How to fly a kite

"*Kites rise higher against the wind, not with it.*" Winston Churchill said that. I presume he was trying to emphasise the importance of perseverance, determination, and resilience in the face of resistance and adversity. There's little doubt we faced our fair share of adversity, considering how the education system entrenches ableism for Autistic students and racial apathy impacting on First Nations students like my son.

Using Churchill's quote as an analogy, my son is my kite. Using analogies helps me because I struggle to articulate myself, especially when I need to most. That's how people tend to miss the point.

My son is my kite, but those in the education system believe he's a balloon. I have always been told to fly my kite with the wind, just like balloons. I was conditioned to believe that this was always the correct way to fly a kite. It's because the education system mostly caters for balloons filled with air, not kites. Balloons travel faster with the wind and balloons without obstacles in their path travel even faster and higher. Parents with balloons can eventually let go of the string knowing their balloons can safely be carried away, with the wind.

My son is my kite, he's not a balloon. I can never let go of my kite's string because he's a kite. Every time I tried flying my kite with the wind, my kite would awkwardly tumble around, drag on the ground, scraping every stone and rock in his path. As my kite uncontrollably flapped about, I desperately tried holding on, his string kept getting tangled.

I was continually judged and criticised for not being able to hold onto my kite like other parents holding onto their ballons. I was berated for not knowing how to untangle his string and not being able to untangle it fast enough. I tried following all the professional advice I was given to fly my kite with the wind, but still my kite could never fly. My kite in fact got worse. Eventually, my kite's matted string became a pile of knots. Whilst gusts of wind kept my kite flappy about, I grew frustrated desperately tugging at the knots. Being constantly blamed I cried believing that somehow it was all my fault but never understanding how, I did everything that was asked and expected of me.

My son is my kite. My kite was damaged. It's not my fault, some would later say. Your son is clearly a kite, not a balloon, they explained. Some sat with me to try to help me unravel the knots, separating his string one by one. This took years and those that helped would come and go. During these times, I came across other parents with kites painstakingly trying to unravel the knots in their strings. We were all expected to fly our kites with the wind.

It took years before I would learn how to fly my kite. Years to accept and trust that doing the exact opposite to what most people do is the only way my son can fly, rising high against the wind and not with it. Yet some still firmly believe kites can fly with the wind just like balloons. They genuinely believe if you teach the kite to behave like a balloon through a response cost punitive rewards system, and whilst not fully understanding some Autistic behaviours, it will eventually rise above the ground.

So, this is exactly why I want to share our journey, to hopefully help make it easier for others who struggle with their kites. Perhaps changes can be made so that kite flyers are better supported instead of trying to force kites to behave like balloons.

How to embed trauma

My son developed trauma because of unregulated programs like the School Wide Positive Behavioural Support (SWPBS) program, inconsistencies in responses, medical neglect, including medical neglect within the school system through bad policies. I hope the Committee can realise that how individuals interpret these policies is influenced on how individuals view families.

From the outset, symptoms of Autism were initially flagged by his teachers in Prep at my son's first mainstream school. Along with a nurse from the Department during his Primary school entrance health assessment who recommended further assessments and social skills development with a speech therapist. This never happened. Not even by his treating medical practitioners who only diagnosed him with separation anxiety and a sensory processing disorder. Although the school put in place several good strategies, my son was still subjected to never measuring up to the SWPBS program, inappropriate responses from both teachers and parents whenever he wasn't coping. This was the beginning of his school journey where he continued to experience both physical and emotional trauma over the years. The school responded appropriately at times by warning parents in the newsletter not to approach students in the playground and by his teacher writing the following email to fellow staff members after my son was inappropriately restrained by a teacher. This email should serve as a positive example on how to respond to Autistic students with challenging behaviours.

"Hi everyone, just wanted to share some information about one of my students (my son's name) in Prep in case you meet him out in the yard. (my son's name) is a very sweet student who has sensory issues that can cause him to become very upset/angry and sometimes violent towards other students. Triggers that cause him to become upset can include loud noises, students bumping into

him, students "annoying" him or being silly. He also struggles to understand different social situations with his friends. As you can imagine he has a hard time being in the yard. He is encourage to go to lunch times clubs where possible but does spend some time in the yard as well. I just wanted to send some strategies for you to use if you come across him in the school.

