Classroom Adjustments: Cerebral Palsy

| **TIMECODE** | **SPEAKER** | **CONTENT** |
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| 00:00:00:00 | WILL | Oh, yeah, there was one time, the school was doing a walk in Year 2. |
| 00:00:12:12 | WILL | And the teachers made sure that I was in front of the whole school, which was, one, pretty cool, but it was also cool because they were trying to help me by making it so everyone was going at the same speed as me. |
| 00:00:24:03 | SERPIL | That's Will. He's in Year 6 and he has cerebral palsy. |
| 00:00:28:21 | WILL | I like writing stories, and I'm starting to get into it, trying to make comics about disabled superheroes. |
| 00:00:36:05 | SERPIL | Will also likes playing cricket and he sings in a band in his spare time. Hi, I'm Serpil Senelmis and this podcast is part of an NCCD portal series. In this episode, we'll discuss some adjustments that can be made in the classroom to enable students with cerebral palsy to participate on the same basis as their peers. You'll hear more about Will's talents and you'll meet his mum Jordan. You'll also hear the experiences of a teacher who has specialised in adjustments for students with cerebral palsy and we'll get some top tips from an expert in the field. |
| 00:01:26:14 | SERPIL | Now, at the start of each episode, we usually ask an expert to describe the disability we're talking about. In the case of cerebral palsy, Will sums it up in a nutshell. |
| 00:01:38:08 | WILL | It is a physical disability that you were born with. It is not genetic, and it affects your brain in a way that makes it harder to send signals to muscles, and you can't grow out of it. It just affects you for your whole life. |
| 00:01:51:10 | SERPIL | And how does it affect you day to day? |
| 00:01:53:17 | WILL | I get relatively regular spasms, and I can find it quite difficult to walk and go upstairs sometimes. Well, all the time, I find it hard to go upstairs. Just had a surgery, so I find it easier to walk, which is nice. |
| 00:02:09:00 | SERPIL | Now, that's what I call succinct and to the point. For a little more detail and perspective, I turned to Will's mum Jordan. |
| 00:02:18:03 | JORDAN | Well, I guess, it's purely a physical thing for him, although, as we've gone through school, we've picked up other things for him like a difficulty in tracking with his eyes, which affected his reading. So he ended up getting glasses, and we needed to do exercises. So, there were things that we weren't aware of. |
| 00:02:38:08 | SERPIL | Like many disabilities, cerebral palsy occurs on a spectrum and each individual's experience is relatively unique. So for a broader introduction to cerebral palsy, I called in the experts. |
| 00:02:52:02 | RACHAEL McGLYNN | Hello, my name is Rachael McGlynn and I am a speech pathologist. And I work for the Cerebral Palsy Alliance in Tuggerah, New South Wales. So, for some people, their muscles may be very tight. We would refer to that as spasticity, and they'd have difficulty using their arms or legs in a way that they want to. And in others, they may have movement disorders where their arms and legs move in ways that they don't want them to. It is quite difficult to say, "Is there any commonality?" Because whilst the causes can be different, every person is very different. |
| 00:03:24:19 | SERPIL | So, basically, what you've told me is that cerebral palsy can have both a physical and a cognitive impact. So, if we were to look at it in a school context, can you explain what sort of challenges it might pose for a child in primary school and then in high school in relation to their learning? |
| 00:03:42:18 | RACHAEL McGLYNN | It could be something very simple as a child entering primary school that has some fine motor difficulties, some minor delays in their learning, right through to children who cannot walk, cannot talk, cannot use their arms and legs, and, obviously, very, very highly dependent on another person. It is an extremely wide range of levels of physical disability. |
| 00:04:05:05 | SERPIL | For Will, cerebral palsy affects his movement and that creates some of his main challenges at school. |
| 00:04:11:21 | WILL | Physical education is hard. I try my best at it, but it is very hard. |
| 00:04:18:12 | SERPIL | So, tell me about what your PE teacher would do to make adjustments for you so that you get to actually be involved in physical education? What sort of games do you play? |
| 00:04:29:12 | WILL | Usually, it involves quite a lot of running, and I can't really run. So, I do an awkward jog. And whenever someone's chasing after to me to tip me, the teachers make it so they have to walk when they're trying to get me, which is really good, and it helps make it fair for me to be able to play. |
| 00:04:56:21 | SERPIL | And when it comes to making adjustments in the classroom, looking at the student's learning environment is a pretty good place to start. |
| 00:05:05:13 | RACHAEL McGLYNN | Common things that we might look at changing, for example, in a classroom might be looking at height-adjustable tables to accommodate the wheelchairs, looking at more supportive seating for children who may have difficulty sitting on a chair at the table or can't necessarily sit on the floor unaided. So, they need a floor chair. Sometimes, we're looking at bigger modifications like bathroom modifications to include hoisting equipment or a change table. In some situations where there might be hearing difficulties, we look at acoustics and what sorts of things we can put in place to ensure the child is able to hear the teacher. Simple things around the school like ramps, circulation space, ensuring there's undercover parking for getting in and out of the car. Maybe the child needs a chair at assembly. Is there going to be space in storage in the classroom for the equipment? So, a good place to start is looking at the physical environment first for the child and what equipment they need. A lot of it, to be honest, was just common sense. |
