

Scott's Story

Background

Disability comes in all shapes and sizes. Physical disability is perhaps easier for people to spot and this enables them to react positively for the most part. However, when children have other kinds of disability – those that affect their mood or ability to communicate effectively – it can be much harder to deal with. I have worked with lots of children with such 'invisible' disabilities. I have found that often young children in school are able to recognise these differences seemingly intuitively and often don't feel awkward around the person with the disability – they may see them as 'different', it is true. Invariably though, they want to 'look after' class mates who come across differently. They can be fiercely protective of them.

General themes

How do we deal with people whose brains are wired differently? Do we laugh and cross over to the other side of the road? Or do we embrace them and welcome them into our friendship groups?

What do Christians believe?

There are many examples in the New Testament of how Jesus showed immense compassion to those in need and he taught his followers about never turning their faces away from the most vulnerable: 'I was hungry and you fed me, thirsty and you gave me a drink; I was a stranger and you received me into your homes.' (Matthew 25:35)

Prayer

Lord God, You made us in your image and you love each and every one of us the same. Help us to see the opportunities we have every day to show your unending love to the people we meet, through what we do and what we say. We ask forgiveness for the times when we have turned away from those people who needed us to offer them the hand of friendship.

The story

If the children had been in the story, would they have laughed at Scott? Or would they have been unnerved by him? Why did the different adults in the story react as they did?

PSMC links

- What do we do if we see someone acting strangely – maybe wailing or laughing or rocking? Are we embarrassed and do we laugh or do we shy away? Which would be better? Which would cause the least hurt?

Scott's Story

SATs mattered: SATs were serious. Scott was finding Year 6 tough. The other kids seemed fine, they weren't bothered. He wanted to talk to Mum about it, properly; but when he brought it up, she always said the same. 'Just do your best. That's all your dad and I can ask.' But, Scott was worried. What if he couldn't do his best? What if he mucked up – what then?

Scott could remember when it first started. Before then, he had been normal. It had been Oliver's birthday party. It was an outdoor event. They had to put on army uniforms and drag themselves round a junior assault course. He had enjoyed it: getting muddy, with commando paint daubed across his face. When he had got home he had showered. Later, sitting in front of the television, he saw that he had dirt still beneath his nails. He went to the bathroom and started to scrub.

Sitting down, he settled back to his television programme. He felt uncomfortable, edgy. He wanted to wash his hands again. Already? There was no need. But, he couldn't resist. He went to the bathroom. They looked clean, but felt dirty. He washed them.

The next day at school, he went to the bathroom to pee. He washed his hands. He was reminded of the previous evening. He dried his hands. They felt unclean. He washed them again.

Back in class he tried to settle back to work. He couldn't concentrate.

At lunchtime, he washed his hands again. Twice.

That evening, he locked himself in the bathroom. He poured the sink full of hot water and lathered the soap. It felt good washing: he relaxed. It was like having an itch that needed to be scratched. When he washed his hands, he felt good: better, relaxed.

'Are you in the bathroom again?' Mum shouted. 'You spend your life in there these days!' It was true these past few weeks had been a nightmare. Forever feeling like he had unclean hands. Feeling a sense of relief when he washed them. His hands were becoming red and sore. The skin was broken and had even begun to weep in places. Scott kept his hands in his pockets and tried to eat alone in his room. But, Mum soon spotted the soreness.

'Whatever's happening with your hands?' she said. She booked an appointment with Dr Davies.

'Hmm,' he said. 'I don't know if you are allergic to something – maybe it's something you've touched. Step outside Scott, and take a seat in the surgery while I have a quick chat with Mum.'

After what seemed like an age, Mum came out. She looked worried. When they got home, Mum and Dad sat him down.

'Scott,' they said. 'The doctor thinks there might be a simple explanation for the soreness of your hands. You are washing them too much. Let's try to wash them less. You really only need to wash them after going to the toilet and before meal times. Are you worried about anything?'

'Yes,' he blurted out, 'the SATs.'

'Just do your best,' they said, 'that's all you can do.'

Wash his hands less. That would be hard; they were dirty and needed to be cleaned. Scott still felt he simply had to wash them. He would try to cut down. He didn't like having sore hands. But, it wouldn't be easy.

The next day, Scott needed to pee at school. Mr Smith said he could go the bathroom but Scott hesitated outside. He didn't want to go in. The toilets always seemed filthy in school.

Then, he would have to wash his hands. No, he would wait till he got home. Scott was busting by the time he got indoors. He stood over the toilet. It was such a relief. He washed his hands afterwards.

Gradually, Scott trained himself to wait until he got home to use the bathroom.

The work in class was tough. He tried to listen hard but some of the ideas that Mr Smith talked about were too difficult. One day, he asked to wash his hands in the sink.

'Why are they dirty?' asked Mr Smith, sounding surprised.

'I've got ink on them,' he lied. He felt better when washing his hands. Mr Smith asked to see Mum at the end of the day. She wouldn't tell Scott what it was about. 'Just things,' she said. 'Things. Nothing to worry about.' But Scott was worried. The SATs were getting closer.

The other kids had started to notice his hands. He told them he had eczema. Another lie. Scott felt worried most of the time, anxious, unable to settle – unable to concentrate.

Then it happened. He recognised the feeling during maths. He needed to poo. But he couldn't, not here, not at school, not in those toilets.

He asked to go to the bathroom.

He shut himself in the cubicle. He couldn't bring himself to sit on the toilet seat. It was unclean. He dropped his pants and pooped where he stood. He missed the toilet pan. He panicked afterwards.

