Classroom Adjustments: Acquired Brain Injury (ABI)

| **TIMECODE** | **SPEAKER** | **CONTENT** |
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| 00:00:00:00 | STAV MAVRIDIS | All the children seemed to know what had happened to him. He did a little spiel every year where he spoke to the children about what ABI was. He did a PowerPoint every year. |
| 00:00:22:08 | STAV MAVRIDIS | So, he explained it in a kid-friendly way. He made the PowerPoint himself at home. Though kids had known what had happened, he answered questions and just drove the whole thing himself. |
| 00:00:39:00 | SERPIL | That's primary schoolteacher Stav Mavridis speaking about her former student Miles who has acquired brain injury or ABI. I'm Serpil Senelmis and this podcast is part of an NCCD portal series. In this episode, we'll discuss some adjustments that could be made in the classroom to enable students with acquired brain injury to participate on the same basis as their peers. You'll hear more from Stav and you'll meet Miles and his mum Simone. |
| 00:01:25:21 | SERPIL | Let's start with a clear understanding of what acquired brain injury is. As the name suggests, its an injury to the brain that's acquired after birth. Dr Ruth Tesselaar is a neuropsychologist and explains that there are two main types of ABI. |
| 00:01:42:14 | DR RUTH TESSELAAR | There's a traumatic brain injury from traumatic causes such as a motor vehicle accident or a fall. And then there's non-traumatic causes of a brain injury from things such as a stroke or a brain tumour or hypoxia. So, a lack of oxygen.  So, there's probably about five different elements that we generally talk about with acquired brain injury, but there's also very unique aspects. I think what makes an acquired brain injury unique to the individual and unique compared to other disabilities is that it can be acquired at any age.  And so they have this past knowledge of themselves without a disability. And then, suddenly, that changes one day for them. So, it is quite unique. |
| 00:02:25:06 | SERPIL | So, you mentioned the five common elements. Can you perhaps describe to me what the five common elements are likely to be for a child with acquired brain injury? |
| 00:02:35:04 | DR RUTH TESSELAAR | Yeah. So, the main one, which is most easily identified, are the physical changes following an acquired brain injury. So, often, people might have difficulties with their walking. Sometimes, they're in wheelchairs. Sometimes, they might lose the use of an arm or a leg. That doesn't happen in every type of acquired brain injury.  Another really common one that we often think about is the cognitive or thinking problems. So, that's often changes in somebody's attention or their speed of processing. So, how quickly they can take in and learn information, their memory and their learning, and their executive functioning. So, all their planning and problem solving abilities.  The other three main areas that we often see changes in is communication and language. People's energy levels. So, changes in both their physical energy levels and their cognitive energy level. So, we talk about kids in the classroom getting cognitive fatigue where their brain is tired. And then psychosocial changes. So, that's in the areas of emotion, behaviour and social skills as well. |
| 00:03:36:13 | STAV MAVRIDIS | They all vary and every child's different, but this particular child I had in my grade was very confident and very vocal and overexcited and enthusiastic. The great thing was a lot of the things we were doing with this child were actually applicable and useful with the whole grade because this wasn't just something relevant to someone with acquired brain injury. I found it was actually really useful for everyone. So, we would often stick little visuals on his desk, on his table in front of him, because another thing that was an issue was the organisation, about having all the things he needed for the day on his desk. |
| 00:04:24:13 | MILES | Hello, microphone! |
| 00:04:31:24 | MILES | Hi. My name's Miles. I'm in Year 7. |
| 00:04:35:00 | SERPIL | Miles, can you tell me how do you describe your acquired brain injury to people? |
| 00:04:40:08 | MILES | Like, my disability? Alright. Well, it affected the right side of my brain. That's where the scar is. So, my left side of my body is disabilised. I bet you didn't know the right side of the brain controls the left side of the body, and the left side of the brain controls the right side of the body. |
| 00:04:57:23 | SERPIL | I did not know that. |
| 00:04:59:09 | MILES | So my left side is disabled. So, I can't walk like a normal person with my leg. And my arm sometimes hangs out like this. I got to be careful not to punch people in the faces with this. |
