



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 kids, who have never been understood by the system that was supposed to be helping them. He had been judged, labelled, ridiculed and treated in some truly appalling ways. Consequently, his attitude and appearance were clear reflections of the life he had lived, along with where he was heading, and none of that was good. 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 the hell are you and what do you think you can do for me?" Like many such children, Brendon had been promised help by countless adults, they had all failed him. This is one of the main reasons I never tell children I can help them; so many have gone before, promised so much and delivered nothing.



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 their own painful childhoods. So many of these parents struggled themselves in school, something I find we are far too inclined to completely overlook. 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; so they just don't 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 nothing to sell these kids. 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.

We have all probably heard the term 'developmental disorder,' but I find this to be a very general term of dubious value. It doesn't really tell us anything about a child's actual level of performance. The child might well be lagging behind their peers, but we need to know what level they are actually performing at, before we can start to help them. In order to provide some clarity around a child's performance, I use the term '[developmental age](#).' The child's developmental age is the age level they are performing at. When we know a child's developmental age, we know where we need

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.

to start working with them from, and it also provides a great deal of insight into the behaviour of a child. 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 gives us their level of overall maturity, as well as the level they are actually performing at. Brendon 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. Kids being kids, 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 spoke very clearly of this much younger child.

Like some kids who struggle significantly, he had developed an area of specialised interest and knowledge, as a means of compensating for his struggles. Brendon 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 kids 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 kids 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, throughout the child's performance. In Brendon's case it was showing up as a [memory deficit](#). All memory deficits are the consequence of an inability to [integrate](#) all of the [sensory information](#) available to us. At the core of memory deficits is an inability to form [inter-relationships](#) between pieces of sensory information. This capacity is typically restored in our first therapy session, with the memory deficit immediately resolving.

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 kids 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. However, these kids 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. Unfortunately, adults tend to misinterpret as a behavioural issue arising from personal choice.

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.

These patterns of task performance are also incredibly common in kids who have a visual perceptual deficit. They jump around within a task, because most of their activity is triggered by what attracts and repels them. This type of performance is also centred of sensory overload, where areas of high sensory loading attract the child, but they are also trying to avoid these areas because they typically cannot perform these aspects of the task – there's just too much information for them to deal with, and they do not understand it or what is required of them. It is usually in these aspects of the task that we see the child defaulting to trial and error modes of performance – what I refer to as 'having a bash,' without any real attempt to complete that part of the task because they know they can't. To the uninitiated, these modes of task performance are usually interpreted, as a lack of 'focus', or the child being wilful and not doing as they have been told.

- 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.

Performance always declines as [sensory loading](#) increases. This is the natural order of things in all human beings. The difference for someone such as Brendon is that he has no way of getting out of sensory overload other than getting out of performing the task. It's a good idea to be aware of this relationship between [sensory overload](#) and behaviour because it is such a common reason for kids to have an emotional meltdown.

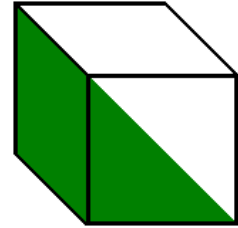
- Brendon had to be shown how to form inter-relationships between aspects of the task. This is the most fundamental and basic level of performance. It's essentially a matter of being able to connect the dots and make sense of whatever we are engaged in. Brendon could not connect the dots and had to be shown how to do this.

For example, when a functional person is performing a random pegboard task, they can see that there are no patterns in it, but they also know how to deal with this and can complete the task without counting the spaces between the pegs or using their fingers to mark those spaces. In Brendon's case, he did not have the skill base to stabilise such a task, nor could he see how the pegs related to one another. Consequently, such tasks would 'swim' in front of him and cause him to go into sensory overload very quickly. When kids are performing at this level there is no way they can see 'the big picture' ie: the whole of the task in a way that makes sense.

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 applying new modes of task performance, and he was demonstrating a very clear capacity to improve upon his task

performance. This was an intelligent young man who just needed to be shown how to connect the dots, so that he could make sense of the world, and begin operating on a vastly more effective level.

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. This is the moment where he reveals the consequences of everything that has happened in his life, up until this moment. He is deeply and profoundly sad to the very core of his being.

This therapy reveals absolutely everything about these kids and I am always aware of every nuance of expression within a child, on a very deep and intuitive level. Despite what we may think, kids do not get up in the morning plotting the downfall of the empire. They are like little puppies, literally doing everything they can to have their bellies tickled and, when they do not get this they begin to enter a psychological and emotional wasteland, which will have a devastatingly profound impact on them for life. When they do their very best and only ever get to experience failure, rejection and criticism, the consequences are truly devastating. When we consider that these kids are typically immature to begin with, and are required to front up every day, to a situation in which there is no success, no fun, no praise; it should be very easy to predict where they are going to end up as adults.

