

September 2025



Dear Friends,

My only daughter Hester was unexpectedly born at 34 weeks. I was 42, and we were shocked when she was diagnosed with Down Syndrome and her first year was a rollercoaster. She spent a month in a specialist baby unit and had open heart surgery at 6 months.

She was delayed in reaching her milestones and didn't walk until she was 4. She hated loud noises, bright lights and crowds. When she was 2½ she received an autism diagnosis, and an ADHD diagnosis when she was 7. Her behaviour became more and more challenging.

Hester went to mainstream primary school until the pandemic, but after everyone returned to school, she struggled to cope in a full class and would stay in a side room with a teaching assistant.

We moved her to a special school with much smaller classes, where she's flourished. But her anxiety means extracurricular activities are virtually impossible. As a lively and sociable girl, she's missing out on doing the things she loves, like swimming and school trips.

We never go out as a family because of her anxiety, which is really isolating. At home, life is pretty gruelling. Every step of every day involves negotiation.

Hester needs constant supervision to be safe, and as an only child, her dad and I are her playmates.

This is why Norwood's Unity short breaks have been amazing for us on Sundays and in school holidays. My partner and I don't get to relax much in our daily lives, but the hours Hester spends at Unity are such precious time, when we can breathe easy, knowing she's being so well looked after. The support workers are fantastic and she trusts them. They are so patient and understanding with Hester and work with her to make sure she does the activities she loves. A lot of people find Hester's behaviour really challenging, but there is a real lack of judgement at Unity. They understand that it isn't that Hester won't do something, but that, for whatever reason, she can't.

The manager, together with Norwood's autism specialist, even went to visit Hester at school. They spoke with her class teacher and developed tailored communication and behavioural strategies to support her more holistically.

It's been eye-opening to discover how few resources are available for families of children with learning disabilities, like holiday clubs and after-school childcare. That's why Unity is so important – outside of school, it is the only environment where we can safely leave her.

Please donate whatever you can this Rosh Hashanah to ensure that more families like mine can benefit from Norwood's support for families of children with neurodevelopmental disabilities. Thank you.

Lucy