

Case Study – Nathan’s Journey

Nathan is a Year 13 student at the Castle School Post-16. Over recent years he has come on a remarkable journey in terms of developing his confidence and independence. Much of this is linked to his participation in extended work experience.

Nathan has autism. He is a very able student with great interpersonal skills and a lively sense of humour. However as a younger child his abilities were often hindered by anxiety, due to his autism. This included fear of new situations or anything unexpected, travelling in cars and meeting new people.

When he was in year 11 (age 15), it was felt that Nathan would benefit from attending some work experience, so a placement was set up for him at Sainsbury’s, one of our long-term World of Work partners. Initially this was a great challenge for Nathan; he was very nervous about being in an unfamiliar environment, and did not wish to wear the Sainsbury’s uniform – preferring his own clothes. We supported Nathan, and let him adapt to the situation at his own pace until he found his feet. Once he was settled, Nathan worked for half a day a week in the chilled aisle at Sainsbury’s with their staff member, Leigh, who has worked with many of our students in the past.

Under Leigh’s supervision, Nathan quickly learnt the role at Sainsbury’s. As his confidence grew he began to blossom and quickly took on new tasks, including learning how to use the cardboard baler – which was a first for one of our students. He also learnt the value of wearing a uniform and agreed to wear one himself.

When Nathan entered year 12 and moved up to our Post-16 unit, we wished to stretch him further and build on his supermarket experience. We looked for a similar role in a smaller store where he would have the opportunity to work in a variety of different areas. We talked to Ann – Community Champion at Tesco Metro in Newbury town centre – who offered him a placement on Monday mornings. Thanks to his previous placement at Sainsbury’s, Nathan approached Tesco with a very different attitude. He was excited and full of confidence, and accepted their uniform without question.

Nathan settled in quickly at Tesco Metro and formed a very good working relationship with Ann. He started working in the bakery section, packing donuts, cookies and other goods and arranging them on the shelves. This became his regular section, with time spent working in other parts of the store fitting in around his time in the bakery.

With the growth in Nathan’s confidence came the desire to be more independent and to learn to travel by himself. We worked with Nathan and his family to put together a travel training programme supported by the World of Work team, designed to expose him gradually to travelling independently, using the local bus network.

Travel Training Stages:

- Accompanied bus travel, from home in Thatcham to Tesco Metro in Newbury. (Nathan was met at home and accompanied for the entire journey).
- Independent bus travel, accompanied at either end. (Nathan was accompanied to the bus stop. He travelled on the bus alone and was met when he left the bus.)
- Independent travel from home to Newbury. (Nathan walked independently to the bus stop and took the bus alone. He was met at the bus stop in Newbury and accompanied to Tesco)
- Full independent travel. (Nathan travelled the entire journey alone, confirming his arrival by a text message to the team).

This graduated approach worked very well. At each level we worked with Nathan until he was fully confident and ready to progress. Often the move to the next stage was at Nathan's request, as he was so keen to gain his independence.

These stages took several months to complete, and we progressed on to the next level only when we were completely confident that Nathan (and his family) were comfortable to do so. The most important factor was Nathan's own drive to succeed.

Independent travel has opened up a new world for Nathan. A few months into his placement, Tesco offered Nathan the chance to work a full day at the store, and with only minimal support from the World of Work team he was also able to travel home independently in the evening. It has also opened up his social life and enabled Nathan to meet friends in town at weekends to visit the cinema and enjoy other activities.

Nathan's confidence at work has also grown unrecognisably. Initially he was very attached to a set routine at Tesco and would experience anxiety if Ann was not available or if he was unable to work in the bakery. By the end of a year at Tesco, Nathan was happy to enter the store and work wherever he was needed, with whoever was on duty. If Ann, or another supervisor was unavailable, Nathan would happily offer his services to other staff members and could work with minimal supervision.

At the start of Year 13, Nathan's confidence had grown to the point where he wished to spread his wings further and find a part-time paid job. The World of Work team helped him find some suitable positions and Nathan put in some applications. He was successful in securing a part-time position as a "back of house assistant" at Pizza Hut.

Although Nathan is still a full time student at school, we have also referred him to "Ways into Work", West Berkshire's supported employment service. They assisted with the interview process, his induction at Pizza Hut, and continue to support him with training, understanding company policies or any logistical issues. Ways into Work will continue to support Nathan, helping him to develop his employment options when he leaves school.

Nathan now works at Pizza Hut every weekend. He travels independently and is learning to make pizzas as well as carry out his day-to-day duties. His pride and pleasure at having a real job and earning his own money are a delight to see, and he is currently saving up his salary towards a holiday.

This is a great example of how consistent, long-term work experience can be truly life-changing for our students, especially when coupled with wider life skills such as travel training. A traditional two-week placement would have been too daunting for Nathan, whereas this extended approach allowed him to gradually grow his confidence and skill set and find his place in the Tesco team. The extended time-frame also allowed a gradual approach to his travel training and has been key to Nathan's overall success.