| 00:05:10:21 | SERPIL | And you said you can't walk properly. How does it affect your legs? |
| 00:05:13:22 | MILES | Well, I do walk fine. I don't really have a problem. But sometimes I just like vault or don't bend my knee or something. Just small. I just walk different. It doesn't affect my legs, really, but right now, I've got a blister on my left big toe. |
| 00:05:33:10 | SERPIL | And is that because of your gait? You know, the way that you walk? |
| 00:05:37:17 | MILES | No. It's because of one of the new shoes I got. |
| 00:05:40:01 | SERPIL | (LAUGHS) Love it! So it's got nothing to do with acquired brain injury? |
| 00:05:44:18 | MILES | No. Nothing. Yeah. |
| 00:05:45:17 | SERPIL | Just your shoes. |
| 00:05:46:15 | MILES | Yeah. |
| 00:05:56:10 | SERPIL | Miles is 12 years old and he's just started high school and has had acquired brain injury for five years. And as you can hear, he's a bit of a comedian. |
| 00:06:06:12 | MILES | Why was six scared of seven? |
| 00:06:08:07 | SERPIL | Why was six scared of seven? |
| 00:06:10:05 | MILES | Because seven ate nine. Why did seven eat nine? |
| 00:06:12:21 | SERPIL | Why? |
| 00:06:13:21 | MILES | Because you're supposed to eat three squared meals a day. |
| 00:06:17:02 | SERPIL | (LAUGHS) Love it! |
| 00:06:34:04 | SERPIL | So it might be a good idea for Miles's mum Simone to explain the serious stuff. |
| 00:06:40:09 | SIMONE | Yes, so we were in a car accident just three days before Christmas. And, basically, the brain shook in his skull. He was in a car seat and everything. Car did everything that it was meant to do safety-wise, but his little brain just shook in his skull during the impact. |
| 00:06:56:22 | SERPIL | For Simone and Miles's teachers, one of the most challenging aspects of Miles's acquired brain injury is the impact on his behaviour when his energy levels drop. |
| 00:07:06:17 | SIMONE | Cognitive fatigue is really, really difficult to manage because it's very difficult to see. We notice it in different... His physical attributes are affected. His arm does stick out more. His gait is more problematic. He'll have little physical tics that become more pronounced when he's more fatigued.  And just distractability just goes through the roof. The filter, the social filter, it completely goes by the wayside. He doesn't really act in an appropriate social behaviour. So, it's problematic in the sense that, socially, he becomes quite boisterous and he doesn't mean it. He's not intentionally being a naughty kid. He has no means of reining it in because he just doesn't have that self-regulation when he's very fatigued. |
| 00:08:00:20 | SERPIL | Lucky in Miles's case, he's super entertaining. |
| 00:08:03:23 | SIMONE | Well, he uses humour a lot to deflect those things, which is a great aspect. But then it can be, again, socially inappropriate. (LAUGHS) Like 50 jokes in a row. (LAUGHS) |
| 00:08:18:02 | MILES | But I do know a lot of jokes. |
| 00:08:19:18 | SIMONE | OK, so you can tell these guys before we start one joke. |
| 00:08:23:04 | MILES | One? |
| 00:08:24:04 | SIMONE | One. So pick a good one. |
| 00:08:25:08 | MILES | Knock, knock. |
| 00:08:26:01 | SERPIL | OK, who's there? |
| 00:08:27:07 | MILES | Grandma. |
| 00:08:28:06 | SERPIL | Grandma who? |
| 00:08:29:02 | MILES | Knock, knock. |
| 00:08:30:08 | SERPIL | (LAUGHS) Who's there? |
| 00:08:31:13 | MILES | Grandma. |
| 00:08:32:13 | SERPIL | Grandma who? |
| 00:08:33:05 | MILES | Knock, knock. |
| 00:08:33:19 | SERPIL | Who's there? |
| 00:08:34:17 | MILES | Grandma. |
| 00:08:35:04 | SERPIL | Grandma who? |
| 00:08:35:24 | MILES | Knock, knock. |
| 00:08:36:14 | SERPIL | Who's there? |
| 00:08:37:17 | MILES | Aren't. |
| 00:08:40:15 | SIMONE | Go with it, it's worth it. |
| 00:08:42:09 | SERPIL | Aren't who? |
| 00:08:43:24 | MILES | Aren't you glad Grandma's gone? |
| 00:08:45:23 | SERPIL | (LAUGHS) |
| 00:08:49:02 | SERPIL | Neuropsychologist Ruth Tesselaar says returning to school after experiencing acquired brain injury is a major change for the student with ABI, as well as their schoolmates and teachers. |
| 00:09:01:04 | DR RUTH TESSELAAR | Because a brain injury is new for the students as well, it can really impact on their motivation at school. So, if you've had a really high-achieving student who now has to actually work really hard for learning, that can start to look like behaviour issues. So, it might go unnoticed with the teachers that this is actually a cognitive difficulty that the student is having, and they might just lump it as the student used to be great and now they've got all these behaviour difficulties. |
