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# Autistic girls, young people and absenteeism

Dr Ruth Moyse

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# Expert by experience and design

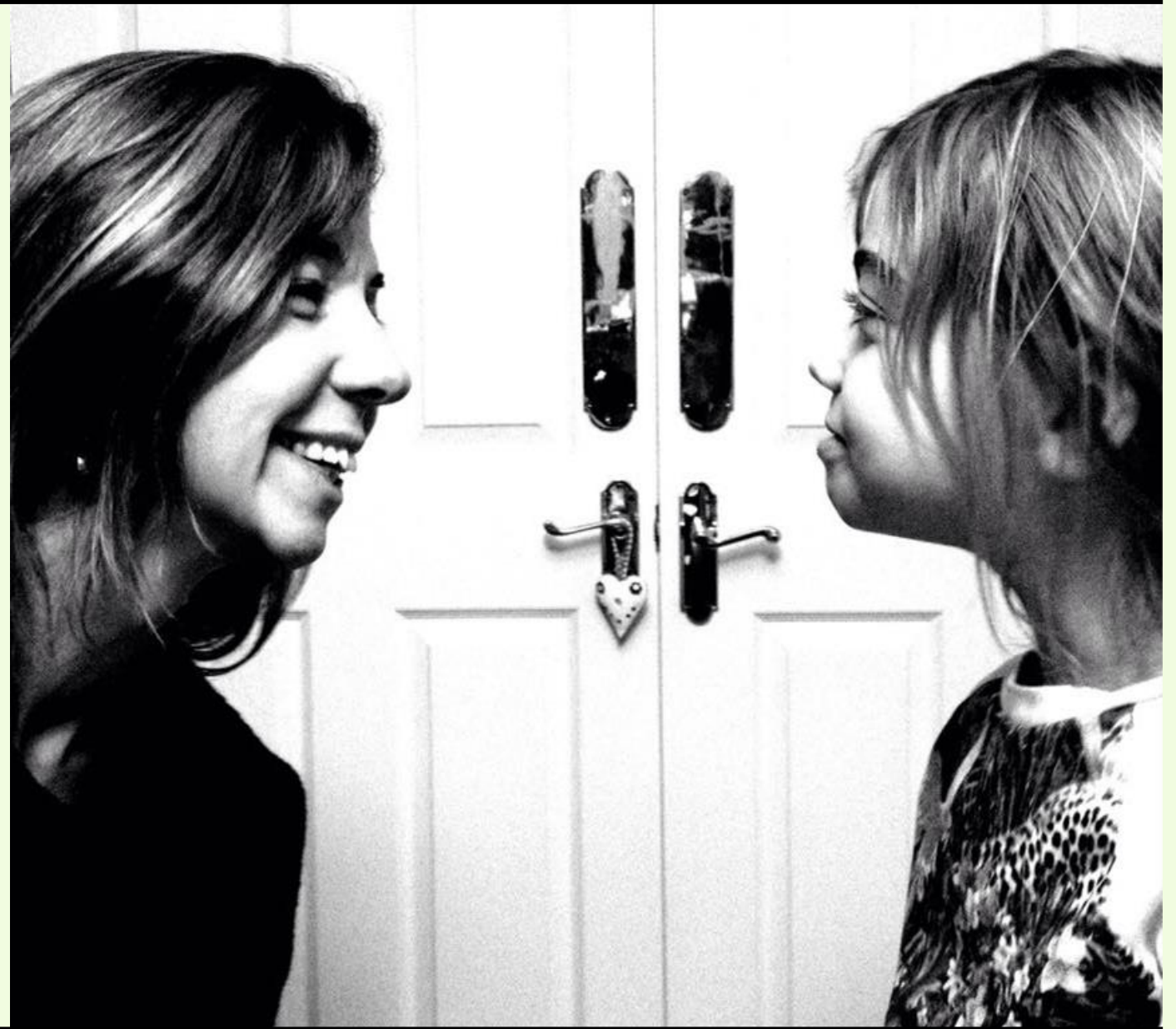
Teacher

Parent

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AT-Autism

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University of Southampton

#ActuallyAutistic #AuDHD



# The plan

1. Why do we need to think about autistic girls and education?
2. Do we have expectations around gender?
3. Why is masking relevant?
4. What is the impact of masking on mental health?
5. Whose red flags?
6. Whose voice?
7. Absence: a problem for secondary schools?
8. Recommendations from autistic young people





# What do you bring?



What *knowledge* and *experiences* do you bring with you that *inform your understanding* of autism and the support of autistic girls/young people?

