

Animal magic



Harry with his training certificate and therapy dog Vader, right



When Heather Parks' home became a battle zone because of her son's disruptive behaviour a four-legged friend restored the peace By Ruth Addicott

Heather, 44, lives in Okehampton, Devon, with her husband Phillip and their four children. She works for a community interest company that provides family support and counselling. She says:

"It all started in May 2011 when my eldest son turned 10. He didn't want to celebrate. He didn't even want to go out. In fact, it was getting increasingly hard to get him to go anywhere.

'Have you heard of Asperger's?' the psychiatrist asked, when we finally got an appointment. I'd never heard of it. 'It's a form of autism,' she told us, convinced it was the underlying issue. It turned out to be true.

The novels on my bedside table were replaced with books about autism and Asperger's but the more I read, I feared we were in bigger trouble with our youngest son.

Harry was only six and also struggling. Where my eldest could be persuaded to do things, Harry refused to do everything – even getting into a friend's car who was picking him up from preschool.

His behaviour after school was becoming alarming. He'd be violent towards his younger sister in the car, take off his seatbelt and act completely irrationally if either his sister or I spoke.

He seemed to need total silence. By the age of eight, he became hypersensitive to noise. He'd explode at the sound of cutlery or someone eating or swallowing or voices or singing.

All of these would cause a huge meltdown, sometimes abusive with shocking language, sometimes violent. He'd pick things up and throw them with no regard to damage or people in the

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way. Our home began to feel like a war zone.

One day, out of the blue, Harry asked me if he had misophonia, a condition where certain sounds trigger a fight or flight reaction. I found people online who were experiencing the same – which was both a lifeline and depressing. There was no cure and it worsened as people got older. We tried hypnotherapy, but Harry wouldn't cooperate.

On the surface, Harry was a model child. He joined in football and went to different clubs. I had difficulty convincing the teachers there was anything wrong. We were still waiting for a diagnosis, but as is common with children on the autistic spectrum, he masked his issues. When he got home, he was so exhausted he'd blow up.

If I left the house he'd throw the contents of his bedroom out of the window. I was worried someone would report us to social services.

We saw an audiologist who issued Harry with white noise generators that looked like hearing aids. We tried to remove as many triggers as possible, but it was impossible. Harry would react at the mere sight of his older brother. I felt like a traffic warden trying to keep them apart.

I was increasingly concerned about our other children. They were hypersensitive to anything that might trigger Harry's outbursts and paranoid about going out in case he kicked off.

My middle son avoided mealtimes and lost weight. My daughter began to worry about what would happen if I died, as nobody else could handle Harry. She didn't want to go to school. My eldest was trying to focus on GCSEs. We were living a nightmare.

Visiting relatives was also difficult. We could go in two cars but we needed enough rooms to accommodate the children. One time, Harry had a huge meltdown when his siblings had friends over. They were mortified.

Harry's behaviour seemed controlling, manipulative and, at times, downright abusive. It was hard for the extended family to see this without trying to interject and

difficult for me as I perceived it as criticism of my parenting. I was fiercely defensive of Harry, who I knew was suffering.

I felt I was pushing away the people who wanted to help us but I couldn't cope with their comments. It was isolating us all. The only people Harry tolerated were my brother's family, who had some magical ability to coax him to join in. They became a lifeline.

Just after his 11th birthday, Harry was diagnosed with autism. We believe it's a type called pathological demand avoidance (PDA) when a person's anxiety is such that they avoid everyday demands and expectations.

I attended courses, followed advice from the PDA Society and continued along a 'no blame, no judgment' pathway. I knew that Harry was not acting out of choice.

He started secondary school but never made it to the first lesson. He had a panic attack and fled. His frustration and fear were consuming him. He refused to do any work and gave up tennis, the piano and the trombone. His world became smaller and smaller.

We were at breaking point. I considered moving out with Harry to give the family some respite

– but the other children felt I was choosing Harry over them. Their reaction felt like a knife stab. I reduced my hours at work. I was running out of capacity.

We decided to take Harry out of school. He wasn't getting an education, anyway. The only thing that seemed to interest him was getting a dog. He pleaded with us constantly to get a puppy and eventually I gave in. He researched endlessly, watching training videos and pretty much took over responsibility. While he struggled to communicate with humans, he seemed to have buckets of patience with dogs and a soft calm voice they responded to.

I read an article about an autism-therapy dog and became obsessed with the idea that if Harry had a therapy dog it could help him go to school and regulate his behaviour. The chances of us getting one were slim, but I believed in the therapeutic value of animals and loved the idea of him having a friend who would love him unconditionally. Beneath his behaviour was still my gorgeous, funny, kind boy. I just needed to reach him.

Then in March 2017, I stumbled across the charity Dogs Helping

Kids (DHK) and its founder, Tracey Berridge, agreed to meet us.

Harry struggled with new people and places and I had no idea if I would be able to get him in the car, let alone behave. Somehow, I got him there and that's when he met Vader, a rescue Saluki-cross-greyhound, now a certified support dog. The bond between them was magic – it was a dose of hope.

Over the next two years, Harry's weekly session with Vader became his therapy. He was learning and engaging and proud of his knowledge. I saw him grow in confidence and smile. One day, Tracey gave him a book and Harry forgot he refuses to read and read to me for the entire 50-minute journey home.

Harry still has enormous anxiety, but he is happy and much calmer. There is no shouting or violence, he's thoughtful, helpful, gives great hugs and tells me he loves me. He's a pleasure to be around.

Our hope is to find a sponsor to enable Harry to train his own support dog so he can have the confidence to go out on his own. That would be life changing." 🐾

For information on DHK, visit dogshelpingkids.co.uk.



Life has much improved for the Parks family