| 00:09:26:20 | SIMONE | So, his education was most definitely impacted. It can't not be. In retrospect, looking back, grade 3, the first year, was a write-off. And we probably would have done things slightly differently if we knew. And no-one knows with acquired brain injury 'cause it's just such an unknown world. We started school. We started very slowly as instructed by the educational people at the hospital. He did half a morning for a couple of weeks. And then he did one day a week. And then we built up for two days a week. And he wasn't full-time until, I think, midyear. And he was so fatigued and just the therapies were very involved at that point too. He had physio twice a week, and OT twice a week, and things like that. So, that's taking a lot out of him. It took a real toll. |
| 00:10:20:08 | DR RUTH TESSELAAR | So, cognitive fatigue is really common following an acquired brain injury. So, some students that I work with, when they get really tired, they just need a five-minute break. And one of the students I used to work with used to go for a lap around the oval because it was his brain that was tired and not his body. And that five-minute lap around the oval really refreshed him, and then he could go straight back into class.  Other students that I work with, they might need that quiet room where there's less stimulation so they can really refresh. Some students only do a half day at school or they might do a reduced load. And it's that trial and error as well. So, some students might need, if there's a 40-minute period, they might need a break in the middle of that period. For another student, it might be that they have a 10-minute break in between classes rather than disrupting that flow of that class. |
| 00:11:10:03 | SERPIL | Miles likes the idea of breaks in his school day, but I suspect he's got an ulterior motive. |
| 00:11:16:19 | MILES | Maybe allow me more relaxing time so I can just go on my laptop while I'm waiting. |
| 00:11:31:02 | SERPIL | Miles's mum Simone explains the importance of timeout breaks in helping him to manage his behaviour. |
| 00:11:37:19 | SIMONE | It used to happen more. We'd have more anger episodes and whatever. He doesn't do that much anymore. Miles has got a real...a resilience and a real grit to him to keep going. So, he doesn't actually have that self-awareness that he's as tired as he is or that he needs the breaks. We've dealt a lot in depth with communicating what he can do, what he can't do, ways around and strategies that we've discovered that work for him such as breaks. |
| 00:12:07:19 | SERPIL | To help with concentration and to reduce interruptions, teacher Stav Mavridis tried an adjustment that would help Miles collect all of his thoughts in one place. |
| 00:12:17:24 | STAV MAVRIDIS | One of the therapists had given me this tip about if he's so desperate to say something, I had a sticky notepad beside him so he would jot all the questions down or all the things he wanted to share. And then I didn't realise there would be so many because then I had to make time for him to share all the numerous sticky notes that were all over his table. |
| 00:12:43:01 | DR RUTH TESSELAAR | What's really useful for some teachers is thinking, "OK, I've taught some students that have got attention deficit disorder. I can use those same strategies for this child that I think has got attention difficulties in the classroom." So, things might be helping that child focus on the task. So, putting them next to a student in a classroom who isn't going to talk and distract them, and who might be to help keep them on track, reducing the visual distractions in the classroom, giving them a really clear list of what's expected for them so to help them stay on track. So, there can be really useful recommendations or strategies around attention. |
| 00:13:20:11 | SERPIL | So, I'm assuming, then, structure and routine is a big part of these adjustments for acquired brain injury? |
| 00:13:26:22 | DR RUTH TESSELAAR | Yep, I'm nodding, and that's really good for a podcast. So, structure and routine is really important. And so it might be structure and routine within the classroom setting. So, when the student comes in, they have a routine. So, in primary school, the routine might be they know when they come in, they know where to put their bag, they know where to put their lunch and their water bottle, they know what books to get out. |
| 00:13:47:03 | STAV MAVRIDIS | The child with ABI, I felt that it was far better being at the front of the class where there were less distractions around. We tried not to make his aides stand out, particularly as he was in the upper school, but he didn't seem to mind that much, actually, and she was always nearby because at other times he would actually call out for assistance. |
