

For a solitary boy diagnosed with Asperger's

Syndrome, a new kind of therapy has transformed him

Ethan's closed life unlocked by music

■ SANDRA DICK

WITH its astonishing detail of wood, metal and glass, wheels and chains and staring carved figures, the obelisk Millennium Clock at the Royal Museum fascinated little Ethan Brooks.

The five-year-old had arrived for a day out with his grandfather, and the pair had planned to take a wander around the many rooms in the museum looking at exotic collections of animals and insects, and playing in the hands-on science zone.

But two hours later Ethan was still staring at the timepiece, determined to memorise its quirky gargoyles, digesting the intricate movement and waiting for the hands to reach the magical hour mark.

"Two whole hours we sat waiting for it to strike, he wouldn't move, he was fascinated," remembers Ethan's grandfather, John Brooks.

"I took him home, and the first thing he did was draw it in such incredible detail so that most of the bits were there, the pendulum, the figures."

But if it isn't just the Millennium Clock, or any clock for that matter, that captures Ethan's attention, it's calendars, maps and even the Edinburgh A-Z.

It's not quite what the typical little boy might want to immerse himself in, but then Ethan Brooks, it would turn out, is no ordinary little boy.

Today he sits at a school desk surrounded by mounds of brightly coloured Lego bricks and carefully presses another piece into place. "They're his latest obsession,"

HAPPY: Ethan's progress delights mum Wendy



explains his mum, Wendy, 38, smiling with pride as Ethan reaches for a hastily-made windmill to plant on top of his latest creation.

He doesn't even mind when three schoolfriends pile in for a closer look at what he's doing. Grinning, he raises the windmill up to show it off and gently cradles it into the next room.

It's a small act – one that most parents wouldn't pay a second's thought to. But for Wendy, just watching her only son interact with his schoolfriends, confidently and calmly, is something she once wondered if she'd ever see.

Ethan couldn't be more different from the quiet little boy who could once only communicate by pointing and grunting half-formed words, and was so lost in his own world that he didn't have any friends.

Now, six years old and finally diagnosed as having Asperger's Syndrome, Ethan has emerged from his private world of clocks

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and calendars – a feat that was achieved with the help of liling classical music.

A large set of headphones and a CD player rest on the school desk close to where the Lego set lay, and the music has been carefully selected for its structure, sound patterns and frequency.

The mix of Mozart, Haydn and Vivaldi stimulate key areas of the brain in a process which could transform the lives of children like Ethan.

He is among the first to go through The Listening Program at Dalkeith's Mayfield Primary School, a groundbreaking therapy described as a "workout for the brain", that is aimed at targeting the auditory processing problems often experienced by sufferers of Asperger's and autism.

Incredibly, however, the therapy could also be used to help improve many other ordinary youngsters' concentration levels – and even be a solution to Scotland's poor record of classroom behaviour.

And after just one block of sessions, the sounds of classical composers have helped transform the lives of both Ethan and his mum.

"He was nearly three-and-a-half before he



IN TUNE: Certain pieces of classical music are used in therapy

could speak," remembers Wendy. "I'm a single parent and Ethan's my only child. I started to wonder if it was something I was doing wrong – was I speaking to him enough? Did I need to do something different?"

"I was with him 24 hours, every day, constantly talking to him, explaining everything and just hoping that he would pick up on what I was saying. It was exhausting."

Ethan had also begun to display other unusual behaviour for his age. "I'd take him to soft play unless I went with him," Wendy recalls.

"He was clingy – he'd go to a birthday party and refuse to move from my knee. And if there was a change to his normal routine, say we went to the shops, he'd get very stressed and his behaviour would be very unpredictable."

Those times were the hardest, when Wendy would find herself apologising to strangers for Ethan's wild outbursts, grabbing and occasional biting.

By chance, Wendy worked voluntarily for various parent support groups, helping families deal with the impact of conditions like autism and Asperger's Syndrome. She began to recognise familiar patterns in her son's behaviour.

She remembers feeling a wave of relief when he was eventually diagnosed with receptive language disorder – a condition which means he has difficulty absorbing information and pro-

cessing it, common to all children suffering from forms of autism.

Then, just a few months ago, medics finally confirmed Asperger's Syndrome, a condition closely related to autism but bringing with it a combination of extra elements – including an almost obsessive interest in either collecting or memorising certain things.

While Wendy slowly came to terms with her son's diagnosis, Suzie Smith, a special needs teacher at Mayfield Primary School, had already stumbled across a new sound-based technique.

It had resulted in a dramatic improvement in the condition of children in the US with communication problems linked to conditions like autism, Asperger's and learning difficulties.

The dedicated teacher wanted to see if the technique could help the children she taught. And so the Listening Program was launched at Mayfield Primary over a year ago – with Ethan among the first Primary One learning support pupils to take part.

The groundbreaking therapy consists of a series of 15-minute sessions of listening to specially-selected music, chosen for its ability to stimulate the brain.

"The music has been modified to challenge the pathways between the ear and the brain – it actually changes the brain," explains Suzie, one of only three people in Scotland trained to use the therapy.

"When the music starts, it's like



PLAY MATES: Ethan finds it easier to interact with other children since his new therapy started. It is something he found very difficult to do before. Pictures: JULIE BULL

any piece of, say, Mozart. Then the music changes. It moves from one ear to another, back and forward, across the head.

"There are lots of sounds which target different zones in the brain, ones to do with balance, rhythm, creativity."

She says that the results are almost immediate. "The first thing we notice is that levels of concentration improve very quickly – something that has a very big impact on children.

"With Ethan, he was quite shy and withdrawn. The therapy helped him deal with that, and feel more comfortable.

"He is now doing really well

within the mainstream curriculum – so well that he's been able to attend his local primary school and only come here for a short time each week."

The therapy at Mayfield – the only school in Scotland to provide The Listening Program for pupils – has been so successful there are now plans to broaden provision throughout Midlothian's schools.

"Levels of concentration in children is a huge issue across education in Scotland," explains Ros Hunter, education officer pupil support services at Midlothian Council.

"We have already found it beneficial for children who are in

mainstream education but who have some learning issues, not as acute as some, but who are benefiting from improving their concentration levels."

While Asperger's Syndrome will always affect Ethan's life, hopes are high that the Listening Program will help him develop key skills to see him through his future

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and will help him overcome insecurities which might otherwise have kept him in a private world.

"Most people would look at Ethan and think he was fine," explains Wendy, as Ethan gathers up some more Lego and carefully constructs another layer. "But he needs his routines and his rotas. He has calendars in every room in the house and he knows exactly what we're supposed to be doing on what day. There's even a calendar in the bathroom.

"He watches television, but it's not what typical six year old watches – he watches The Simpsons and can repeat whole episodes word for word – and he

loves things like maps and weather charts. And his favourite book is still the A-Z.

"Ethan sees things very much in black and white – he wouldn't understand if you told him a joke."

And as she watches her son gather his schoolfriends around to show off his Lego creation, she can't help but smile.

■ The Listening Program therapy is run by Suzie Smith at Mayfield Primary School. She also offers private therapy through Sound Learning Systems, Learmonth Terrace, Edinburgh. Visit www.soundlearningsystems.co.uk or call 0131 343 1813