



# Our experience of a Dissolving Barriers to Learning Workshop

by Jacqui Hindley

## Crisis Point

In 2006, I was close to the end of my tether. Mother to Laurence, a six year old boy with such a lovely smile and willing spirit, I had a child who couldn't tolerate touch, who screamed in inconsolable terror sometimes three times a night and who continually left a trail of destruction behind him. He is on the autistic spectrum with delayed development, hyperactivity, dyspraxia, and severe auditory and visual processing disorders. For the previous years I had been totally caught up in firstly getting a clearer picture of Laurence's needs and, secondly, fighting for those needs to be heard by the Local Authority (LA).

The more I had to fight for Laurence, the less available I was for my husband and our needs, and our three year old daughter was showing signs of our family's stress. At times for me, drained into isolation and numbness, that nearby cold, swirling river was tempting - an answer to the unbearable pain.

Then I came across a 'Dissolving Barriers to Learning' event and felt like someone had recognised my needs and created a workshop for me. Against all the odds, I made it. I just couldn't miss it and my husband, Rob, also made a colossal effort to be there. We were sitting amongst by head teachers, social workers, school governors, playground assistants, a university lecturer, a journalist, wobbly parents, and other parents who were just interested. This was a new enterprise for the facilitators and one that turned out to be incredibly valuable for us.

## Initial Work

An opening round, and there we all were, however we were, bathed in 'open-hearted' listening and support. Rob and I presented our issue: my fight to get Laurence's educational needs met and immense frustration around not being heard in this by the LA.

Guided by the facilitator, we set up the key representatives - one each for us parents, one for Laurence, two for the LA, and one for the meeting of Laurence's needs (through Occupational Therapy and Tomatis Listening Therapy work, that we were privately funding). Sitting as a part of the outer circle, my husband and I witnessed a truth revealing itself in front of us...

*The representative of Laurence, our 6 year old autistic son, is very uncomfortable with the representatives for my husband and I, who are standing very close behind him – especially me, his mother.*

Ouch! The penny drops. How can I back off and literally give him more space?

*As our representatives step back from Laurence, he smiles, breathes and moves playfully, joyfully. He's totally aware of where his needs are met and turns to them.*

Just these simple moves held enormous messages for me. Although painful, I could recognise that, in my fighting for Laurence, I was effectively on top of him all the time and somehow needed to 'back off'. What was even more powerful was the facilitator was saying to me "Just look at Laurence and his needs" and that the two representatives were happy. At the time I was totally caught up in the fight with the LA, and here it was being suggested that I pause, and look at this child a minute... and when I did so it was abundantly clear that he was actually all right. That he was getting enough. That, at that moment, his needs were being met, albeit privately through our own efforts and organisation. What an immense relief.

## Further Moves and Insights

We also looked at what was going on with the representatives for the LA and they were clear that they were unable to move. While this was not a pleasant outcome, it was very much seeing it as it was – their responses reflected the truth of the situation. In a strange way it felt really helpful to acknowledge: 'yes, this is how it is and it's really hard.'

At this point I myself was brought in to replace my representative – and nothing changed. Then a new representative was brought in to be 'whatever was/was not happening between myself and the LA' – and something certainly changed in me, changed like a volcano erupting internally. I found myself sobbing deeply, it was quite extraordinary. When the facilitator asked me if I knew what it was about, initially I had no idea, then I began to get the sense that it was an old personal trauma, deep, raw and clear to me in that moment.

This trauma was not explored or even named in that workshop – it didn't need to be. The facilitator acknowledged it and suggested that I keep it safe, looking at it when the time was right for me. My God, I could breath. What a difference it made and, after this, incredibly, one of the immovable LA representatives was able to make a small step forwards towards us!

In retrospect I have been able to see that, somehow, my old trauma had become mixed up in my fight with the LA, and that this was preventing me from being able to work with effectively with them. Despite having done a lot of psychotherapy work around that trauma issue, I do not believe I would ever have been able to see this dynamic or separate from the strength of the trauma without this piece of work.

Another shift the work enabled was that of pulling me out of my tunnel vision into a fuller picture of what was going on and hence changing my perspective. Beforehand, I had been totally intent on getting what I wanted from the LA, approaching it as if: they 'should' do this for my child, the right thing according to Jacqui. Afterwards, I was more acknowledging that 'they weren't able to do this for my child', and so it became 'what is possible in this situation?'

The final piece I recall is being given a line to say to Laurence's representative: *"I will continue to fight for you."*

That line, in that moment, with that group of people, has been such a source of strength, intention and support to me and our family. It is truly phenomenal.

## After-Effects

The following week was Laurence's Annual Review. We had a LA rep, and I spoke freely of my frustration with: the communication problems with the LA; the ineffective speech therapy and occupational therapy provision; and the lack of holistic vision. There were no tears. There was no fight, only questions about how best to go forward for a very complicated, confused and fearful child. Laurence, our little boy with such a smile who's so socially available and willing - so willing a spirit.

For me, this was extraordinary – previously I'd not been able to cope with talking to them and would be fighting back tears the entire meeting. This time, I felt safe and protected internally. I'm sure the change came about as a result of the systemic work

- reassuring me about Laurence's well-being generally, as well as affirming my continued commitment to him;
- separating out my personal trauma from the relationship with the LEA; and
- shifting my perspective on what was possible from the LEA and helping me see the wider picture.

I've since had the opportunity to use systemic approaches to address other aspects of our family life, including the trauma that had emerged as described above. It has been my experience that each piece of work has been a subtle shift in a positive direction that has impacted the whole family, including Laurence's well-being.

It's not always easy, but here we are a year and a half later and Laurence has been accepted by the Local Authority into an independent small school of our choice where he is settling well. He's a lot less fragile; verbally and physically he's able to orient himself a lot better than he has ever done; and he is able to cope with changes of routine that would previously have been unthinkable. Our daughter is demonstrating less stress and our marriage is stronger.

As far as I am concerned, this work is really helping us to live our lives more fully, and I'm deeply grateful to all the people, especially Judith Hemming and her teachers, who have contributed to our journey.