

Two ADHD children who are “outliers” in a school system that does not want them. A single mother’s story in South Wales.

Meet Laura, a mum of five children, two of which are nine-year-old twin boys. The boys are the reason that I am meeting with Laura. You see, Laura has reached out to me for help, out of desperation for her boys. When Laura talks about her children, she does so with an undeniable love and determination that her boys are not as bad as “the school is making them out to be”.

She was quick to state, “don’t get me wrong, they can be little horrors, just like other kids, but they do listen to me, they do understand right from wrong”. At home, if it starts to get hard, she takes one boy into one area and her daughter helps her with the other twin in another room, they play games until they start calming down, and are in a better frame of mind. Laura knows her

boys and takes the attitude that being on the ball means being preventative, so as to avoid her boys from making difficult choices.

We met up, week 4 since of the start of September term 2021, and so far her boys, between them had already clocked up 9 fixed term exclusion days. Laura was feeling very anxious as she was due “another” meeting at the school, and she felt that one of the twins was facing more exclusions. A phone call home the day before by the Headteacher informed her that one of the twins had “hit” his teaching assistant. Her son denies all of this, stating that it wasn’t quite like that, it wasn’t meant to hurt anyone. Mum feels she wants to support the school, Laura never fails to turn up to any meeting and so tries her best to understand the challenges in school. Following the phone call, Laura was deeply disappointed and challenged her son over this latest incident. He simply broke down, inconsolable, denying what he was being accused of, pleading with his mum to hear him out. In Laura’s words “**I know my boys, I know what they are capable of, and I know when they are lying. My boy is not lying to me. As his mum, I know this for a fact.**”

The facts are that both boys have a Statement of Need (Wales still use Statements), both boys have a diagnosis of ADHD, and one of the twins is on a CAHMs waiting list for an Autism assessment. Mum shares their file with me, which includes various professional documents. Twin A has 30 hours of 1:1 support, and twin B has 20 hours of support. The professional documents and Statement, clearly identify several professionals that are supposed to be involved in working with the school to meet the boys needs. However, mum is unaware that these professionals are involved, as she herself has never been requested to attend meetings and be involved in any planning that

“The problem with pounding a square peg into a round hole is NOT that the hammering is hard work.



It's that you're destroying the peg.” ~Unknown~

directly relates to her children's additional needs. There is also no paediatrician, no dietician involvement. The only meetings that she has experienced, have always been around the area of their behaviour and exclusions.

Laura explains that she is concerned about the staff that are involved with her boys, i.e. the teaching assistants. Her boys she feels are being contained, not educated, explaining that the boys have since returning to school in September been exposed to up to five teaching assistants. This results in the boys taking a dislike to their adult support as they are not able to relate to these adults. Laura explains that the staff currently in place, don't understand her boys' needs, or even conduct themselves, as if they like them. The boys it seems don't get on with quite a lot of them. This of course means that the boys' behaviour is increasingly becoming more difficult and defiant with support staff and sometimes teachers. This results in the boys being removed from lessons and working in a porta-cabin on the school site away from their peers and teachers.

Laura feels helpless and destitute as she understands what is transpiring right in front of her, but she does not have the resources to find different solutions. You see Laura herself was a carer for her mum when growing up, and so missed a lot of schooling, so she herself, to this day can barely read and write. Laura's expectations from school, are that her boys are given the chance to read and write, as a very basic minimum.

Since September, Laura explains that:

- She gets asked to pick up the boys fifteen minutes before the end of the school day, as the Headteacher wants her boys out of the way, before other parents arrive, and the other children leave school at the end of the day.
- Her boys no longer access mainstream lessons and so do not get to participate in learning, and they themselves feel disheartened and despondent, saying that school is pointless as they are not learning anything.
- She has been informed by the school that they wanted to place her boys on a part-time timetable as it is difficult to manage them in school for long periods of time. Laura feels that this is too difficult for her to manage as she is also a carer for her brother, making it difficult to support him. To ease tensions, Laura has instead requested that the boys attend school three whole days a week and they stay with her the other two days.
- At the end of each week, Laura receives a diary of all the boy's behaviours for each day of the week. The log of each day starts with "**Didn't meet targets set**" – I ask Nancy what the targets and plan of support for each child were, but Laura didn't know what the targets were for her boys, these had not been discussed or shared with her. The log then went onto identifying the boys' behaviours:
 - o **Aggressive towards member of staff; rude, shouting out; defiance; running around; jumping on tables; refusing to follow any instructions...**

It is clear to Laura that the school have rejected her children, they have rejected her as a mum, yet she is still trying to make sense of this tragedy, despite the depth of hurt and confusion all over her face. Laura repeats over and over, that she desperately wants her boys to have an education and that wants her boys to leave school being able to read and write. Mum shares her vulnerability, explaining "***I am an uneducated woman, I just want it to be different for my boys***". This is a mum who loves her children fiercely, they are fine boys with complex needs, and simply wants them to be treated fairly, justly, and not like they are unwanted. Laura's boys go to school every day, feeling that they are unliked, "unlovable" by their school and that they are being funnelled into more experiences of rejection. For these two boys, going to school is an extremely brave thing to

do, but I imagine that it is synonymous to walking on that treacle of almost toxicity, causing them so much personal harm.

Considering that society has just experienced one of its most complex storms in our living memories, during lockdown there were a few phone calls from school, checking up on the boys, but there was no actual support. When the boys returned to school in April following the second lockdown, the teaching assistants working with both boys were staff that the boys got on well with and who took an interest in them, who liked the boys. Laura explains that it gave her a sense of hope as the boys were engaged in school. Since returning in September, those staff have gone and there was no explanation and now they have new teaching assistants, who are also mostly shared with other children, which does not help her boys, they are not getting what they need and their entitlement. After the stress of the pandemic, lockdown, with the pressure of life being so unpredictable and, in their case, limited access at home to any type of learning, followed by the six weeks summer holiday; returning to school in September like this, is a level of unbearable stress that is taking this mum and her boys with very complex needs to the edge of not being able to cope. This family simply does not know what to do with school, and our educational system colludes with a school making choices which contributes to making this family even more vulnerable. A trajectory of little hope and despair for Laura and her boys.

A morning in the life of a Parent Coach, walking with a desperate parent.

Elsa Torres 081021