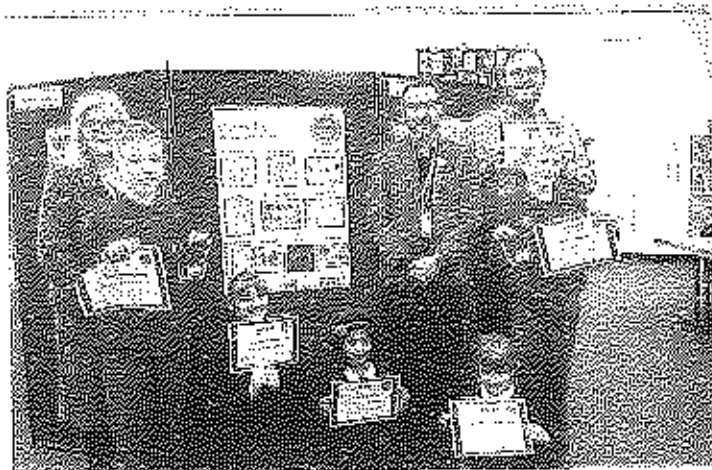
"That's more important. But they're in a mainstream school, so they get the education at a level which is suitable. We have ups and downs – we have students who don't manage."

Over the years, the college has only had three students that were unable to manage and moved to alternative provision, while others have gained places in the sixth form.

"Without this provision, and in a mainstream school, they'd be on the periphery and not being able to join in and not be quite sure how to do friendships or be part of anything – and that's if they could manage to be part of a mainstream school at all," says Ms Hynton.



SENDing a message with children's art



The 10 winners of an art competition aimed at bringing to life Cambridgeshire County Council's pledge to work together to make special educational needs and disability (SEND) everybody's business have been announced.

More than 100 entries were received for the SEND pledge art competition and the winning artworks were displayed as part of the launch event for the joint SEND strategy for

Cambridgeshire and Peterborough.

The winners were chosen by a panel of judges, which included artists Julie Reed and Faye Panchal and representatives from parent carer forums. Each winner was presented with a £75 voucher for their school and a personal £25 voucher.

Pupils from St Laurence RC School, King's Hedges Primary and Impington Village College were among the winners.

Summer children are being outperformed

The gap in educational performance between Cambridgeshire children born in summer and the rest of the year needs to be put back on the agenda, according to the county council's service director for education, writes *Ben Hatton, Local Democracy Reporter*.

Jonathan Lewis said the gap in performance between Cambridgeshire children born in summer and the rest of the year is "startling".

Cambridgeshire County Council's children and young people committee was presented with the county's educational outcomes on Tuesday last week.

It was noted that the gap in pupils achieving the expected standard at Key Stage 2 - aged seven to 11 - between summer born and autumn born children was 8.8 percentage points.

Of those born in the summer, 58.6 per cent hit the expected standard, whereas the county average is 62.8 per cent. Excluding the summer born children, the average is 64.2. Those born in autumn scored highest, with 67.4 per

cent, then winter with 63.4 per cent, and 61.7 per cent of those born in the spring hit the expected standard.

When the disparity was queried by councillors, Mr Lewis said: "I just thought it was startling. When I put the figures there I expected there to be a difference - but it was significant. There is no reason why summer-born children can't perform."

He jokingly noted to the committee that he himself was a summer-born child.

The educational achievement gap for summer-born children was far from the only noticeable disparity in the figures. The gap between those meeting the expected standard between boys and girls at the same stage is larger - 9.3 percentage points.

But the gap between the most and least deprived pupil at Key Stage 2 is more than double those disparities, at 29.2 percentage points.

Mr Lewis told the committee the county "has to continue that focus" on reducing the gap for disadvantaged pupils.

you have to fit in with societal expectations without any understanding of your particular needs. This is the bridge between the two."

And of the Cabin, she says: "You have a specific place to return to where you're part of a special, dysfunctional family where we are very aware of what's going on."

"No-one can say it's not my fault, I did it because I'm autistic. They can't use that as an excuse, which we found initially would happen in a mainstream environment. Equally, they have to get used to complying with other peoples' expectations."

"On a flip, side the society we live in has to understand that everyone is different and we have to make allowances to incorporate everybody."

"It gives people the ability to say 'yes, I can express myself and be myself', and say 'hey I've got autism, I'm proud of it' and the confidence of being able to go into the wider environment."

The Cabin currently supports more boys than girls at a ratio of 70 to 30, which reflects the picture nationally.

It's still more common for men and boys to receive a diagnosis of autism, according to the National Autistic Society.

But it's increasingly believed that autistic women and girls may be better at masking their difficulties, leading to their autism being missed.

Ms Hylton adds: "Girls tend to show their autism more at about 14 or 15, so we don't tend to get them at 11 with a diagnosis."

She continues: "With autism, it's a developmental disability. Emotionally our boys tend to be much more immature than their peers and that's why the difference is only more apparent in girls at about 14 as puberty kicks off."

Mr Allcock adds: "I don't think they're consciously masking it. I think they're just trying to survive. And it manifests in a different way. They're not loud and aggressive, and fighting and jumping over fences."

"They're just isolated."

For more information, visit combertonvc.org/about-us/SEND/cabin.