# 1. Why do we need to think about autistic girls and education?



In England, **autistic girls** are **significantly more likely** than non-autistic boys or girls, or autistic boys, to be **persistently absent** from school

- Why?
- What might frame our understanding and response?

## 2. Do we have expectations around gender?

### *First type of description*

‘Hides in cupboards’ and ‘tries to avoid/opt-out’. (Cayla)

‘Works hard’, ‘anxious about failing with her work and in not being able to please’.  
(Emma)

‘Very shy’; ‘very submissive’; ‘tries to fade into the background’. (Katie)

‘Very compliant.’ (Gina)

### *Second type of description*

‘Partners think she’s bossy.’ (Molly)

‘Resistant’; ‘lacks empathy’; puts ‘a great deal of burden on the class teacher and the class as a whole’. (Beth)

‘Attention-seeker’; ‘lashes out’ and ‘doesn’t care about others if she has hurt them’.  
(Lauren)

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# Impact on whom?

## Internalising

- “Compliant”
- “Submissive”
- “Shy”
- “Wants to please”

## Externalising

- “Resistant”
- “A burden”
- “Bossy”
- “Attention-seeking”



# 3. Why is masking relevant?

- Masking is a response to the social world and to **trauma** (e.g. bullying)
- **Stigma** leads to attempts to conceal; to 'pass' as 'normal'
- **Hide** autism-related difficulties
- **Internalise** distress
- Not limited to autistic females



# Implications for support?

“I defy anyone to pick her out in five minutes.”

“There is nothing. I see nothing.”

“I don’t have to cope with anything.”

“We have children who have more needs.”





## 4. What is the impact of masking on mental health?

- Physical and emotional exhaustion
- Loss of identity
- Overworking to compensate
- Trauma and unresolved pain
- Self-medication
- Poor mental health



## 5. Whose red flags?



### Wrong red flags?

- What if academic targets met?
- What if internal absences unrecorded?
- What if they are the 'ideal pupil'?

### Consider:

- Impact of sensory input / overwhelming environment
- Difficulties with sleep
- Anxiety

# An experience-sensitive approach

Stigmatised (at school  
or within own  
community)

Labelled as odd, weird,  
'disordered'

Mis-diagnosed (e.g.:  
anxious, PD; conduct  
disorder)

