

Case Study 2: St James Roman Catholic Primary School, Richmond

Case Study Summary

St James Roman Catholic Primary School used internal alternative provision to support pupils who found it difficult to access full-time mainstream education, many of whom had additional needs including autism and a range of SEND. Pupils often experienced anxiety, difficulties with self-regulation, and challenges in sustaining engagement in learning.

The project focused on developing self-regulation through structured, purposeful movement. Pupils were taught to use a range of activities, described as organising, calming and heavy lifting, to help manage different emotional states. As they became more confident, they began to self-select activities using a simple menu system, choosing when and how to take short sensory breaks during the school day.

The use of clear, consistent vocabulary, including terms such as pushing, pulling, lifting and rolling, helped pupils understand how different types of movement supported their needs and contributed to increased self-efficacy.

As a result, pupils demonstrated improved ability to regulate their behaviour, with staff reporting fewer incidents during afternoons and reduced time out of class. Pupils described feeling “ready to go” following movement breaks, reflecting improved readiness for learning.

This approach reflects the school’s **‘Flourishing Together’** ethos, which focuses on removing barriers to participation and ensuring that every child is able to engage fully in learning and school life, supporting them to achieve their God-given potential.

This case highlights the value of embedding movement within daily practice as a proactive strategy for regulation and engagement.

Context

St James Roman Catholic Primary School in Richmond is a voluntary aided primary school serving pupils aged 4–11. Rooted in a Catholic ethos, the school emphasises the development of the whole child, with a focus on faith, community and moral responsibility. It serves a diverse urban community and promotes high expectations for both academic achievement and personal conduct.

The school has developed a strong reputation for its inclusive and autism-friendly approach, supported by a specialist autism provision and a clear emphasis on calm, consistency and kindness. This has made it a popular choice for parents of pupils with a range of special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), particularly those who benefit from structured and supportive environments.

This focus on inclusion, wellbeing and positive relationships underpins the school's approach to supporting pupils who require additional help to access learning, including those at risk of disengagement.

Integral to the approach is the school's *Flourishing Together* framework, which emphasises helping all pupils to achieve their God-given potential. Central to this is the belief that all children should have equitable access to high-quality learning and be able to participate fully and actively in school life.

What challenge was the school trying to address?

At St James Roman Catholic Primary School, internal alternative provision is used to support pupils who find it challenging to access mainstream education throughout the school day. Many of these pupils have additional needs, including autism and a range of SEND, and can find the demands of the mainstream classroom overwhelming at times.

This can present as heightened anxiety, difficulty with self-regulation, and challenges in sustaining attention and engagement in learning. Without appropriate support, these pupils are at risk of becoming increasingly disengaged from both learning and their peers.

While the school has developed a strongly supportive, autism-friendly environment, there remained a need for more targeted and flexible provision that could respond to individual needs while maintaining a connection to mainstream learning.

The challenge was therefore to provide structured support that would enable pupils to regulate, re-engage and build confidence, while also identifying strategies that could be applied earlier and more consistently across the wider school.

What did the school deliver and why?

The school built on its understanding of the link between physical activity and self-regulation by developing a programme of purposeful movement activities.

These activities are used across the school, from early years through to Key Stage 2, and are grouped into three categories: organising, calming and heavy lifting. Pupils are explicitly taught how to use these activities safely and effectively, developing an understanding of how different types of movement support different emotional states.

As pupils become more confident, they begin to self-select activities using a simple menu approach. They identify when they need a sensory break, choose appropriate activities from their own equipment set, and move to a suitable space such as a corridor or outdoor area for a short period of time.

Some activities develop fine motor skills, while others build strength, including lifting, rolling and pushing tyres. There are both individual and group activities, such as construction using large blocks, which support both physical development and collaboration.

This approach is designed to develop independence and self-awareness, helping pupils to recognise their own needs and take appropriate action to support their engagement in learning.

What changed for young people?

