

Visual Perceptual Therapy Case Study



BRENDON AN ORDINARY LITTLE BOY

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I liked Brendon right from the moment I met him. He was such a great example of so many children, whose difficulties have not been fully understood. School was a very difficult place for him as he was unable to perform so many of the tasks expected of him. Consequently, his attitude and appearance were clear reflections of his life experience so far. He sported a Mohawk, complete with rat's tail, through which a scar on the side of his head was clearly apparent. His attitude was written across his face, in a sneer, clearly expressing an attitude of, "Who do you think you are and what do you think you can do for me?"

Brendon was 9 years old and was routinely in trouble in school. His latest outburst had resulted in his mother being told, that if his behaviour did not improve, he would be suspended from school. The school principal later advised me, that the Visual Perceptual Therapy was the last chance for this boy, truly a sad statement for such a young child.



I knew very little of Brendon's history before I met him. His mother crept into the room, obviously very afraid of what had happened and what might happen. I gave her full marks for even turning up though. For so many, these situations remind them too much of the trauma of their own painful childhoods. So many of these parents struggled themselves in school, which is something that is often overlooked. Having to front up and deal with their child's school, over issues that they are all too familiar with, is not a pleasant experience for them; Consequently, they may not turn up. But here was Brendon's Mum, obviously afraid, but here for her son.¹

Brendon's attitude was palpable. His whole demeanour clearly says he has been here before and doesn't think much of it. But this is all fine with me. I have been here before as well and I know the therapy speaks for itself. I have no need to convince a child of anything; all I ask is that they engage with me and see what happens.

Despite the attitude, Brendon did engage with me. Within 15 minutes he was engrossed in the tasks and even commenting that it was fun. However, it quickly became very apparent that Brendon's overall level of performance was substantially less than it should be.

It is important to know what level a child is actually performing at. Simply determining that a child is struggling in school does not tell us this. A part of my evaluation is to determine a child's developmental age when looking at a child's performance. We use the child's handwriting, speech and language, general maturity to determine the age level the child is performing at. Once the developmental age has been determined it will provide insight into their behaviour, as well as why they are unable to perform certain tasks. In Brendon's case, he demonstrated a developmental age of around 3-3 ½ years of age.

As soon as Brendon's developmental age became apparent, the cause of his troubles in school was revealed. While a child (or adult) will accumulate life experience proportional to their chronological age, their developmental age also gives us their level of overall maturity. Brendon

¹ Several months later Brendon's Mum contacted me and told me that she felt badly because she had not told me everything about her situation. She was not Brendon's biological mother but had mothered him since he was 1 year old. She wanted to leave Brendon's father, because he was abusive and this was damaging to Brendon. She wanted to take Brendon with her and wanted to know how to do this. I was able to direct her to someone who could help her.

may well be 9 years old, but his ability to perform functionally, socially and behaviourally was the level we would see in a child of 3 or 4 years of age.

Brendon was routinely in trouble, for swearing in the most atrocious language at his peers. Children being children, some of them – and one in particular - took great delight in provoking him into these outbursts. The language was what we may expect a 9-year-old boy to know, but how it was delivered was representative of a much younger child.

Like some children who struggle significantly, Brendon had developed an area of specialised interest and knowledge, as a means of compensating for his struggles. He had an obsessive interest in rubbish collection and recycling, and he knew more about this than most adults.

These obsessive behaviours are not uncommon and typically tell me that the child is actively engaged in exploring their world and is not lacking in intelligence. However, there are usually also issues with self-esteem and confidence and having an area of specialised knowledge allows the child to feel good about something in their life. This is what is meant by compensation; where there is a move to counter feelings of inadequacy. Sometimes these areas of obsession reflect a narrow and reduced view of the world, so it becomes important to be able to fully evaluate the child and determine what is actually going on for them.

In Brendon's case, he was compensating for his sense of inadequacy and how he felt about life and himself. He struggled socially and with literacy and numeracy, but he was an expert in the field of rubbish collection and recycling. One of the outcomes we look for, in the Visual Perceptual Therapy, is of the relinquishing of these obsessions and the development of wider interests.

Brendon's visual perceptual therapy evaluation also revealed the following:

- Brendon did not know how to begin a task. Around 90% of the children I work with don't know the best place to begin a task and/or, do not understand the concept of what a task is built around.
- Brendon did not use visual cues within the task to stabilise his work. This is because he did not have the capacity to do so. Corners and horizontal and vertical lines are all great examples of stabilisers, because they provide constant visual cues, telling us which way is up and how to orientate the work we do. Even our 'spatial awareness' is developed on the basis of these visual cues. Without such stabilisers our world view is in a constant state of flux and movement, adding to or creating the sensory overload these children are always experiencing.
- He was unable to make use of all of the information that was available to him. Essentially, this is a matter of the child's capacity to deal with normal everyday amounts of sensory information found in their experience of life, being exceeded. Sensory overload is the result of this but it shows up in a variety of ways. In Brendon's case it was showing up as a [memory deficit](#). Many memory deficits are the consequence of being unable to make use of all of the [sensory information](#) available to us with some being 'left out' of our processing.

Our ability to account for all of the information available to us also relates directly to our problem solving and decision making abilities. Obviously, we are not going to make good decisions or be effective in our problem solving, if we are not able to make use of all information available to us. Most children who have problems in this area are stuck in trial and error modes of problem solving and do not understand cause and effect. Unfortunately, such children are routinely in trouble because they continue to do things that have a negative impact on other people and their property. These children are unable to anticipate the consequences of their actions and persist in doing the same things over and over again, because they cannot get out of this cycle.

