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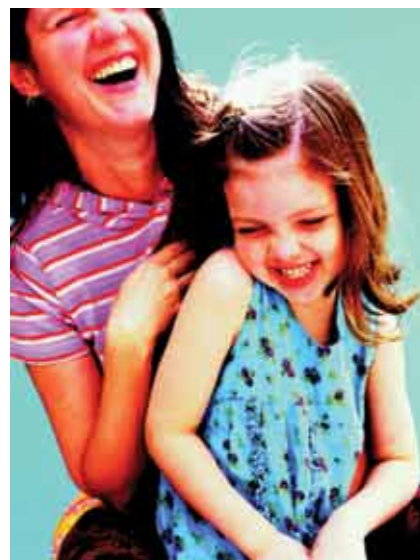
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THE IDEAS COLUMN

Using person centred thinking to engage and motivate children with SEN

Helen Sanderson and Antonia Kinman look at recording and sharing hopes and dreams at home, at school and beyond...

Getting a Life

Getting a Life is a project for young people with severe learning disabilities. Recent research from the project shows that whilst parents of disabled children have high aspirations for their child, their expectations of what's possible are low. Parents often feel that their own aspirations for their child are not matched, or taken seriously by the people who support their child outside of the home. Getting a Life is all about raising aspirations, making changes to the system and creating a clear path to paid employment. There are a number of demonstration sites around the UK which aim to share new ways of working, so that young people with learning disabilities can leave school, get paid employment and have equal life opportunities.

At a special school in Sunderland, Ben Rosamund has been exploring a range of person centred approaches to help young people to think about their future as they leave school. He used a time travel theme and built a "tardis" (a decorated Gazebo) as an entry to the "new world of the future". Outside the tardis was a life-sized cut out of David Tennant as Doctor Who. In the gazebo, a projector screen showed a very short clip of film of a "timelord" (actor) talking about going on a journey in the future. He then showed a range of choices for young people as they leave school. The "timelord's assistant" was in the gazebo, and, as each young person came in, she helped them to look, both on the screen and using pictures on a table, at the different choices specifically available to them. The young person was supported to think about what they wanted to do

when they left school, particularly around work. At the end of their visit to the future, they were given copies of the pictures they chose, and these were used in further classroom work around hopes and aspirations for the future.

"All About Me" movies

Peak School in Derbyshire is a special school for students with profound and multiple learning disabilities. Mike Chetham, a teacher at the school, introduced the idea of working with students and their families to create "All about Me" movies about each child in his class, to form the basis of their transition plan. The movies are created by collecting information and images from family members and school staff about what is important to each student, what they're good at, and their hopes and dreams for the future. Mike then sets the words and pictures to music to create a unique, insightful and powerful portrait of the student that celebrates who they are, their gifts and their potential.

"Each child's movie is played to everybody at the beginning of their transition plan meeting" says Mike. "Parents and staff alike are always really moved by the films, and watching them before planning means the student is right at the heart of their plan. It helps people see past the labels."

"All About Me" movies could also be used at person centred review meetings, played in assemblies to celebrate students who are moving on to further study, employment or independent living, and shared with the people who will be supporting the student when they leave school.

Student stars

As part of her drive to increase parental involvement in their children's education, one inclusion co-ordinator, Tabitha, sent home a letter asking for them to share with her the hopes and aspirations that they have for their children. This was in the form of a star, which the parents filled in and returned to Tabitha at school. "Initially, I was concerned that I might receive unachievable or unrealistic social or academic aspirations. To this end I was careful with the wording of the letter", says Tabitha. "I have been so pleased with the response. Of course, I have not received a Hopes and Aspirations Star from everyone, but we have had back



a majority. It has been lovely to read the very positive aspirations, ranging from 'to be able to read their little sister a story' through to 'continue to love coming to school'."

All the hopes and aspirations stars have been typed up in class sets. These will be kept by each class teacher and will form the opening dialogue at our Autumn term parents evening. The stars themselves have been cut out and laminated and Tabitha has made a display around the main entrance to the school, so that parents, children, governors and visitors can read them.

This year's parents evening started a bit differently. The first thing that the teachers talked to parents about was how their child was doing in relation



to their hope or aspiration. As one dad said, "It was refreshing to hear that Lucy's aspiration was taken seriously and that her teacher was supporting her to achieve it. It gave parents evening a completely different feel".

Dream lanterns

These floating paper lanterns, sometimes known as Chinese sky lanterns, can be purchased for as little as £1.50 each on the internet, and are very easy to decorate with paint, paper, photographs and ribbons, or whatever else you have to hand. The idea is to record your dreams for the year onto your lantern, and release it into the night sky. This time of year, when it's dark early and things look a bit bare and gloomy, is an excellent time to do this, either at home or school.

Work with students and their families to produce a list of hopes, dreams and wishes for the coming year, and then record them in a way that's meaningful to the person, either as images or words.

Each person then decorates their lantern with these dreams and whatever embellishments they like, such as

stickers and ribbons. Each lantern carries a small candle inside it. Once everybody's lantern has been finished, they can take turns to have their lantern lit and release it into the sky. Record the moment with a photograph. These photos can then be mounted at home or in the classroom as a reminder of what each person wants to achieve in the year, and to help the people in that person's life think about how they can help them achieve those dreams. **SEN**

Further Information

Helen Sanderson is the expert advisor on person centred approaches to the Government's Valuing People Support Team and co-author of *Celebrating Families: simple, practical ways to enhance family life*.
www.celebratingfamilies.co.uk

For information on the Getting a Life project, visit:
www.gettingalife.org.uk