

My Lived Experience of ABA by an Anonymous 15-year-old Autistic Mainstream Pupil

I am 15 years old and I currently go to school in (mainstream secondary). When I was two, I was diagnosed with autism, I was put on the spectrum. At that age – I didn't know this at the time – but later discovered I had gone mute. When I did some research it was what they call "regressing" which was where I just went completely mute, I didn't say a word, whereas I had been speaking until I was about one and a half, but then I just stopped.

I went to a school – it is an ABA school – and through a long time of signing I began knowing again how to speak, and I sort of trained my mind back through the ABA therapy sessions that they were doing. So that enabled me to move to a mainstream school. Through that school, I did a whole range of things – I did various clubs, I did a comedy club with my friends. In Year 6 there was about 11 of us looking after the garden at our school.

I mean I should have struggled with socialising with people, but through practice I actually don't struggle with it so much. I quite like talking to people. The school was really good at helping me to improve my social skills as a whole really. I began making a few friends – a few became a dozen. Now I know quite a few people that I feel safe and comfortable talking to and calling my friends.

I've always liked getting involved in activities and stuff, so after school I did Scouts, and I managed to get my Chief Scout's Gold Award which was really good. I do my school's Book Club, which basically involves me reading books, reviewing them, talking to people about them - and through Book Club I volunteered with the librarian to help plan events for the

library. Through school, despite having a social condition, I almost feel I have overcome a lot of social difficulties throughout my life.

In the future I'd really like to work in something to do with the film or television industry. For example, I am thinking of the British School of Film Classification – which age rates films – 18, 15, 12 – because I'm really interested in talking about films with my friends and writing about films. My all-time favourite is probably one of the Harry Potter films because I feel like they have something for everyone: I love how as the series/characters get older, the films get darker and more mature as well. And I like that it gets scarier as it gets older as well, but they don't lose what made the original series so special – the friendship between the three characters – which is why I got into them in the first place.

I shouldn't have really been able to cycle like I do – cycling should be a complete nightmare, co-ordination wise, trying to figure out where you are, oncoming traffic etc – they all are things that seem quite difficult. But through practice and riding my bike with my Dad I've been able to do quite well at it. I have done a few events: I did a Sky bike ride which was about 10 miles. And recently I did a 21-mile cycle race – they called it a marathon even though it wasn't a marathon (26.2 miles is a marathon - I was 5.2 miles short!). But let's call it a marathon. The first year I tried it, I fell 14 miles along the way – it was really annoying as I'd completed two-thirds of it and then there was this hill – and - boom! So this year I made sure I clutched onto the brakes as hard as I could while still actually cycling and I feel like the effort and perseverance got me to 21 miles.

My message to parents would be that having autism is not all bad. For example – I think this is common in autism, not entirely sure – sometimes I can be a bit blunt in how I speak. I don't intend to say the things that come

out of my mouth, but I don't realise they are seen as rude. Particularly for parents who'll look at things in a completely different way. If your child has a diagnosis, you will have to work to help your child, but it's exciting to look at things from their perspective. Just keep trying when it gets difficult is what I'd say.

I was originally really unsocial, I didn't like being independent, I didn't like meeting new people, going to new environments. Pantomimes in particular, because of all the sensory stuff going on in the theatre. I remember running out of a pantomime crying because of this green phantomesque figure – uugh!

As time went on and through practice and through perseverance I managed to be more social, go through more environments that I didn't think I would like. I managed to talk to loads of people on a daily basis. And it's not all a bad thing, you get new experiences and new perspectives on the world. Well, now I am actually surprised by how much I do. I go to the shopping centre with my friends, I talk to people on Facetime and Skype. And I also like going to my friends' houses for parties and social gatherings, watching Netflix with them, listening to music... It doesn't feel like a gloomy, unapproachable place any more. I now more than ever, through perseverance and through effort, fit in really well.