Multiple micro-  
aggressions over time

- Bullied, overlooked,  
excluded, othered, ignored

Internalised attitudes  
and values

Stress, low self-esteem,  
poor mental health



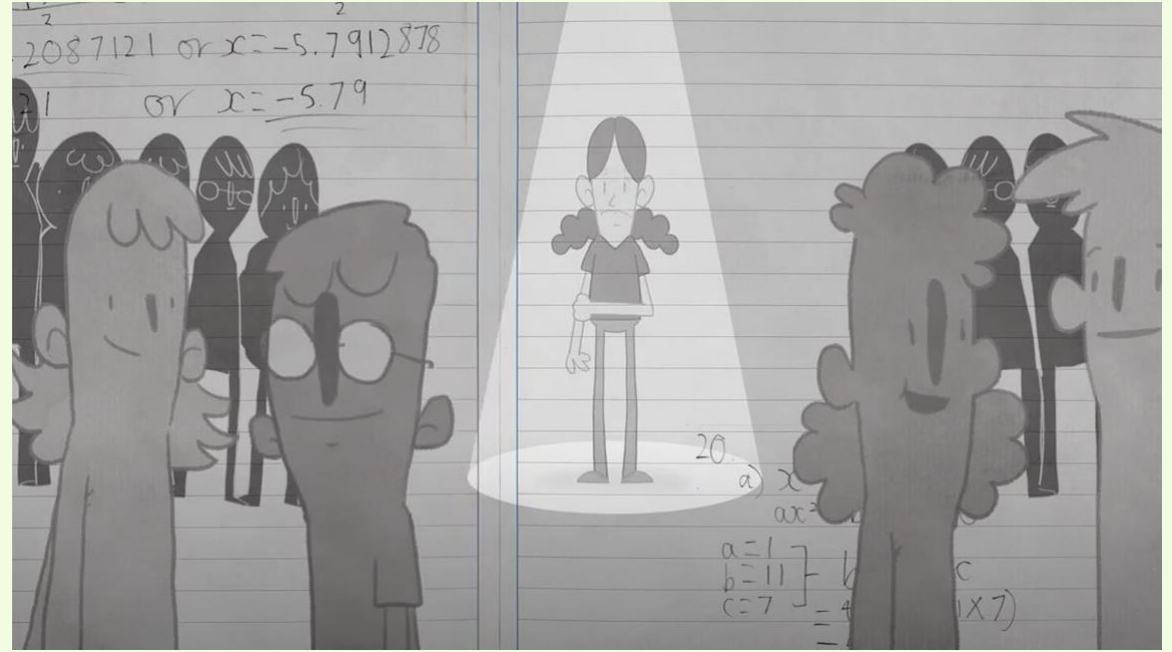


## 6. Whose 'voice'?

- How much of what we think we know is based on *assumptions*
