

Children with autism given voice

Adam Galvin, 9, was diagnosed with autism at a young age and couldn't speak. Parents Caroline and Brian tried many approaches over the years but Adam made little progress. He seemed able only for pre-academic work and was unhappy in school. Then his life began to change remarkably.

He could tell his parents that his favourite colour was orange and he knew God lived in heaven; that they are his favourite people in the world and he is a fan of Chelsea.

In 2014, helped by teachers and staff, Adam left the autism unit in Swinford National School and now attends 5th class. He loves school.

Fiachra Ryan, 13, from Castlebar attended the autism unit in Newport, doing very basic academic work.

In September 2014 he moved to secondary school, attending class with his peers and doing 8 academic subjects.

Dramatic changes in children's lives have been brought about by a revolutionary new teaching method for people with autism.

Rapid Prompting Method was introduced to Ireland by a group of Mayo parents, including the Galvins.

They discovered it online and brought trainers here from the USA to try it with their children, holding the first RPM workshop in 2013.

There the trainer showed that Adam could understand normally and could already spell. By the end of the workshop he was communicating with his parents for the first time.

RPM holds that autism is not a lack of intelligence in a child but a difficulty in motor control and a lack of speech. The child is taught to point to letters on a letter-board and spell his or her answers.

Eventually pupils learn to spell on a keyboard or an iPad that speaks for them. It is very successful with people with autism who have no, or limited, speech.

At the last workshop Cian Cotter, 10, was first enabled to tell of his love for music. He spelled out:

"Never should a person live life without hearing music. Most find autism hard but imagine never hearing anything. Argue with me on this and you will lose. Not hearing is worse."

So far some 52 families from around the country, with children aged 4 to 22, have benefitted from 9 workshops.

"It's like meeting your child for the first time," said Mary Kiernan, mother of 18-year-old Darragh.

Darragh moved from the autism unit into 6th year for History and Geography classes. He is also doing well in Maths.

Seosamh Ó Laimhín, 17, from Foxford, suffers from epilepsy, osteoporosis and autism. His parents were told he had a mental age of 2.

He did his first workshop in August 2014. "Now we realise that he can spell and read, even though he was never taught," says his mother.

Seosamh has begun Junior Cert academic lessons at home and in the special school he attends. He can tell his parents when he is in pain and how he feels after a seizure. When his mother started RPM he felt "liberated", he says.

He has expressed deep faith in God and that it was his belief in Jesus that sustained him during his long years of silence.

In July 2015 Seosamh gave a workshop at Knockadoon Youth Camp about his life before and after RPM. He spelled out the speech and his mother read it. He told young people:

"Before RPM I had geriatric roaring in my head. I had giddy dope robbing me of moments. Loved when Mammy found RPM. Radiant hope filled my mind. Hideous thoughts faded..."

"Thought I had found a mighty way to communicate. Wonderful moments for more wonderful things happened. Read terrific books.

Very normal, very happy school days in my new school. Playing word games with my brother.

"I believe Jesus is just waiting. Go to him. Spend time with Jesus. Mother Mary is only wishing with all her heart that you love Jesus. The moment you start to roam you might regret leaving this loving person."

RPM has been in the USA for 10 years and thousands of children have been transformed by it. RPM Ireland has been set up to spread the word here.

It runs workshops and fund-raisers so that parents can share their experiences and help other families of children with autism.

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