

News

School's mission to give wider range of activities to pupils with complex needs

BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS WITH ART, MUSIC AND DANCE



Pupil Daisy gets a lot of joy from creating pieces of art work

CHILDREN with complex needs are enjoying a growing range of extra-curricular activities, including dance, music and art.

Chatten Free School opened in Witham in 2021 to provide a highly specialist day school for children who cannot access education in any other Send settings.

All students have an autism diagnosis and associated complex needs – and many were previously out of the education system or facing no alternative but to live in care.

The school is on a mission to give its young people as many of the same experiences as their peers in mainstream schools as possible.

Each year, students have the opportunity to go on a residential trip, attend their own music festival, complete work experience and celebrate with a leavers' day in the summer.

Now, the school is removing yet

more barriers by offering pupils a range of extra-curricular activities.

Assistant head teacher Bobby Roache said: "Our extra-curricular calendar has grown over time. When we think back to our first year, it would have been really hard for our children to access extra-curricular activities. It would not have happened. But, now, some of that same cohort of children are accessing these activities.

We are even more open-minded now about what our children can do.

Assistant head Bobby Roache

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The Royal Academy of Dance provides its Step into Dance inclusive dance programme to the school's secondary-aged students, as well as one-to-one sessions for primary-aged pupils.

They take part in a range of dance classes, depending on their abilities and tolerances, including sensory based dance and group dances during the weekly session.

Assistant head teacher Millie

Backhouse said: "For some of our children, being able to tolerate someone new in the room with them is a challenge and so to see them taking part and enjoying dance is wonderful. They may start with one-to-one sessions, but gradually they build up to work with two or three others and then take part as a group. It has become a real passion for some of our children.

"When we look at our older learners, being able to access and join in at youth clubs or adult social care in the future is an important skill for them to have. For our younger children, dance is helping them to follow instructions and communicate with new people.

"To see the pure joy dance is bringing to our children is amazing."

Suffolk Music Therapy Services is helping children to find new ways of accessing learning each week.

Assistant head teacher Vic Beattie said: "Some of our children are extremely sensory based and need the input music therapy offers them.

"It works really well in getting those children to tune in and gets their attention. For some who can't access much of the curriculum, we are finding they are so tuned in to

music and it is something they can do wherever they are. We can then use some of those techniques to support them with other areas.

"One of our children has discovered he loves music and singing so much that his parents have bought him musical instruments to widen his interests at home. It is giving them something to be passionate about."

Weekly art therapy sessions are helping children to express themselves by talking about the artwork they have created.

By developing the length of time the children can sit and engage in the activity, they are building self-esteem while also building up tolerance of change by transitioning from one part of the school to another for the lesson.

For Daisy, her art sessions are a way for her to regulate her emotions.

The nine-year-old, from Chelmsford, joined Chatten Free School in 2023 after mainstream school failed to meet her needs.

Mum Erin Purnell said: "Daisy has

always loved art and gets a lot of joy from creating pieces of work. It regulates Daisy and keeps her happy.

"Daisy does art every day at home, so I'm very grateful that she's had the opportunity to have a professional art therapist work with her at school."

Deputy head of school Ashleigh Cambridge said: "These are all new experiences for our children that they might not have had the opportunity to try before.

"While these are extra-curricular activities, when we find a child has a particular passion, we can use that to link back to the curriculum.

"It could also be a hobby or a job they go on to enjoy into adulthood – it could be they love art and go on to sell their own paintings when they are older. It is about finding interests that can help to shape their lives.

"It is making us engage more with activities that go on in the community, as well.

"Our parents are so excited their children are getting these new experiences."

Visitors 'truly blown away' by 'unique environment'

A GROUP of specialist school leaders visited colleagues in Witham and were "blown away" by the work going on with children with autism.

Having joined Challenge Partners – a collaboration of schools who work together to drive improvement and share best practice – a year ago, Chatten Free School recently welcomed visitors from Kent and London to see the work that goes on at Chatten.

As part of the organisation's Growing the Top programme, the school is encouraged to share its unique strengths, while being open to learning where they can develop and grow.

Head teacher Adam Dean welcomed senior professionals,

including head teachers, deputy head teachers and an occupational therapist from special needs schools.

He said: "While we know that Chatten is a special place, it's incredibly easy to get lost in the day-to-day and forget just how unique our environment really is.

"These were completely independent, very experienced professionals from several other special schools, all with their own areas of expertise, and they were truly blown away."

Visitors complimented the school's resources, calm environment, engagement and care, staff experience and ongoing staff training after their tour.

Mr Dean said: "They were struck by how calm the school felt. They mentioned that despite our specialism in catering to children whose needs can't be met elsewhere due to challenging behaviour, this was one of the calmest environments they had ever experienced.

"Most of all, they were impressed by how engaged every single person was with their pupils.

"They noted that the positive, two-way relationships between tutors and young people have clearly been fostered with real care.

"Practice across the school was praised as truly outstanding and uniquely pupil-centred.

"One of the visitors commented it

was the best she'd ever seen across almost 20 Send schools she'd visited.

"It was clear to them that our staff really know our children and deeply understand how to engage and support them.

"One of our core goals at Chatten is to share good practice, and this visit was a perfect opportunity to showcase the amazing, unique work happening here.

"These professionals are taking away a lot of ideas to use in their own settings, particularly regarding how we support complex, challenging behaviour.

"I was really, really proud of our school. I was proud of everyone and blown away by our people."



Head teacher Adam Dean