  - about autism?
  - about autistic girls?
  - about what absent autistic girls need?

*"Just listen. It's not rocket science."*

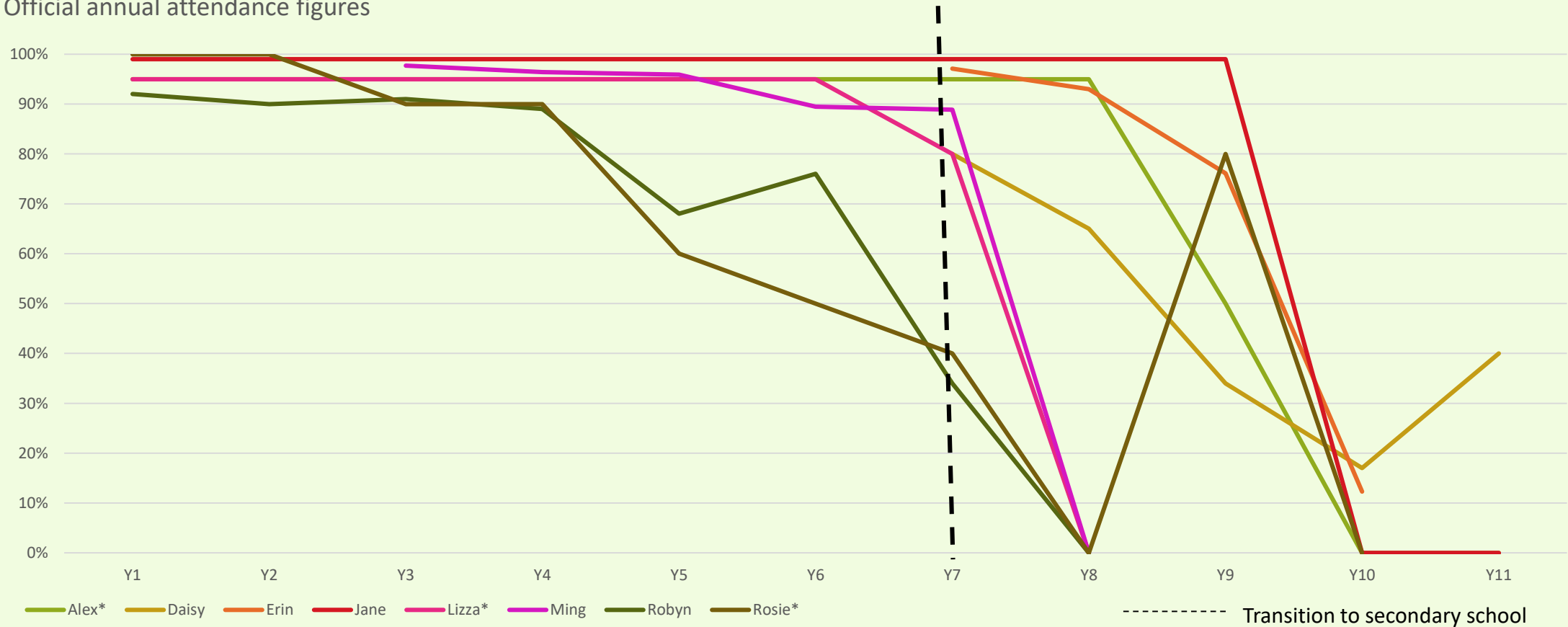
- Who needs to be in the conversation?
- What does effective collaboration look like?