| 00:06:00:11 | SERPIL | Janine Collins is a primary school teacher and special needs liaison officer specialising in cerebral palsy. She agrees that common sense has guided some of the most effective adjustments in the classroom. |
| 00:06:13:23 | JANINE COLLINS | Just the way the classroom is set up, that the child, they can see the classroom so much better. It's little things, but they mean a lot to the student with cerebral palsy. And not be in a classroom where there's lots of stairs. Like easy access in and out of the classroom to the hall, that sort of thing. So, depending on the student's needs, whether or not they're given a computer from the start, or whether we do lines on a page that they know where they can write. On cue for more of the junior age. Fatter pencils, a sloping board for their books, so they're not having to lean over, they can they can write on a slope. So, things like that, yeah, are tried and tested and work really well. |
| 00:07:05:17 | SERPIL | Now, Will mentioned earlier, quite casually, that he was finding it easier to walk after his surgery. His mum Jordan points out that the surgery created challenges in itself that required their own adjustments. |
| 00:07:19:01 | JORDAN | At times last year, which was a very tough year for Will because he had his surgery, and he was in a lot of pain, they reduced the number of transitions that he had to do. So, he would spend two lessons in one classroom so that he only had to transfer, I think, three times rather than five. They also gave him cards with pictures of the teacher and the subject and the classroom on it. And they'd put it in the order that he had to do it, so that he had longer to process what he was going to have to do and where he was going to have to go. |
| 00:08:03:00 | SERPIL | While the physical effects of cerebral palsy are easy to see and address, Jordan says the cognitive challenges are not as easy to identify. |
| 00:08:13:00 | JORDAN | The thing that was holding him back when it came to how the school judges reading was his comprehension. And we discovered not until he was in Year 4, possibly even Year 5, that the issue was not so much that he couldn't comprehend what he was reading. That he needed longer for that comprehension to sink in. So, if he read a story and they immediately asked him questions, he had great difficulty in answering those questions. But if you left it three hours, he could then tell you everything. So, with instructions for tasks, with packing up and moving into a different classroom, all of those things just take him that little bit longer to process what he needs to do and the order in which he needs to do it. |
| 00:09:03:17 | SERPIL | So, in that case, how has the teaching shifted to ensure that there are the appropriate adjustments made so that Will does have time to reflect and that he has time to comprehend what is being taught? |
| 00:09:18:23 | JORDAN | He is given extra time now. Another big problem that we've had all the way through his schooling is anxiety, which is apparently very common with children with cerebral palsy. He gets extremely anxious. And the thing that will make him the most anxious is time limits. |
| 00:09:34:17 | SERPIL | So in addition to speaking to parents before making adjustments in the classroom for their children, it's a good idea to maintain regular contact with them throughout the school year. |
| 00:09:45:02 | WILL | Oh, yeah. My parents talk to my teacher quite frequently. I'd say, like, yeah, a couple of times a week. |
| 00:09:54:04 | JANINE COLLINS | So, by speaking to the parents, the parents are probably our best source of information. And therapists. If the student, and in many of the cases they're seeing an OT, we speak to the OT as well. So, it's a very hand-in-hand operation that they provide us with the information of what we can do to assist the child. |
| 00:10:15:13 | SERPIL | It's also a good idea to check in regularly with your student to find out how effective your adjustments are. Will's mum Jordan regularly urges him to advocate for himself. |
| 00:10:27:01 | JORDAN | We have encouraged him to not ever be embarrassed about saying, "I have cerebral palsy, and this is what I need from you to make this possible." So, the school has been really, really good at listening to him when he's brave enough to actually say, "This isn't working for me. We need to do it a different way." So, they've been really fantastic. And, you know, something that I think is so important is listening to the kid rather than having a sort of blanket solution for how you deal with a problem. Listening to what works and doesn't work. |
| 00:11:18:20 | JANINE COLLINS | So, we will have written goals and things that we want to achieve, but the teacher, from day dot, will build up a rapport. They know what the students want to achieve. And that's through asking for feedback from the child what they want to achieve, what their goals are, what they want to happen throughout the school year. So, there's a lot of communication, a lot of feedback from the student to make sure what the teacher has put in place is working or what they could do better. |
| 00:11:55:05 | RACHAEL McGLYNN | Definitely asking a child, "How would you like to do this activity? How would you like to be involved in this? How would you like to complete your assignment and get it to me?" Because, I guess, as we get older, sometimes, we have to be careful not to make decisions for what we think the child might want in adapting things for them. |
| 00:12:11:13 | SERPIL | In addition to physical adjustments, communication and encouragement, there's a lot of technology available to assist students with cerebral palsy and the technology can range from the common iPad through to some extremely high-tech gear. |
