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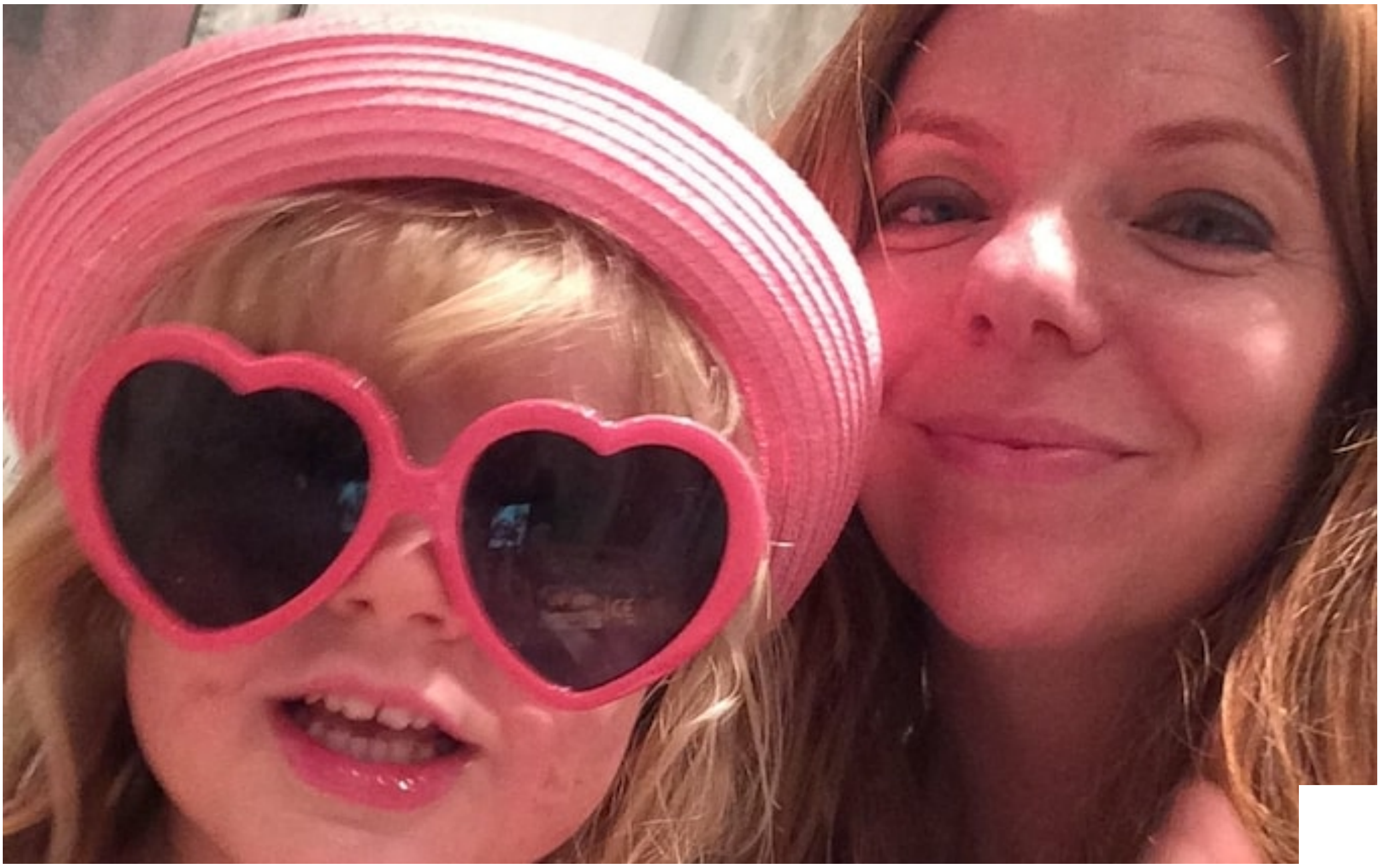

'Everyone thought my daughter was badly behaved and I was a bad parent – then we found out why'

She was diagnosed with underlying processing difficulties and neuro-muscular immaturity – suddenly everything fell into place

By Havana Marking

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My nine year-old daughter had stood up in the middle of the meal. Her pretty face was wracked with fury. Other restaurant guests turned to look. She hissed like a cat and spat – yes, spat – at me on the other side of the table. The same guests then focused on me: what would I do? How would I discipline her? I, dumbfounded, had absolutely no idea.

Minutes before, we had been laughing. It had been a day of celebration and this meal, at a trendy London diner, was meant to top it off, but a few bites in and my little girl had transformed from her sweet self to a monster. There was no warning, no cause I could fathom and nothing I could do but silently pay the bill and walk out, hoping the cold air would calm us both. As my daughter came back to herself, she was as humiliated and confused as I was. I realised we needed outside help. This was bigger than both of us.

My daughter has always been what is politely called ‘lively’. She is friendly, funny, and bright but, by the time she was three, she had also often been labelled a ‘drama queen’, as she often overreacted to things that her peers were fine with. She is kind and confident but for no apparent reason would suddenly bawl her eyes out, explode with frustration, lash out with anger. Plus, she was always on the move: the slightest distraction and she was off, no longer sitting down, racing round the room, wriggling out of bed, not finishing whatever it was we had started. So far, so toddler, but she didn’t grow out of these traits. And the tantrums didn’t stop either, in fact they seemed to get more violent with her increasing strength and size.