# Walk in my shoes

# 7. Absence: a problem for secondary schools?

Official annual attendance figures





# Informal absences precede formal absences

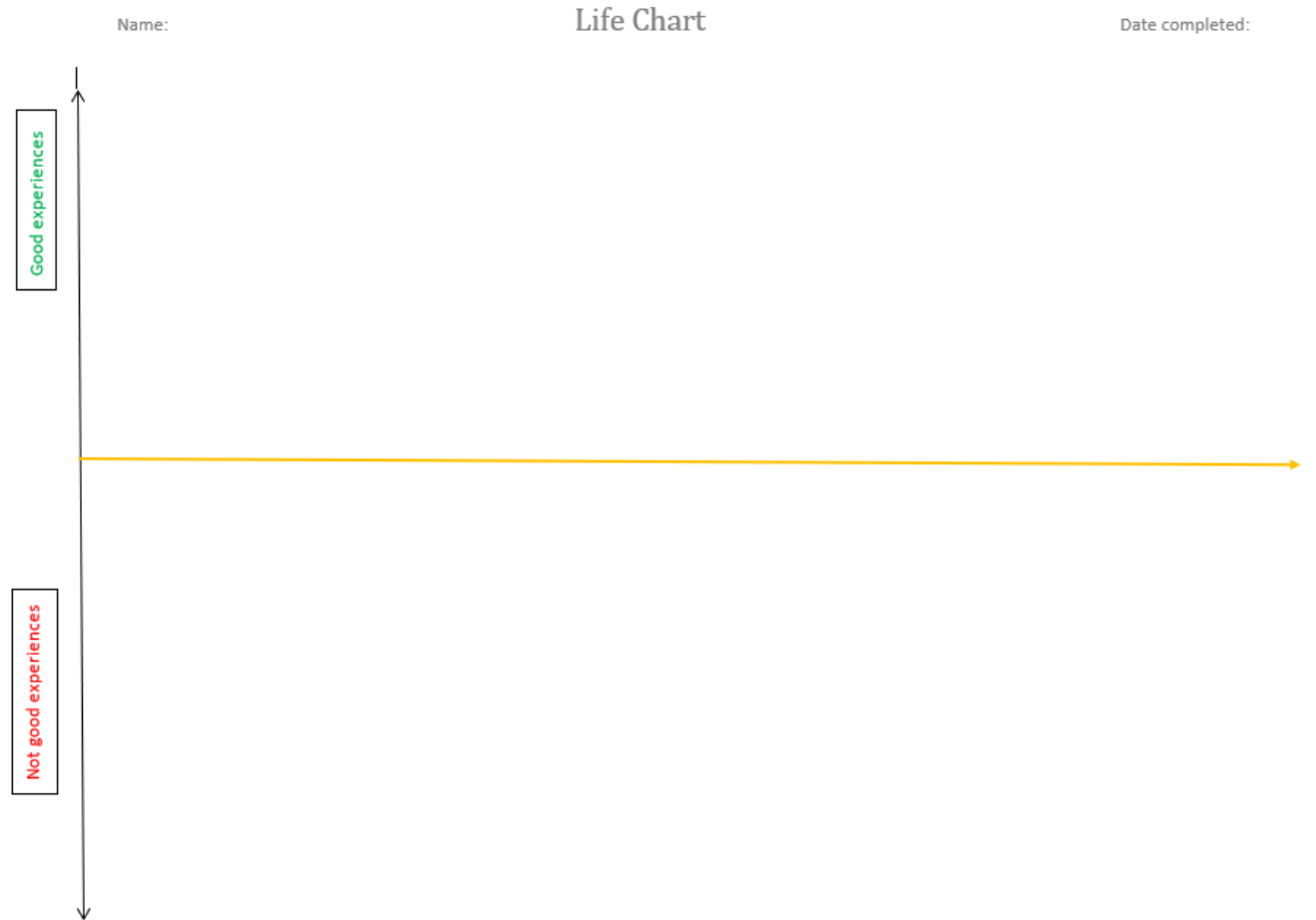


Of eight girls, half reported wanting to stop attending school **within the first year** but persevered at school for 8-9 years before they finally stopped attending.

Multiple examples of **informal absences** that do not show up in official statistics.

In some cases, girls **almost entirely absent** from lessons, despite being recorded as present in school.

# Participant-led narratives



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# Absence is an unequal strategy