In the afternoon, all the boys were called into the Hall. 'Someone,' said Mr Tubbs, 'has been quite disgusting in the toilets. The cleaners will refuse to clean it I'm sure. How could anyone have done such a thing?' He expected the culprit to own up or all the boys would miss afternoon break.

All the boys missed afternoon break. Scott felt ashamed. He asked to wash his hands. He felt nervous, panicky.

At the end of the day Mr Smith asked to see

Mum. They met in Mr Morgan's office. They were some time.

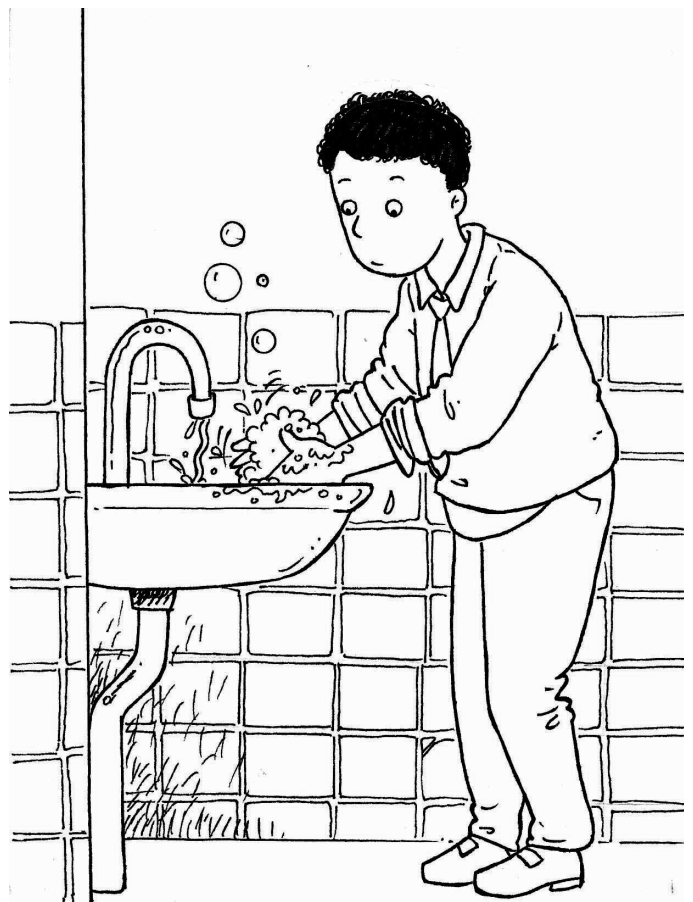
Scott and Mum walked home without talking. Scott didn't want to know what they had spoken about. Mum looked worried and wanted to speak to Dad on her own as soon as he got in.

The next week, Mum said they were going to the other side of town to see a doctor who wanted to talk to him. 'What about?' demanded Scott. 'Wait till we get there,' she replied.

The doctor's surgery was white. There were people sitting outside waiting. Scott waited. His hands felt like they needed a wash. He wanted to clean them. He wanted to pee. He would wait.

'Scott Tompkins,' the receptionist said. 'Mr Stevens will see you now, Mrs Tompkins,' she said.

'Hello Scott,' said Mr Stevens as they entered his room. He seemed nice. He was trying to



make Scott relax, he could tell. Scott liked him. He was friendlier than Doctor Davies. Less stern.

'So when did it start Scott?'

Scott said nothing.

'Come on,' he said, 'you can tell me.'

'When did what start?' he replied.

'This feeling that your hands were dirty. The need to wash them.'

Scott said nothing.

'Show me your hands, Scott.'

Scott held them out.

They were red raw – he hadn't noticed just how bad they had become.

'It started after Oliver's party,' he mumbled into his chest and began to cry, slowly at first, then uncontrollable sobs that shook his whole body. Mum put her arm on his shoulder.

'Tell me about only being able to use the toilet at home.'

Mr Stevens seemed to know everything. Scott was embarrassed. Ashamed.

But later, much later, he felt better for having talked to Mr Stevens.

Scott saw the doctor again the following week. Mum had been brilliant. She said he wasn't to worry, everything would be all right.

'Scott,' said the doctor, 'you aren't well – like someone might have a broken leg, you are having problems with your brain – it's not working quite as well as it should. You have something called OCD,' he said. 'We don't need to worry what the letters stand for – you can find out when you are older. It sometimes comes on when someone is worried about something. You've been worried about your

SATs, Mum tells me. It's your brain's way of coping. It has given you something else to think about – something you can control.'

'Something,' said Mr Stevens, 'is telling you that you need to wash your hands when you don't. I want us to try something.' Like a conjuror, the doctor took out a bucket of a mud like mixture. 'I want you to put your hands inside,' he said. Scott felt sick. He couldn't.

'Go on,' encouraged the doctor. Slowly, Scott put his hands in the mixture. 'Now let's hold them there for a minute,' Mr Stevens urged.

Scott managed fourteen seconds. (The doctor told him afterwards.)

The next session, Scott held his hands in the mud for three minutes.

By the end of the month, he could do it for five.

In the weeks and months to come, Scott slowly got better. He needed to wash his hands less. When he felt the urge, he found something else to do – he had to take his mind off it, said Mr Stevens.

Someone came into the school each Thursday to talk to him. She was nice. She helped him to say how he was feeling. He was grateful.

One Wednesday in the classroom, after his SATs, Scott needed to use the toilets. He went out. He peed and washed his hands, just the once. He felt an enormous sense of pride as he walked back into 6H.

'Okay?' called out Mr Smith, with a smile on his face.

'Okay?' queried Danny. 'Why, what's wrong with you?'

'You'd never guess,' said Scott. 'But I'm getting better.'