| 00:14:12:24 | SERPIL | With all of these adjustments, Miles's teacher Stav worked slowly in regular consultation with his parents. |
| 00:14:20:09 | STAV MAVRIDIS | I think a combination of putting everything into place, not at the same time, but putting in one adjustment at a time where he would have time to adjust. And then introducing something else. I think it's really important to be aware of everything that has taken place, to read the documents, speak to people. I think that really helped me. So I was a bit anxious. But after having him in my classroom, I realised that a lot of those adjustments really helped everyone. |
| 00:15:00:17 | SERPIL | Even after reading all the background information, meeting his parents and talking to his therapists, Miles's teacher discovered the need for adjustments that simply weren't apparent until he was actually in the classroom. |
| 00:15:14:01 | STAV MAVRIDIS | He was a great writer. But we also discovered that his handwriting slowed down the progress to the point where he didn't enjoy writing anymore because, although he had great ideas, everything took so long to put down on paper. |
| 00:15:31:12 | SIMONE | Writing is really taxing on him physically. Having to hold a piece of paper with a left hand that doesn't work, he can barely bend his arm, that's really tough to write while supporting the paper with your right, it doesn't work. So, he's actually a really quick five-finger typist, and there is a five-finger typing thing that they do and learn. |
| 00:15:53:07 | STAV MAVRIDIS | Then we introduced poetry, and he really took off with poetry. Poetry is not many pages of writing and he would write it effortlessly. He would tell me it's one of his strengths. And he loved it and looked forward to poetry each week. And he would go away and do it in his own time. And I think the thrill of that was having the audience and then coming back to class and sharing. |
| 00:16:22:24 | SIMONE | And so he's had a laptop from, I think, grade 4 or 5, and that has helped him. So, any task that he's having to take notes, he'll just sit there and type. |
| 00:16:32:13 | DR RUTH TESSELAAR | I think with modern technology, it's made it much easier for adjustments and technological adjustments. So, things like using a dictaphone on your iPad or your iPhone instead of having to write an essay is one really easy example for students with a brain injury. So, if they have some fine motor coordination difficulties or their handwriting speed is much slower than it used to be, then being able to dictate an essay can be really helpful for them because, often, they'll say that their hand can't keep up with their brain.  The other examples are allowing them to take photos of the notes written on the board from a class discussion or take notes of what appears written during classes because, again, if the child can't keep up or it might be a memory aid for that child as well. |
| 00:17:20:02 | SERPIL | So as the mother of a child with acquired brain injury, what advice does Simone have for teachers who have a student with ABI in their class? |
| 00:17:29:17 | SIMONE | Talk to the parents because the parents do know a lot about some strategies, and the strategies are going to be different for every child. And read up about fatigue and the way that it does present itself because it's not like a yawning child. They often go silly and inappropriate. And just if you have that understanding, then you'll be able to sort of remove them, let them have some time to settle and you'll have less behavioural issues. |
| 00:18:02:11 | SERPIL | From the teacher's perspective, Stav Mavridis agrees with Simone on the importance of regular contact with the family. |
| 00:18:09:09 | STAV MAVRIDIS | I think embrace it. It's actually a positive. I learned so much. It's really important to work with the family, people who've known the child in the past, and to really get to know the child. I think that would be the most important thing because I really enjoyed having him in my class and I think particularly also because he had a really funny sense of humour. |
| 00:18:38:09 | SERPIL | And Miles puts all jokes aside and this is his top tip for teachers. |
| 00:18:43:24 | MILES | So, if I was helping someone with an ABI, I would just remind them of what they would be doing and maybe help them do it and come up with strategies. |
| 00:19:07:02 | SERPIL | This podcast is part of a series that highlights adjustments that could be made in the classroom to enable students with disability to access and participate in education on the same basis as their peers. You can find all episodes on the NCCD portal. I'm Serpil Senelmis. Thanks for listening. |
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