By staff



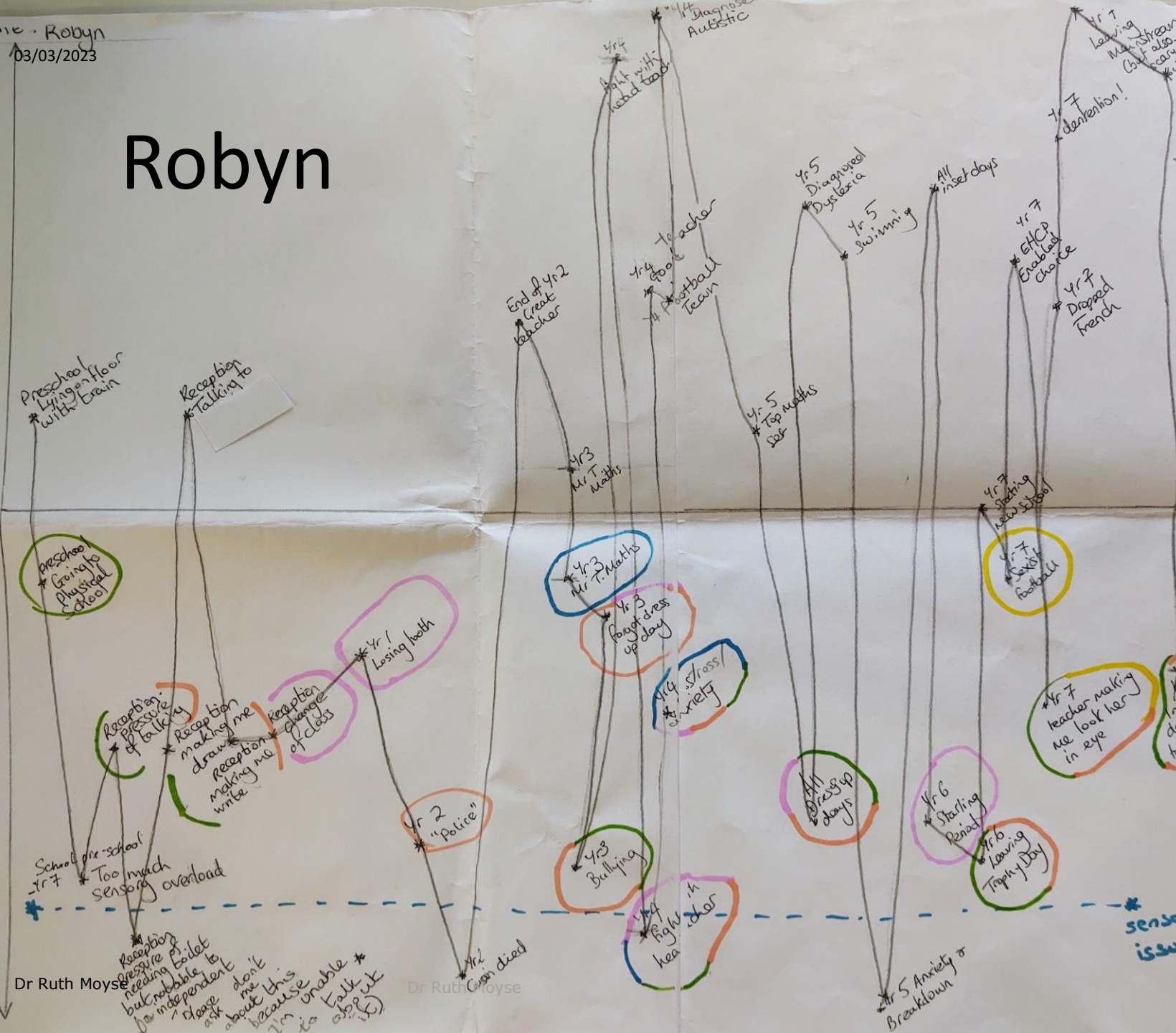
By the girls

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# Robyn

Good Experiences  
Not Good Experiences

name - Robyn  
03/03/2023



## Themes:

Sensory overload

Force (rigidity, discrimination and abuse of power)

Change

Social expectations (& understanding language)

Discrimination

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reception  
pressure of  
talking  
but I'm not  
able to be  
independent  
I don't  
ask  
about this  
because  
I'm unable  
to talk  
about it

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Year 5 Anxiety or Breakdown

sensa issue



# Daisy

	Event	Why did you choose this?	Why was this such a positive experience? What worked well?
1	Starting music lessons	“Led to me falling in love with music which became a way for me to cope and escape from reality.”	“Given the same opportunity as other children...felt like I was good at something.”
2	Meeting a teacher who believed in me	“Made me able to stay and cope in mainstream for as long as I did.”	“She understood my difficulties but didn’t ignore my strengths, and she gave me a safe space to hide and express my feelings and feel valued.”
3	Dropping French and PE	“Removing majorly overwhelming events from my week made me feel like I could go to school.”	“I dreaded these lessons as they caused sensory overload, so I didn’t fear school as much when I didn’t have to go to them.”

8. What did the girls recommend to inform practice?

“Just listen. It’s not rocket science.”

“Be curious.”

“Prioritise wellbeing.”

“Take action.”

“Be more informed about autism.”