· Don't dismiss what he is saying. There is always a reason why he is upset and you can help him to understand and fix the problem he is upset about.

· If he is in a rage (screaming, red face, fist closed), please do not touch him or grab him. Move other students right away immediately so he can calm down.

· He has a strategy in place that he can go to the wellbeing building and play with his timer and key and lock to calm down. Please encourage him to do this.

· If he doesn't respond he loves sensory toys and if possible you could get someone to grab something from oral language area (in the prep building) and bring it to him. If not try and district with something you have (e.g. "(my son's name) have you seen my new watch"), ask if he could do a special job inside, or ask if he wants to go to (staff member name's) area or a tent (in prep building outside my room) to calm down.

If you need extra support (Prep Coordinator) and I are your first person to contact to support in this situation. The prep aides are also amazing with him if you see them around.

Hopes this helps and if you have any questions please feel free to ask."

Unfortunately, over the years schools didn't always respond in an appropriate way, there was never any consistency within schools or across different schools. Unfortunately, I'm unable to tell our full story because the Department of Education and Child Protection heavily redacted documents I sought under Freedom of Information. Although I fully respect and understand certain parts of these decisions, I question most of the redaction under *Section 30 referring to Internal Working Documents* as it is these documents that would be most helpful in understanding the reasons behind some decisions about my son.

How to spot systemic neglect

Symptom 1 – Rigid and Repetitive Behaviours

I guess separation anxiety is one way of labelling resistance to change. During drop-offs my son's behaviour was considered in the context of separation anxiety causing him significant distress. Throughout the day it was considered in the context of distress struggling with transition to change in routine. My son's challenges with transitioning and change in routine was always a constant struggle at his schools. Schools developed strategies to deal with this aspect which worked well when the plan was followed. My son had fixations on his favourite characters and schools used these to help him engage. He was always a 'fussy eater' and all schools were responsive to his needs. He's been diagnosed with *Avoidance Restrictive Food Intake Disorder* (ARFID), commonly associated with Autism. My son needed sameness and familiarity and would form an attachment to one teacher. All schools accommodated this except for, oddly enough, his Autism school. His Autism school, dealing with a high level of special needs students, had four teachers in his small classroom along with therapeutic staff. He found it difficult to adapt and form a consistent trusting relationship with just one of them. During COVID it was worse. Nobody truly understood my son's needs at his Autism school because most students present with an intellectual disability. Having different teachers writing in his school communication diary meant there were hardly consistencies in replies as a different teacher would introduce a new subject matter without addressing the last.

Symptom 2 – Sensory processing disorder

It's difficult for schools to control the environment. What seems moderate for most students can cause sensory overload and distress for an Autistic student. But every school did their upmost to accommodate my son's needs in respect to his sensory overload. But there were many ongoing challenges, particularly in mainstream schools which was usually outside the school's control with limited resources and lack of sensory safe spaces. His Autism school were able to accommodate his needs well.

Symptom 3 – Social pragmatic communication

Schools officially respond to student based on results in Core Language skills, not Social Pragmatic Communication. I never knew about social pragmatic communication and I am pretty sure most people don't, including the average teacher. Eventually, through NDIS supports, I was taught how to recognise it when I was required to maintain a behavioural diary on challenges impacting my son's behaviours. It is important to learn and understand about social pragmatic communication because how you respond is completely different to the traditional methods of responding to behaviour. It could be as simple as clarifying what you mean or ensure the students can genuinely comprehend what you mean to avoid confusion and frustration that leads to fear and anger. Traditional responses can be dismissive that leads to anxiety and depression. Social pragmatic communication is identified during speech assessments and teachers should learn about it too with a list of guidelines easily made available.

