



## Case Study: Gertrude

Gertrude started at Circles Farm at the end of 2019, having been referred under Social, Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) reasons, with an ECHP in place. Gertrude had not been tested or diagnosed with any neuro-divergent disabilities.

On Gertrude's referral it stated that she had started to withdraw into herself around Y9, becoming reluctant to engage in learning within a group setting and often seeking her own space when upset. If having her own space wasn't an option, she could sometimes become aggressively volatile, especially if frustrated or a perceived slight or confrontation with another learner or staff member occurred. However, the school soon noted that when they utilised horticultural / farm therapy that they had limited access to, Gertrude became more relaxed and at ease. Gertrude was referred to Circles for 3 days a week.

Gertrude was placed within the Animal Care and Art groups on her first day, where she demonstrated a calm approach when handling the animals, as well as enjoying drawing and building a camp fire. It was noted on her first day report that although she would respond to questions from other learners when spoken to, she preferred to keep to herself and ate alone at break and lunch times. As the group she was placed in became smaller throughout the day, through the natural movement of the other learners, Gertrude visibly became more comfortable and open with another learner, initiating conversations herself.

Throughout the rest of Y9 and Y10, it was evident that this pattern was consistent, with larger groups, or even contact with unfamiliar learners, causing Gertrude to withdraw from the group and tasks set. If there were any disagreements or too much stimulus, she would often walk away to be by herself. This could often disrupt the group's dynamic and lead to a shift in focus for everyone. On any occasion where physical contact with another learner took place, whether that be accidental or in jest, Gertrude would become highly upset and emotional, leading to angry outbursts and threats of physical violence to the perceived perpetrator. On one occasion Gertrude had to be actively restrained by staff until she had calmed down, after attempting to attack another learner after they played a physical prank on her.

Although Gertrude faced many social challenges within education, her attendance has remained consistently high. This consistency led to Gertrude developing strong relationships with staff and also a confidence to begin to approach them to inform of any negative feelings or frustrations as they happen. This gave both Gertrude and staff the opportunity to discuss options to either alleviate or manage these emotions by offering 10 minutes alone in safe space (which was often in the woodland area) or even changing to an alternative group where she would feel more comfortable, before the situation became untenable. Gertrude liked to be kept busy, so changing groups was often a positive move.

This communication was a huge leap forward in Gertrude's ability to communicate and navigate uncomfortable social situations. It enabled her to deal with her frustrations in a positive way, with minimal disruption to the rest of the group. This growing emotional maturity was clearly being nurtured by 2-way communication and the freedom for the learner to be able to make her own decisions in a positive manner.

Gertrude has always been fiercely intelligent, with a knowledge of politics and world events that belie her age, and sport a fantastic sense of humour. Towards the end of Y10, Gertrude had started to develop a small friendship group with learners that had similar interests and social challenges, that she came to look forward in seeing. These friendships continued to develop over the course of Y10 and Y11, enabling Gertrude to become more involved in the group tasks set each day, furthering her ability to engage in work for sustained periods.

However, if her group dynamic was upset by the introduction of an unfamiliar learner, this would lead Gertrude to walk away and disengage until the status quo returned to her expectations. If a member of her friendship group arrived at Circles in a negative mood or were unwilling to engage in tasks themselves, this would influence Gertrude to do the same. She could also become too involved in discussing fantasy scenarios or online gaming, distracting herself and others from tasks. Gertrude would often arrive at the farm extremely tired, as she liked to stay up late at night to play online games with her friends. This led to her being highly unsociable and disengaged first thing in the morning but, after refreshments and breakfast had been provided and a conversation with staff about easing herself in to the day without any pressure, Gertrude would gradually engage over the course of an hour and become settled and in good humour.

Throughout Y11, Gertrude remained in the Allotment Group, along with her friendship group. With her newfound comfort/safety-net of her peers, she began to really engage in the work there, learning much about horticulture and construction, as well as offering her own ideas for future tasks and becoming enthused in the work at hand. With constant communication and consistency, a noticeable shift in her attitude to work and her peers developed, where she started to motivate and encourage her friend group when they were disengaged or feeling negative. If there were going to be any changes her day, such as a unknown learner entering the group or a change of task, Gertrude would react positively as long as that information was communicated to her beforehand, enabling her to have time to reflect and process. If those changes became too much for her during the day, she would openly communicate with the group leader and, if possible, relevant changes were made to address it. The real mark of Gertrude's progress began to manifest in the latter half of Y11, when it was not possible to change the group or situation. With open and adult communication, involving Gertrude in the decision-making process, she started to accept that she couldn't change everything to her advantage to sometimes accept the situation, managing the situation positively. She would realise that it is just a short-term situation and go along with it, rather than remove herself.

Gertrude had always vehemently refused to discuss her education after Circles, refusing to acknowledge it in the hope that it would go away. Any form of discussion around this would instantly upset her and cause her to become highly emotional and sometimes aggressive. This also started to change for the positive, where staff would be able to have short conversations about her educational future, once she understood that there were courses and options, she could explore that aligned with her personal interests. Over time she became less fearful and eventually agreed to a post-16 educational adviser being assigned to her, where that wouldn't have been an option before.

Over the 2 and a half years that Gertrude attended Circles, her social skills, emotional balance, communication skills and work engagement became stronger and stronger. With the effort she put in, the consistency of her attendance and inclusive 2-way communication, Gertrude's progress was so impressive that she was nominated for the Jack Petchy Award, which she won.