# What is within **your** control?

- Have a plan
- Reduce input
- Reduce demands



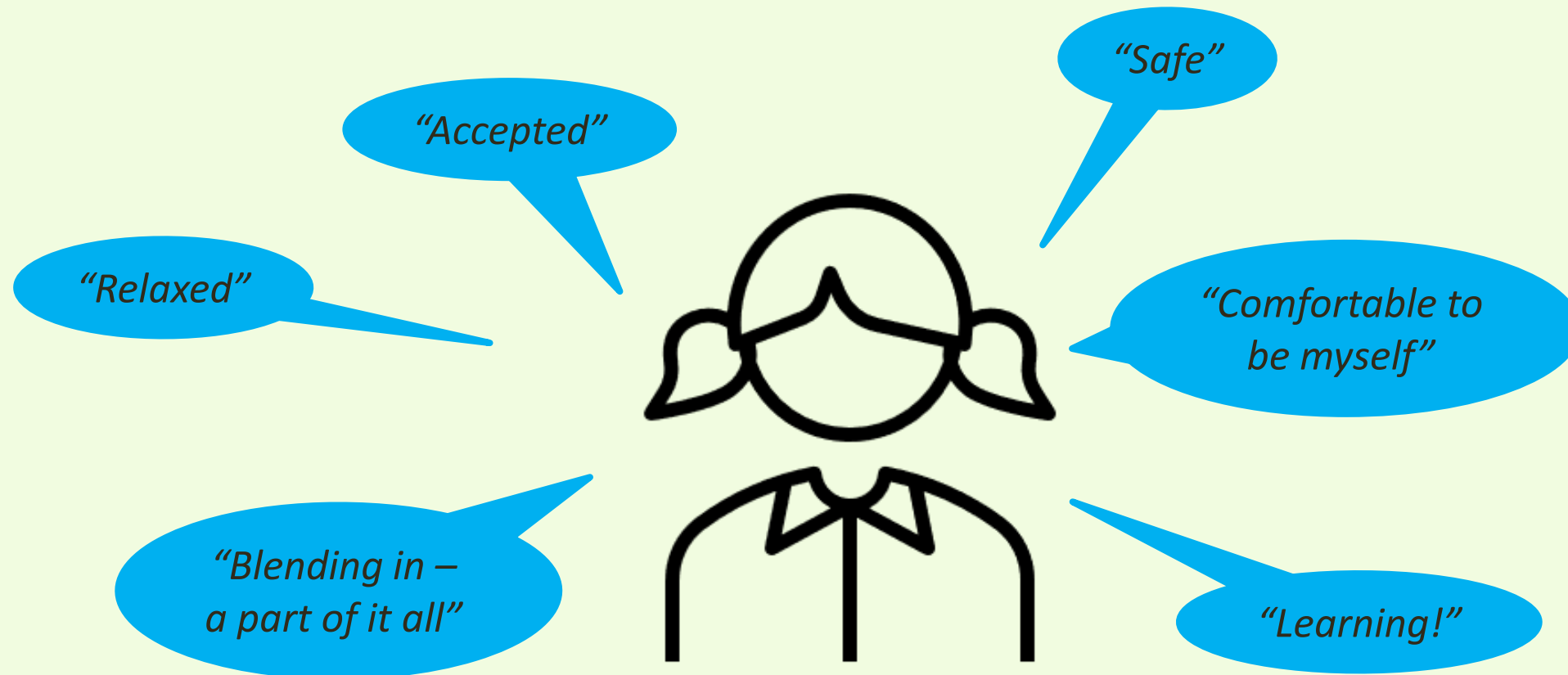


# Acceptance, Belonging, Connection

- Build **relationships**
- Prioritise autistic young people feeling **safe** and **cared** about
- Learning follows wellbeing



# In my ideal school I would be...



# Resources

<https://pauli.com/spectrumgaming/AutismResources>

Dr Ruth Moysie

Executive Function/  
Dysfunction

Explaining to young  
people

Forest School

Gaming

Girls/ Women

hollyhill41 2mo  
Whole body listening from a  
neurodivergence affirming  
perspective

lisa chapman 1mo  
The Neuro Bears

Spectrum Gaming 6mo  
The necessity of autistic  
play

youngminds.org.uk  
Gaming & Mental Health | Parents Guide  
To Support

invisible, just ignored  
Written by Cos Michael, 2015

PDF  
https://www.evelyn.gov.uk/regulation.co  
m/

YouTube  
\_490q6LaHIY  
https://youtu.be/\_490q6LaHIY

Spectrum Gaming 6mo  
Learning to play or playing  
to learn?

lisa chapman 6mo  
Gaming & Mental Health

RuthMoysie 5mo  
Fizzacc presentation for  
schools

Spectrum Gaming 5mo  
Support for Executive  
Dysfunction

Spectrum Gaming 1mo  
Amazing Things Happen!

Spectrum Gaming 6mo  
Forest school: What works  
for us

This article has some good  
advice, although it is not  
specifically focused on autism

Fizzacc Presentation for Schools  
@ACoRNSoton  
Made by a research group of  
autistic girls and one  
researcher/ex-teacher (Chloe E  
at ACoRNS, University of  
Southampton.  
Link to other resources here:  
Fizzacc Information - ACoRNS  
Southampton (acorns-  
soton.org.uk)





# Thank you

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