| 00:12:27:11 | RACHAEL McGLYNN | In the case of this young man who has a severe physical disability but no intellectual disability, he uses an eye gaze access computer. Meaning, this is a tablet which has a camera mounted to it which detects the movement of his eyes, and on his screen is a communication layout. And when he looks at a word, it will speak that word. So, the camera acts as the mouse, allowing the child to choose the words he would like to say. And then he uses his eyes to speak. |
| 00:12:56:11 | SERPIL | That is super amazing. |
| 00:12:58:04 | RACHAEL McGLYNN | Yeah. And these days, that technology has become a lot more accessible, a lot more reliable. And it's essentially made the difference between this child being able to access mainstream schooling or not effectively. |
| 00:13:09:12 | JANINE COLLINS | We're very lucky where we are that we use a lot of computers. So, what we have done is we've got that they can speak into a microphone because some students who have cerebral palsy find it very hard to be able to write or even type at the same speed as other students. They have microphones that they can talk into, and it will write it for it, and then it will read back to them. So they can see if what's being typed is exactly what they wanted to say. |
| 00:13:43:13 | RACHAEL McGLYNN | There's also the opposite too with text-to-speech. So, a child can highlight what text they wish to read or listen to, and it will read it to them. They can type what they wish to say if they're unable to speak, and it can speak for them. For children who have difficulties with handwriting and typing, you can get large-key keyboards which Bluetooth connect to their iPads, which will allow them to type. For me, it is very, very important that teachers do understand in depth the child's technology. That's not to say that the teacher needs to be tech savvy because that is something that can be quite intimidating, but they just need to be willing to learn as part of the team around the child how to use that technology with the child. |
| 00:14:23:17 | SERPIL | And the key to incorporating technology into the classroom is to be flexible and realistic about what the goal of the learning experience is. |
| 00:14:33:02 | RACHAEL McGLYNN | "You know what, it's OK if we type this area of work because the focus of this lesson isn't actually on handwriting. It's on the content that we're producing. So, let's type." Because this student will benefit from typing. |
| 00:14:43:21 | SERPIL | As a teacher and special needs liaison, Janine Collins encourages a whole of school approach to support adjustments in the classroom. |
| 00:14:52:05 | JANINE COLLINS | Now, our learning support assistants, they have a fortnightly regular meeting. So they're aware of if things are happening and what they need to be more aware of. So, it's regular communication at staff meetings, team meetings, beginning of the year. And if something occurs throughout the year, we sit down and talk about it. The execs will talk about it. And then the teaching staff will talk about it. And if the parents want us to tell all of the students, we'll do that. If they just want certain students to know, we'll do that too. But we do regular meetings with each other so that everybody is on the same page as far as our students go. |
| 00:15:36:10 | SERPIL | And, Janine, what would be your advice to a teacher who is about to have a child living with cerebral palsy joining their class? What would be your advice to them? |
| 00:15:47:15 | JANINE COLLINS | First off, I'd do a little bit of reading about what cerebral palsy is. My second would be to sit down and have a conversation with parents. Get as much information from the parents as they can about the student. Have a one-on-one talk to the student as well. Find out what they like, what they don't like, what they're trying to achieve. Just because something works today doesn't mean it's going to work next week. So, you should be prepared all the time to change how you're teaching and what you're expecting. And the thing with the child too with our goals, once they're able to achieve something, we shouldn't sit back and say, "OK. They're able to achieve this. Let's leave it at that." It's like with any child - we want to challenge them to push their goal down a bit further. So, if they're able to achieve something, make their goals just that little bit more of a challenge so they've got something to be working towards. |
| 00:16:51:23 | SERPIL | And for Will's mum Jordan, the secret for success is clear and transparent communication with students. |
| 00:16:59:05 | JORDAN | I suppose I can only talk from how I feel and what I've always said to Will. There's no shame in having a disability. And so....both the child and the teacher should feel very comfortable about being really open about it, because kids are going to be curious. So, making sure that they understand what that disability is so that there can be a really open conversation between everybody. Just constantly talking about what's working and what isn't working, and making sure that the child has a voice, so that it's what they are feeling and thinking is heard and understood. |
| 00:17:43:24 | SERPIL | Hey, Will, what do you want to be when you grow up? |
| 00:17:45:24 | WILL | Yeah, I would want to be a singer when I'm older with some friends in a band that's not really running right now, but we're going to try and get together and do some practice soon, called the Daycare Boys. |
| 00:17:58:07 | SERPIL | The Daycare Boys. |
| 00:18:00:00 | WILL | Because it's made up of some friends that I've been friends with since daycare. |
| 00:18:03:20 | SERPIL | As far as Will's concerned, it sounds like the sky's the limit. And his advice for teachers who have a student with cerebral palsy in their class? |
| 00:18:15:16 | WILL | Have an open mind, don't patronise, and help them in any way you can. |
| 00:18:38:17 | SERPIL | This podcast is part of a series that highlights adjustments that can 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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