Symptom 4 – Auditory Processing Disorder (More common in Autism)

Schools and teachers are usually more aware of loud noises impacting on Autistic students but are unfamiliar about how background noises and multiple speakers can cause some students' distress. Schools only require audiometry assessment results that test for hearing loss, not listening ability. Listening is difficult for my son due to his Auditory Processing Disorder which means voices can sound muffled and he can't filter out background noise like most. Listening to more than one speaker at a time is exceptionally challenging. My son uses listening devices during most one-on-one activities. But he couldn't do this at his Autism school as there are too many teachers in his classroom and only one teacher can wear the microphone to projects their voice clearly into his listening device. When voices sound muffled, he cannot hear or fully understand what a person is saying. This, along with lacking expressive language skills associated with Autism means my son does not ask for clarification or help when he hasn't been able to listen properly.

Symptom 5 – Situational non-speaking

Schools are more familiar with the term non-verbal where a student with Autism cannot speak at all. Some people know situational non-speaking as selective mutism, but I can assure you that there is nothing selective about it. We say non-speaking instead of non-verbal, because as an Autistic boy named [redacted] points out, non-verbal means 'without words' in Latin. My son too has a lot to voice but at times he cannot speak at all and when he does speak, he usually stops mid-sentence with a long pause and starts again. Speaking is uncomfortable for my son as it requires a lot of concentration and effort. He has a limited speaking vocabulary, but his thinking vocabulary is much larger. He often says about his non-speaking challenges that '*my words haven't loaded yet*'. He worked hard to create his own communication cards for the times he cannot say what he wants. But his teacher at his Autism school made him read from his card and demanded he must always use his words. This discouragement and blatant practice of ableism in a school for students with a disability was what ultimately caused my son to not go back to school. The teacher's reaction confirmed to him what he felt all along, that his school disbelieves his legitimate challenges whereby he always felt blamed and lost choose minutes, a cost spent response, for things they genuinely believe he can control and change. My son is adamant that teachers at this school are collectively the worst he has experienced and refuses to go back.

Symptom 5 – Specific Learning Disorder

Schools don't know about this as the Department certainly doesn't flag it. My son is diagnosed with a Specific Learning Disorder, a legitimate neurodevelopmental cognitive disorder in the DSM-5. It is easily identified through assessments, but the Department's psychologists only diagnosed Intellectual Disability, or Severe Language Disorder with Critical Educational Needs (not an official disorder). Some genuinely believe my son can comprehend social situations because he has developed basic core language skills. But he has significant challenges with cognitive processing ability which causes numerous learning challenges. The message teachers get when Intellectual Disability is touted as being the most severe challenge for a student, is that all other students can and should cope better.

Symptom 6 – Emotional self-regulation challenges and Impulsivity (ASD/ADHD)

Not one person considered my son's impulsivity in the correct context of ASD when triggered by his social pragmatic communication or sensory challenges. Instead, his inability to self-regulate his emotions were considered in the context of Oppositional Defiance Disorder. The Department's psychologist cruelly attributes my son's social problems with peers as simply being his peers not wanting to socialise with him due to his aggressive behaviour, rather than acknowledging my son's long history with being bullied due to his social communication challenges that hinders his ability to socialise. This was clearly pointed out within the Department of Education's own speech pathologist's assessment report and established by his first school and the Department's own nurse. The psychologist's notes embedded a cold-hearted narrative of victim blaming. She missed an opportunity to help my son develop positive relationships with his peers by helping him and the people around him understand his legitimate triggers, but instead essentially blames him for his behaviour.

Symptom 7 – Absconding and School Can't (School Refusal)

First School - Absconding is the extreme action my son took whenever he couldn't fit in or felt uncomfortable in his environment. It began in Prep as he regularly absconded from the classroom at his first mainstream school. The school were able to put in strategies and create a sensory safe space for him to go whenever he needed.

