

National Education

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A class apart

Educating children who cannot cope with school

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When schools in England fully reopened after the Covid lockdown in 2020, most children were happy to return. But Rex was far from alone in deciding he wouldn't go back.

"He didn't particularly enjoy school, pre-Covid, but just got up and went, because that's just what you did," says his mother, Tracey. Rex's mental health deteriorated; he was struggling with chronic depression and anxiety, and he became what is known as an emotionally based school avoider.

"His school fell apart during Covid. It wasn't like he was particularly keeping to any routine. And then he tried to go back in September 2020, and I think he suddenly realised: 'this doesn't work for me at all and I'm not going to do it any more,'" Tracey says.

"As a parent, you're at your wits' end, because your child is just stuck at home. They're just on their phone, they're getting more and more distressed. They're just getting more isolated.

"I would wake up crying and I would go to bed crying. Because apart from mainstream schools, in the UK I didn't know what the other options are, apart from home schooling and that's a no for me anyway."

Luckily for Rex and Tracey, the London borough of Camden has another option, run by the Royal Free hospital children's school (RFHCS). After a false start that saw Rex rejoin his previous school for GCSEs only to retreat into further

avoidance, he was offered a place in the hospital school's "futures group", designed for older children who can't cope with the bustle and complexity of a mainstream school.

Despite Rex's initial reluctance - "I think he thought it was just going to be sitting around playing a guitar, it would just be a bit of a joke," says Tracey - he thrived with the group's support, gaining good GCSE results. He is now taking A-levels at a mainstream sixth form.

While the centre does use therapy, including horse riding, art and music therapy, Alex Yates, the headteacher of the RFHCS, says the children it takes on should not expect an easy ride.

"The level of scrutiny and push that they get here is like probably nothing they've experienced before," he says. "It's certainly nothing that mainstream schools will prepare them for, the fact that somebody will be contacting them every morning from 8.15am to ask how they're doing, what time they're going to be in.

"These children are not in a good place. When you opt out of things, and you take a depressive view on things, you are stuck. And these children are stuck. And we've got to provide them with innovative ways to get them out of that."

The hospital school's success has led local schools and Camden borough to support the renovation of a bespoke unit at the Konstam Centre, which officially opened in October - the first of its kind designed to help children aged five to 16 who have been estranged from attending school because of their medical or mental health challenges.

Originally opened as a children's health clinic in 1924, funded by the Konstam family to commemorate

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Alex Yates
Headteacher, RFHCS

two sons killed in the first world war, the centre allowed Yates to bring together a variety of programmes to help school avoiders.

Dr Cathleen Halligan, an educational psychologist who works with the school, says: "The vast majority of children I've met who aren't attending school and are struggling with school avoidance, they do not want it to stay like that. They want it to be different.

"A place like this is less daunting for children who have struggled with some of the things they've

▼ Alex Yates, head of the Royal Free hospital children's school, pictured left, which admits up to 50 pupils

PHOTOGRAPHS: LINDA NYLIND/THE GUARDIAN



experienced, like difficulties with peers or the sensory overload of a big secondary school.

"It's a smaller group here, it's quiet. You have one classroom as a main base, you don't go between lots of different classes, you call people by their first names, you don't wear a uniform. The setting of the school lends itself to overcoming those barriers."

Admissions are strictly limited, and not just to the centre's capacity of 50 children. Students must be referred by a medical professional, social worker or school leader, and funding from the child's current school has to be agreed. Each case is considered by a panel to decide if the child can fit in.

"Essentially, what we're trying to do is to get young people to feel better about themselves, regardless of their age group," says Yates.

"My measure of success for the futures group, the GCSE group, has never been how they do in year 11. Because, quite frankly, you can hothouse and get them grades that

are approximate to their ability, or push beyond it sometimes.

"The real test is what they are doing the year after that. Because all the effort that we make in terms of reconnecting them with the world, in terms of getting their self-esteem back, in terms of building up their self-confidence, that has to be resilient."

Yates said the development of the Konstam centre was "the result of local authority-maintained schools working together".

"The only reason I've been able to do this is because at every stage I've had support from local headteachers, I've had support from Camden's school inclusion team. They've invested, financially invested, as a group," he added. "The reason we got this building is because we were able to demonstrate that the outcomes were fantastic and it was worth the council investing."

Marcus Boyland, Camden council's cabinet member for children and families, said: "We've got a leadership team that's really committed to children in the borough, and we've taken policy decisions to support them and protect them from cuts that needed to be made elsewhere. It's something we are really proud of.

"We see [RFHCS Konstam] as part of an early intervention and prevention strategy, getting in and supporting these children early on, and I believe it can help stop or prevent other issues that might come up later."

Tracey says that while Rex still struggles, she now feels better equipped: "It's work in progress but it's helped massively, me and him both. Whenever I do speak to Alex [Yates], he always says: 'we're here if you need us'."



▲ The Camden school's deputy head, Steve Green, with some of its students