

The Social Communication Department at Shepherdswell

Context

The Social Communication Department at Shepherdswell is a specialist provision for children with Social Communication Difficulties/Autism, from Foundation Stage through to the end of Year 2. We currently have places for 6 children and, to be eligible for a place, children must have an EHCP in place with Social Communication difficulties being their main area of need. We have a specialist teacher and specialist TAs with a range of experience and qualifications in the field of ASD, who work to give all the children the best educational provision and opportunities. We also have a Speech and Language Therapist who visits the Department weekly to work with children on their language skills and to support staff in delivering daily Speech and Language Therapy activities.

Our Provision

We have a class base (Sparrows), from which the children are integrated into mainstream activities and lessons that are appropriate, and in which we feel they can be successful. Within our base, we have a classroom, a Soft Play room, a Sensory room and our own cloakroom and toilet. The children have access to the Sensory room and Soft Play room during 'Supported Play' activities, as well as for specific interventions during the day with staff. We have a Group/Work room, which can also be used for interventions, such as Speech and Language Therapy, as well as messy/sensory activities and some Art sessions, and is used daily for 1:1 teaching activities. We also have our own enclosed outside learning space which provides learning and play opportunities across the whole curriculum, as well as a space for the children to complete 'sensory circuits' and sensory integration activities.

We have access to the 'Forest School' and Sparrows children have regular Forest School sessions, with activities adapted to their needs, but with the same ethos as our mainstream Forest School groups.

Staff in the Department also lead intervention groups in areas such as 'Lego Therapy' and 'Social Thinking', where Sparrows children can work alongside their mainstream peers to improve their communication and social skills.

Our school day is slightly shorter than the mainstream classes (8:40am-2:45pm) as we understand that young children with Social Communications Difficulties/Autistic Spectrum Disorder can need more time of self-repair at home, due to the anxiety that can be caused by the pace and pressures of school (Lawrence, C. 2017).

Our Ethos

We follow the principles of TEACCH within the Department, which means that we strive to make each child as independent as possible in their learning, communication, self-help skills and life skills, setting the foundation for their continued journey through education and on to adulthood. We do this by giving visual/physical structure and clarity within the environment and activities so that the children are better able to understand what is expected of them.

Children starting in the Department at Shepherdswell have an individualised transition process, which is taken at the child's pace, to ensure the high wellbeing of each child in Sparrows. Staff build good relationships with each child, getting to know them well, so that children feel happy and secure. We also work closely with our children's next schools, supporting parents on visits, liaising with new teachers and arranging transition visits to make each child as familiar with their new setting as possible.

We work closely with parents to ensure continuity of resources and strategies between school and home, as well as supporting parents with managing any difficulties their child may have at home, in regard to their ASD. We keep parents informed about their child's day and their small steps of progress during end of day handovers and by using Home-School books and 'Marvellous Me'

Our Curriculum

We follow an adapted EYFS curriculum that is bespoke to the needs of the children in the Department, which includes working on individualised targets in all areas of their learning, such as Literacy and Maths, a range of messy/sensory activities, emotional literacy, relaxation, life skills, social skills, focus and attention sessions, speech and language activities, and teaching and practice of play skills. We also develop each child's ability to complete work tasks independently, using the TEACCH approach.

Each child is integrated into mainstream activities at their level, when appropriate, supported by the specialist Department staff and we liaise closely with mainstream class teachers to ensure each child gets the best possible experience from integrating. We plan lots of activities that take children out into the community, to help improve their life skills and awareness. These include swimming sessions, a visit to a garden centre, a walk to the local park and visits to restaurants, as well as trips to places such as the zoo or open farm. The children in the Department are also able to access whole-school activities, such as Celebration Assemblies, educational visitors and occasions such as the Christmas party, as appropriate.

We use a bespoke assessment system that breaks targets and goals into very small steps and incorporates elements of the EYFS curriculum and the Autism Education Trust's Progression Framework. Children are assessed against these targets daily and their next steps are used to move their learning forward as each target is achieved. This means that we are able to show small steps of progress for each child, across all areas of their development.

To conclude

We are passionate about ensuring that every child in our Social Communication Department has access to the best provision we can offer. We provide an individualised approach to each child's development that includes strategies to help overcome the barriers to their learning. We pride ourselves on our supportive environment and team, which means that all of our children feel secure and happy and are able to achieve to the best of their ability, setting a foundation for their continued journey through education and beyond.