Second School - At 6 years old my son was suspended from his second mainstream school during his first week due to his behaviour. It was more difficult to accommodate him due to limited resources and lack of sensory safe spaces, or space in general. He spent a significant amount of time in both of his Principal's offices whilst they tried to work. I seriously thought about proposing a TikTok challenge to see how many MPs can function efficiently in their office whilst supervising an Autistic child with severe behaviours. In the classroom my son sat away from his peers near the door and the school erected a small tent at the back of the classroom for him to retreat when needed. Still the environment was too overwhelming and absconding became a dangerous habit. The Principal once noted he ran away from the classroom approx. 10 times between 9-11am. He would run onto busy Hoddle Street forcing the head Principal to lock the school gates which meant senior students were unable come and go as the pleased during their breaks. His primary school Principal wrote about how it was becoming more and more difficult to physically restrain him and noted he was resistant to more than one teacher intervening. My son hit his teachers, would throw objects and damaged property. He kicked a hole in the wall whilst being restrained. He was eventually placed on half-day schedules as he couldn't last a full school day and the school enrolled him into a specialist behavioural school so he can transition safely back into his mainstream school.

How to spot racial apathy

Third School - At the specialist behavioural school my son absconded outside of school grounds after a visitor left a secure gate open. A teacher told him she would call the police if he didn't go back inside. The school later explained that the teacher was merely explaining if he gets lost outside school grounds, they will need to call police to look for him. My son was frightened because he only associates police with people who do bad things and he didn't understand what he was doing was unsafe. I complained to the school in writing that threatening a 6-year-old with calling the police was inappropriate, particularly to First Nations students given the history of the stolen generation, my father was one of them. The next day we had a meeting with the Assistant Principal and she agreed more time to speak with the teacher during handover would be appropriate. That afternoon the head Principal kept rudely interrupting my conversation with the teacher which frustrated me and I stormed out. Her immediate response was to call Child Protection noting protective factors. As Child Protection advised they would be visiting the following week, we agreed I would keep my son home from school until we can sort matters out. But his second mainstream school made another notification to Child Protection simply because he didn't show up to school. No attempt was made to email or phone me beforehand. This triggered a welfare check by Police who needed to site and speak to my son. This interaction terrified my son because he believed he did something wrong, particularly after the teacher told him she would call the Police on him a couple of days before. Child Protection unsubstantiated but instead noted his schools were being unhelpful, particularly his mainstream school. However, both schools did hold genuine concerns that my son was not receiving the supports he needs at the service he was engaged with, so they tirelessly tried to get him into CAMHS. This was ultimately rejected as his doctor advised CAMHS he was being adequately supported by her. Child Protection then closed the case. His mainstream school made a few more Child Protection reports after this even when I advised I was pulling him out of school because he continued to abscond. Communication between the school and I broke down completely as they continued to accuse and blame me.

Fourth School - Finally, other medical practitioners intervened and finally referred my son for Autism and Speech assessments. His new senior Paediatrician questioned how it could have been missed. He and my son's speech therapist recommended my son enrol into a specialist Autism school where he was accepted when he was 8 years old. The school was fantastic in many respects including being highly secure so my son couldn't abscond from school grounds. But when my son became depressed, he told me about plans he made to escape from school grounds. I let the school know his plans to ensure it wasn't possible, but I never received a response. My son continued to experience social and emotional challenges at the school that impacted on his mental wellbeing. I had to pull him out on three separate occasions as there is no onsite psychological supports to treat secondary mental health issues, such as depression. There is no safe space for students to raise legitimate concerns, it's either played down or dismissed entirely. The Department's response appears to be, if you're not fitting in, you can leave.

The Department of Education is in dire need of independent oversight. It is a biased system where those investigating are investigating their own. The Department's Legal area needs to change their approach when it comes to the wellbeing of children. They should operate in the best interest of the child, not the Department. I believe teachers should remain mandatory reporters, but they should not automatically be verified. When teachers are automatically verified without scrutiny, it essentially undermines the effectiveness of the Child Safe Standards. When schools don't introduce technology to ensure transparency, they're failing in their duty of care.

Finally, I would like to reiterate the need for early neurodevelopmental assessments for vulnerable students with learning and behavioural challenges, particularly for First Nations students, and emphasise the necessity of integrating neuro-affirming psychologists into the school system.