Brendon's sadness reflects the consequences of all that has ever been done to him, along with his continual failure to do as others require of him. 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; and, most importantly, the failure of the adults to understand him and engage with him in useful and effective ways.

Brendon is a boy who has literally been doing the best that he possibly can for all of his life, and he has never received an ounce of recognition for this. All he has received is grief. This boy has been so seriously and catastrophically misunderstood, and the consequence of this misunderstanding have created some very significant psychological and emotional responses within him. If this is not addressed now, this boy will undoubtedly grow into a young man who is either, pathologically angry and acting this out or, catastrophically depressed and acting this out. Neither bode well for him or those around him.

Our psychological and emotional status has a central role to play within our overall performance. These states will interrupt our task performance before anything else will, with this being the primary reason I want education to up its game. Over the years I have seen so many tragic examples of what education does do to these kids and, while there may well be many kids who have been helped, it is the kids who suffer the negative consequences of this system that we will be reading about in the newspapers down the track. Our psychological and emotional status will also send us into sensory overload, or add to it if we are already in overload, and it will do this in a truly profound way, which is impossible for most people to move out of on their own.

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. However, there was no doubt in my mind that Brendon had been telling the world of his distress for a long, long time, and no one had heard him or acknowledged this. All Brendon's initial attitude with me was all about defending his woundedness, and yet, here he was already trusting me enough to reveal just how much he was hurting. This young man just wanted

help but no one had ever sat down with him and provided an environment in which he could convey what was going on for him. He had only ever been judged.

There is a great lesson here for all of us. The next time we hear of someone committing some atrocious act in the world, we can consider what has happened in their life to cause them to act in such a way. I have often taken the opportunity, to stand in front of a group of 5 and 6 year olds, and wonder what it would take to turn them into those adults we are often so quick to condemn. All cute little puppies grow into dogs, and those dogs will always demonstrate how they have been dealt with in their formative years..... if only we would seek to understand.....and see that kids are no different.

There is a question for the whole of society here, and it is one of whether or not we are prepared to accept that we are turning out generation after generation of damaged and dysfunctional people from within our education systems. We could be addressing the problem very early on, but we are not. Instead, we would rather point the finger at the child's family of origin and blame them for their failings. I cannot count the number of times I have sat down with a child and their family and we have moved beyond the barriers created by such judgement, and we have made excellent progress for all concerned. It has been my routine experience that most of these families are doing the best that they possible can, and that we are doing absolutely nothing to help them by judging them.

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. But I have to ask, "Why should he?" He is only a boy in a world full of adults and this has been going on for a good many years. Instead, Brendon was far more inclined to lie about how he was feeling, and this seemed to be a clear reflection of how his past attempts to express himself had consistently been ignored or discounted by the adults.

It is my practice to deal with issues as they arise in the therapy. If I don't finish the visual perceptual evaluation on that day, so what! It is far more important that the child have their situation respected and addressed, than it is to push on regardless. The priority here was a boy who needed help or he was going to end up another casualty of the system.

I've worked in schools, where there is a continual stream of kids, constantly running to the teachers and telling tales. I've watched kids approach the staff room, knock respectfully and have had teachers ignore them or laugh about them. And I have heard some truly horrible tales, about the things that schools have done to children. Through all of this my only question is, "Why, why would you do this to children and what does it teach them?"

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 kids 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. Sadly, however, this has not been my usually or typical experience of most schools.

One of the tools I used with Brendon was The *Effective Use of Adults Approach*. This approach teaches kids 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 kids 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.

When it comes to emotional expression and how we deal with our emotions, I am always intensely interested in what the child is being taught to do. It is common in our society to repress and suppress our emotions, and Brendon's Mum was teaching him to do this. She obviously loved him and cared for him but encouraged him to stop crying rather than letting him express his emotions and let them go. When kids are allowed to fully express what they feel, on a deeply experiential level, things change and change dramatically. This was something this family needed to learn to do, because Brendon had a lot of healing to do.

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 just started to cry again.

Brendon will succeed. There were no more episodes where he was referred to the school principal because of outbursts and swearing. The *Effective Use of Adults Approach* was implemented and the school stepped in and stopped other kids who had been bullying Brendon.

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 hand writing 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.

It took some time, but within two months of my last session with Brendon, his teacher was finally acknowledging his progress, putting aside her judgements and working with him. She became one of his greatest supporters and, now that he was able to engage and perform the classroom tasks required of him, she had the ability to work with him, without the previous frustrations and failures. I still keep in contact with Brendon and his Mum. They did make some changes to their living arrangements and his new school contacted me, wanting to know how they could help him.

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.