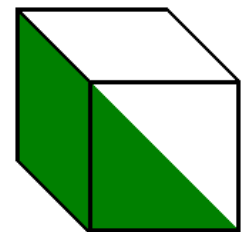
Brendon had consistently demonstrated he struggled in his problem solving and decision making – this is also an area where his performance is related to his developmental age of 3½ years.

Brendon has been stuck in trial and error, as his main mode of problem solving and decision making. This is reflected throughout his actions in the Visual Perceptual Therapy.

- He performs tasks erratically, jumping around within a task, doing what he can, when he can. However, there is no sequential task performance, where he moves through a task from beginning to ending. It is all performed in a chaotic and spasmodic way.
- As the volume of sensory information within the task increases, Brendon's task performance declines and he demonstrates an increasingly dysfunctional mode of task performance. He clearly demonstrated that he was in sensory overload and, that the amount of sensory information contained in a task, did not have to increase by much for this to happen.
- Brendon had to be shown how to 'connect the dots' between aspects of the task. This is a basic skill we all must have in order to make sense of the world.

At this point in the evaluation Brendon was smiling and telling me "This is fun." His attitude had gone, and he was working with me, listening to what I was saying and starting to do things differently. He was demonstrating a very clear capacity to improve upon his performance. This was an intelligent young man who just needed to be shown what to do and he quickly made use of this.

The next phase of the evaluation utilises green and white blocks where two sides of the block are green, two sides are white, and two sides are green and white through the diagonal. This phase starts to build on the skills the child began to develop in the preceding tasks.



Within moments of beginning to work on the green and white block task, a deep, palpable and profound sadness overcame Brendon and he began to cry. It is apparent that he is deeply and profoundly sad.

Brendon's sadness reflects the consequences of all that he has ever experienced in life. It is a reflection of how he feels, every time he is presented with a task that he struggles with; how he feels with his peers, when situations are beyond his capacity to cope.

At this point in our session, Brendon was clearly telling me that he just could not go on in the face of his emotional turmoil. It is also apparent that Brendon's initial attitude with me was all about defending his woundedness; however, here he was trusting me enough to reveal just how much he was hurting. This young man just wanted help.

Brendon was not only incredibly sad, his developmental age did not provide him with the capacity to understand his internal states and tell others about them. Instead, Brendon was far more inclined to lie about how he was feeling, and this seemed to be a reflection of how his past attempts to express himself had misunderstood.

One of my common mantras for schools is that every moment is a teaching moment. Everything I do is about making it easier on everyone, to understand the children and work effectively with them. I continue to find that school can counter so many of the negative experiences a child may have elsewhere, and be a safe and fun haven for them to be in.

One of the tools I used with Brendon was *The Effective Use of Adults*. This process teaches children to ask for help when they need it and ensures they get a useful and child centred response. Here's how it works:

- The child identifies an adult in the school who they feel comfortable approaching for help.
- The adult is asked if they will be the 'point's person' for the child. This means that whenever the child finds themselves in difficulty while in school, they can go to this adult and who will help them. It doesn't matter if this is during class time or break time that child can go to that

adult, and, while it may seem that this will be disruptive, it never is. Effective teachers usually have no difficulty in filling the role.

- The role of the adult is to mediate, to help the child work out effective ways of solving their problems. It also means that situations, in which the child is particularly prone to struggling, will be identified and addressed proactively. These children will usually also be working with a social worker or clinical psychologist on their core psychological and emotional issues, and these co-operative ventures mean the child is receiving a lot of support to put their newly developing skills into practice.

The role of the adult is also to intervene when other children are behaving in ways we would rather they didn't. There are certainly times when it is not a child's role to resolve a situation, and the input of an adult is required.

The teacher Brendon chose was very surprised that he had picked her. As the assistant principal she had had to deal with Brendon's outbursts on more than one occasion. But I said to her that Brendon's choice probably said more about how fair she was in the ways she had dealt with him, than anything else could ever say. Brendon obviously trusted her and felt safe with her. This teacher was able to assist Brendon in various situations, and what was truly interesting was how his behaviour calmed down and he no longer had the outbursts that had caused so many problems.

Over the next three therapy sessions, Brendon's performance improved substantially, but he continued to cry in every session. Despite his tears, he always wanted to work with me and never said "No". In our last session, which occurred four days after a return from two weeks of school holidays, he simply was not able to participate at all. Again, he was just so willing, but every time he was challenged (and all these tasks are challenging to one degree or another) he started to cry.

Despite all of this, Brendon's school work began to rapidly improve, and his mother was invited into the classroom to help out a couple of mornings a week, so that she could gain some skills to help in with his homework. While I was seeing Brendon for the Visual Perceptual Therapy, his mother would enthusiastically tell me of the various things he could 'suddenly do,' which greatly surprised her. She recounted walking down the street with him one day and him saying, "I didn't know you could get to Devonport that way;" a testimony to his expanded awareness of the world around him, and his sudden ability to read at a level that had been far beyond him previously.

Brendon came to see me one lunch time about 6 weeks after I had started to work with him. He wanted to show me how his handwriting had improved, and his teacher had encouraged him to come and show it to me. But what was even more surprising than the massive improvement in his handwriting was the paragraph he had written. It was way beyond anything he had done before, demonstrating a maturity that was truly surprising and gratifying - and it wasn't about rubbish collection or recycling. This boy was relaxed and smiling, and happiness was obviously seeping into his life at long last.

Brendon's teacher became one of his greatest supporters and she was able to work with him, without the previous frustrations and failures.

Brendon's mother did make some changes to their living arrangements and his new school contacted me, wanting to know how they could help him, and this was so wonderful to see.

Ultimately, Brendon is just an ordinary boy in so many ways, and all he needed was someone to listen to him and understand what he was conveying.