At school these things were causing problems. She would disrupt the class and distract others. She would refuse to join in, gravitate to the back of the class and sing to herself. Over six years of schooling, I hadn’t had one positive report and, while everyone agreed she was bright as a button, her work was poor and her approach could be challenging. Traditional discipline made things worse and things could escalate very quickly in the wrong hands. We had to leave one primary school when a new head teacher came in with a zero-tolerance approach. It was clear her vision was not one in which children like mine were welcome.

I had tried to discipline her. In fact, I’d tried every trick in the book: from the naughty step, special time, positive parenting, family meetings, rewards, threats and just plain shouting. I’d been on parenting courses and had self-help books in piles. By the time my daughter was nine and I was in my 40s, I had started to agree with those who judged me: I was a terrible mother.

After the restaurant incident I contacted an educational psychotherapist called Lynsey Daniels, through the Caspari Foundation charity. It was during the second winter lockdown and we could only chat on Zoom, but within minutes she had made us feel relaxed and the three of us laughed, played online games and talked about seemingly random things. After a while, I realised it was like talking to someone with X-ray vision. She could see patterns in behaviour that I was blind to.

During the fourth week of therapy, my daughter had gone to a drama club and I had packed a lunch for her, including a bread roll (a perfectly innocent wholemeal bap). At collection she was holding her tummy and complaining of cramps. When I looked in her bag, I saw she hadn’t touched anything. It dawned on me that she was starving. But when I asked why she hadn’t eaten, she said she didn’t like the roll and would rather be starving than eat it. I told Lynsey and very soon we established that many of the issues were to do with food, the diner incident being one. We also established that my daughter was hardly eating her school lunches. She was “hangry” a lot of the time. Lynsey quickly recommended that my daughter be tested for sensory processing differences (SPDs) and I booked a session at Maximum Potential, a centre for paediatric therapy services, specifically using a sensory integration and neurodevelopmental approach. It wasn’t cheap and there was a long wait to be seen, but boy, was it worth it. Our diagnosis honestly felt miraculous. Here were 19 pages that, in black and white, gave an explanation for so many aspects of my daughter’s personality and behaviour.

She was diagnosed with underlying processing difficulties and neuro-muscular immaturity. This was nothing I had ever heard of but it was fascinating to learn that this is new science, only just coming into the mainstream. It turns out there are quite a few more senses than the five I was taught at school, all sending messages to the brain that need to be answered. It’s not that there is any problem with her hearing for example, but that the processing of the sound is difficult, or chaotic. When she is in a noisy classroom, or an echoey pool, she tries to find a way to regulate that noise – she sings to herself, or puts her head underwater.

And the food thing? Well, the explanation for that – and her reaction – explained so much about her "irrational" outbursts. She has a tactile processing difficulty which means that whenever she puts something in her mouth, and feels (not tastes) something unexpected, the message to her brain is processed as an alarm, and it triggers a fight or flight reaction. No amount of hunger, or me telling her to finish her plate, will induce her to eat it. In fact, discipline in those moments of "bad behaviour" would only exacerbate the trauma.

One page of the diagnosis was dedicated to the vestibular system – the sense that processes information about movement and the head's position in space. This too was a revelation. My daughter has "difficulties modulating movement" and so her brain is less able to tell where it is. She needs to move more to let the body understand that.

Even though one in 20 children has some degree of SPDs, it is not widely recognised as a disabling condition, or recognised at all. But the diagnosis has been incredible for us. Our lives have changed completely, both because my and her approach to life has evolved, but because it also came with an occupational therapy plan, and guidance for her school, who have taken it on board and been very supportive. They have put in place movement breaks during class. Now she no longer throws a pencil on the floor so she can pick it up, she just quietly goes to the corridor and does some star jumps, for example, and comes back ready to focus on the next topic. And one of the fundamental changes I made was to give her a packed lunch – the same thing every day, with no surprises.

When her summer term report included the line: "She is a pleasure to teach", I wept with joy. Aspects of life will always be harder for us, but at least now we know how to approach them. It's like being given a ramp for your wheelchair. My daughter can get up the steps now, just in a slightly different way from other children.

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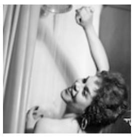

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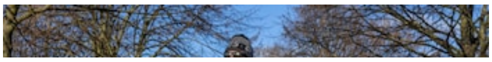

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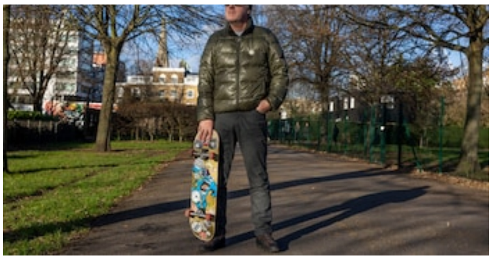

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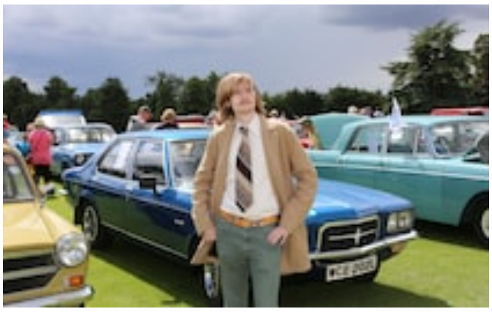

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