

WHY I ABSOLUTELY LOVE EOTAS (EDUCATION OTHER THAN AT SCHOOL)

Laura Kerbey

Five years ago, a colleague and I discussed the increasing number of children who we were meeting through our work as autism and education consultants who were unable to access their education within a school or college. Almost all these children were neurodivergent, bright and wanting to learn, and they just could not do it within the confines of the national curriculum and within the environment of a school building. Many of these children had experienced trauma as a result of their time within the education system and were now suffering from emotionally based school avoidance.

As a result of this conversation, we set up KITE Therapeutic Learning, an organisation that provides bespoke education packages to children through EOTAS packages. When we first started, we had 6 children on our books. We now have over 50 on a waiting list and work with over 60 fantastic tutors and Learning Support Assistants.

We hold regular meetings with our learner parents and team members. Words that we often hear in meetings include, ‘transformative’ and ‘life changing’. Children who have been described previously as ‘hard to teach’, ‘unwilling to learn’ or ‘difficult to engage’ become excited once again by learning, under the careful guidance and support of adults that they have learned to trust.

Quite simply, I think EOTAS is amazing, the impact it has on children’s lives is incredible.

Here is why I love it so much:

EQUITY: EOTAS programmes must be one of the most equitable types of education that exists. Children are supported according to their own unique strengths and needs. EOTAS programmes recognise that not all children are able to do the same thing at the same time and allows children to work at their own pace. Children can make rapid progress, without boundaries, and can slow down, pause or change direction when needed too.

ORIGINAL: Every single EOTAS programme is unique, original and tailor made to learners needs. No two programmes are the same and programmes can be adapted and changed as children’s interests and passions change.

TRANSFORMATIVE: I hear this word so much from parents who have children who have EOTAS. EOTAS can literally transform children’s mental health, their feelings about education and their future opportunities. The impact of EOTAS can send positive ripples through entire families. Children who have

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previously been described as ‘defiant’, ‘oppositional’ and ‘challenging’ become engaged, interested and excited by learning.

AUTONOMOUS: EOTAS allows true autonomy. Learners are the absolute HEART of their programmes. THEY are in charge of what they want to learn about and when. EOTAS programmes can adapt and change as learners’ interests change. Children learn because they want to, how they want to, about the things that they see the value in.

SAFE: Learners who have EOTAS form safe, trusting, reciprocal connections with adults who can share their interests and passions. For children who have had such negative, traumatic experiences in education, this can take time, but EOTAS allows them the time they need, and the safe connections that are formed are the most important foundation of their education.

Here is a wonderful quote from one of our parents at Kite, “Thomas is now formally “educated other than at school”, with his learning provided by a specialist team. He has built up an excellent rapport with them, and they’ve created a curriculum around his special interests. There are still days when he can’t cope, but the team can work flexibly as his needs change.

‘Being “educated other than at school” has helped Thomas to regain his trust of education and adults and has rebuilt his fragile confidence and feelings of self-worth. His world is still small and his anxiety is still high, but he’s happier, more aware of his emotions, and is slowly becoming more open to learning.’

I just WISH so much, that EOTAS was not regarded as ‘less than’ education that is provided in a school. I also wish that it was not so hard for children to get EOTAS agreed by Local Authorities. Parents have to fight SO hard to get EOTAS often only finally being awarded this far more appropriate form of education through expensive and stressful tribunals. This means that precious time and learning opportunities are lost for these brilliant children who do so well once EOTAS has finally been awarded to them.

EOTAS does not have to be forever. At KITE, we celebrate the progress that our learners make, and last year were delighted when three of our learners were able to transition into mainstream colleges, their mental health greatly improved and their faith in the education system and the adults who work in it transformed.

Laura Kerbey is a co-founder of NEST (Neurodivergent Education Support and Training – Formally known as Positive Autism Support and Training (PAST)), Healthy Happy Me and KITE Therapeutic Learning. She has been working with autistic children and young people for over 22 years.

In October 2018, Laura launched KITE Therapeutic Learning Services with a colleague. KITE provides bespoke therapeutic learning programmes for children

who are unable to access school due to high anxiety or other needs. The majority of children accessing KITE are autistic with a PDA profile.

Laura is the author of 'The Educator's Experience of PDA' which was published by Jessica Kingsley Publishing in 2023.

Laura is neurodivergent herself and received a diagnosis of ADHD in her forties, she also has two sons with special educational needs.