Peter, a Year 2 pupil, talked about his sensory breaks. He has his own set of equipment and activity cards and is already able to choose which activities help him with self-regulation. *(Self-regulation, Emotional wellbeing and confidence)*

He chooses to use them most days, often in the afternoon when he sometimes finds it challenging to settle after lunchtime. Staff spoke of how much better he can self-regulate after a sensory break. Peter explained that a sensory break makes him feel calm, happy and focused. He used the term “ready to go”, which is shared widely across the school. *(Self-regulation, Readiness for learning)*

Jamie, a Year 4 pupil, said that he had been using sensory breaks for more than a year and now finds himself needing them less frequently. His teacher explained that he had become much better at monitoring his own emotional state as a result of the work the school had been doing with him. *(Self-regulation, Emotional wellbeing and confidence)*

Jamie sometimes chose vigorous activity such as pushing tyres, but at other times would take himself into a quiet space to read. He also used the term “ready to go” when describing how sensory breaks helped him. He had far fewer behavioural incidents since starting the programme. *(Engagement and behaviour, Readiness for learning)*

Shay and Kip are both pupils working in the school’s specialist autism support provision, spending part of their week in mainstream lessons and part in smaller groups with specialist staff. Like other pupils in the school, regular movement and sensory breaks are part of their daily provision, and they are also able to choose personal activities when they feel they would benefit. *(Self-regulation, Relationships)*

Shay explained that the sessions made him feel calmer and “ready to go”. Kip used a sensory trail that helped him feel more focused and ready to learn. The school’s SENCO said that both pupils had benefitted greatly from a diverse range of carefully planned, purposeful movement activities. *(Self-regulation, Readiness for learning)*

Across the provision, staff reported improved regulation, fewer incidents during afternoons and reduced time out of class over time.

What made this work in practice?

Several features of the approach appear to have been critical to its success.

First, self-regulation was explicitly taught, not assumed. Pupils were supported to understand different types of activity—organising, calming and heavy lifting—and how these relate to different emotional states.

Second, the approach was consistent across the school. Shared language and routines enabled pupils to apply strategies independently across different contexts.

Third, the approach created structured opportunities for independence. Pupils were supported to move from adult-led practice to independent self-selection over time.

Finally, the school's calm, autism-friendly environment and skilled staff ensured that movement was purposeful, consistent and embedded into daily practice.

This approach is most effective where movement is embedded as part of learning, rather than used solely in response to behaviour. This reflects the school's wider commitment to helping all pupils to flourish and fulfil their potential through full participation in learning and school life.

What can other settings learn?

This case highlights the importance of embedding physical activity as a **deliberate strategy for self-regulation**, rather than using it only as a response to behaviour. Teaching pupils how and when to use movement, and providing consistent opportunities to practise this, can significantly improve their ability to engage with learning.

It also demonstrates the value of **consistency and shared language**. Approaches such as organising, calming and heavy lifting, alongside phrases like “ready to go”, helped pupils understand their own needs and apply strategies independently across different contexts.

Alongside this, the use of **clear, consistent vocabulary to describe movement**—such as pushing, pulling, lifting and rolling—supported pupils to understand what they were doing and why. This contributed to the development of self-efficacy, helping pupils to feel more confident in selecting and using strategies that worked for them.

The use of **simple, structured systems**—including individual equipment sets and a menu of activities—enabled pupils to take increasing responsibility for their own regulation, while maintaining clear boundaries and routines.

Finally, the case reinforces the importance of a **calm, well-structured environment and skilled staff**. This approach is most effective where movement is integrated into everyday

practice, supported by consistent expectations and appropriate spaces, rather than used as an isolated intervention.

What can other faith schools learn from this case study?

This case highlights how a school's ethos can be translated into practical, everyday approaches to teaching and learning. At St James, the commitment to helping all pupils flourish is reflected not only in values and language, but in deliberate strategies that remove barriers to participation.

The use of physical activity and purposeful movement is not an add-on, but a means of ensuring that all pupils are able to engage fully in learning and school life. By supporting pupils to develop self-regulation, the school enables them to access the same high-quality learning experiences as their peers.

For other faith schools, the key learning is the importance of aligning provision with core beliefs: ensuring that every child is known, supported and given the opportunity to participate, grow in confidence, and flourish within the school community.