

Aukids®

Issue 31
Spring 2016

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Positive Parenting for Children with Autism Spectrum Conditions



Private Investigations

Our experts tackle a
touchy topic



Overcoming Anxiety

Author Jed Baker on
fighting back fear



Reclaim The Weekend!

Homework tips for
patient parents...



PLUS

WIN a new Mr Tumble
sensory toy, a copy of
Neurotribes and more!

Letter from the Editors

Debby
Tori



Celebrate with us this spring!

Here at AuKids HQ, great things are happening. We're pleased as punch to have been shortlisted under the magazine category for the Prolific North Awards 2016, which celebrate the best media creativity in the North West. This is fantastic recognition for our little social enterprise.

It's not only us celebrating, either. Regular columnist Luke Beardon is also in high spirits after scooping an NAS award for his professional contribution to the world of autism - see opposite page.

And there's more!

John Lewis partner Jane Mellor, who spearheaded an initiative at her Cheadle branch for an autism friendly kids' shoe-fitting service, has won the company's Roof Raiser Award. This gives the project, which Debby and Tori supported with autism training for Jane's department, a giant nationwide boost. Watch this space...we hope for an imminent roll-out of this scheme.

So, we're in a very good mood this spring and to cap it all, it's World Autism Awareness Month. To celebrate, you can claim a free issue of AuKids if you sign up a friend to the magazine (see opposite). Plus, if your friend uses the promo code APR25AUK before May 31st 2016, they get a 25% discount! Just go to www.aukids.co.uk to subscribe.

Make sure you get the best out of your subscription - don't forget it entitles you to download all 30 past issues for free, using our online archive. Forgotten your username and password to unlock the archive? Get in touch using admin@aukids.co.uk

Finally, AuKids belongs to you and we love your feedback. Share it at www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/BFMBC2T.

Tori & Debby

P.S. A big thank you to Dan Salmons, Sherann Hillman, Gareth Child, Gemma Lynch and Shane O'Neill for your recent advice and support. As a social enterprise, AuKids needs friends and it certainly has some good ones!

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You need



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Please note this offer only applies to new subscriptions from April 2016.

COMPETITION WINNERS FROM ISSUE 30:

- Talk with Teddies - Rebecca Bennett, Oxtan.
- Sisterhood of the Spectrum - Jill Fitzpatrick, Liverpool and Kate Entwistle, Urmston.
- I Am Utterly Unique - Judith Woolven, Lancaster.



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Tim's Triumph Gets Cheers (and Tears!)

The piece we wrote on Tim Tuff's triumphant visit to his primary school drew many comments. Katherine Gibbinson wrote to say: 'I was really moved by Tim's story. I think that it's wonderful that he is the last person to touch the magazines. Tell him he's right, it does give us all a connection.'

'His story is so similar to mine. I have never had a diagnosis but I know that I have something. All three of my children have autism. They are wonderful and I tell them every day. I also had a teacher tell

me how useless I was and how I was not clever like my brother. She would shout at me constantly and I still hate being shouted at. I got two A-stars, 3B and 4C grades at GCSEs - so not useless like she said. I am just thankful that things are now different for our children. My daughter's school are so good with her'.

Sara Basma had this to say: 'I have just read your piece about Tim in the latest edition and had to write to say how wonderful it was to read. Thanks to Tim's holidays in Devon we have had the pleasure of meeting him and consider him a friend.'

'After reading the piece about Tim's school years I just wanted to say that I hope he is proud of himself. He really is amazing to overcome such a tough beginning and is an inspiration to us all. I have read the piece to both of my children and it helped to open up a conversation about having more confidence at school and not worrying about who you are. Thank you Tim and thank you Aukids, both my children, Coşkun and Orçun, are both fans of your magazine'.



Coşkun and Orçun with their fave magazine!

AuKids Panellist Scoops NAS Award



STAND OUT SUCCESS: Luke Beardon with the Individual Education Professional award at the NAS event, standing with from left to right: Janey Godley (comedian), Jean Wilson (head of Axois), and Janet Corcoran (NAS trustee). Janey and Janet hosted the awards.

Congratulations to our regular panellist Luke Beardon! He was presented with the **Axois Award for Achievement by an Individual Education Professional** at this year's Autism Professionals Awards, hosted by the National Autistic Society last month.

The Autism Professionals Awards have been created to recognise and reward services and professionals who are leading the way in innovative autism practice and making a real difference to the lives of people on the autism spectrum in the UK.

Luke, a lecturer in Autism Studies at Sheffield Hallam University, told AuKids: "The concept that all people with autism are disordered, impaired, or somehow 'lesser' is one that needs to be challenged."

"I feel honoured to be in a position whereby I am able to share what I have learned to a wider community in the hope that it may help in some way. Being given the opportunity to write in Aukids magazine is one example of just how lucky I am - without people like Tori and Debby it would be very difficult to have such a platform to share experiences".

Celebrity SPOTLIGHT



HAPPY COUPLE: Gavin with his 'betrotthed' Abby

Jennifer Cook O'Toole is the celebrated author of **Asperkids**, the **Asperkids (Secret) Book of Social Rules**, **The Asperkid's Launch Pad**, **The Asperkid's Game Plan**, **The Asperkid's Not-Your-Average-Coloring-Book** (she is American, she is allowed to spell 'color' like that) and **Sisterhood of the Spectrum**, all published by Jessica Kingsley Publishers. All six titles are Amazon best-sellers. She has won endless awards and been named one of the 50 most influential women in North Carolina - which is home to 9.5 million people.

This is what Jennifer has to say about Gavin:

'Gavin is six, (nearly 7), the third of my original three 'Asperkids' and the only girl (finally allowing Mommy to stop answering the "Is that your natural colour?" question)

'He is a chatterbox who loves Lego', anything involving swords or Light Sabers, science (everything from anatomy to rocks and minerals) and origami.

'So, Gavin's thinking that when he grows up, being a Ninja doctor who loves Minecraft seems like a good plan. He has been engaged to the girl next door since pre-birth (he and Abby are three days apart) and alternates between being an absolute love bug and doing whatever he can to get under his big brother and sister's skin.

'Gavin never (ever) stops asking questions, plays soccer and is on his fourth level belt in karate.

'Although he was only three at the time, Gavin is also responsible for the opening quote at the beginning of **The Asperkid's Launch Pad**, which says:

Send your celebrity details to editors@aukids.co.uk

HOME IS
THE BEST PLACE
BECAUSE IT'S WHERE
MY FAMILY IS,
AND I LOVE MY FAMILY.
AND SPIDER-MAN. YEAH.
MOSTLY SPIDER-MAN.

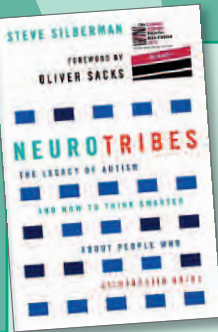
ROYAL RECEPTION FOR OLGA



From right to left: HRH Princess Marie of Denmark, Prof Fred Volkmar and Olga Bogdashina

Our columnist and international speaker Olga Bogdashina presented at the World Autism Conference in Denmark back in January. She was about to relax at the hotel before the opening, when she received an invite to a select gathering hosted by HRH Princess Marie of Denmark, who was opening the event. Princess Marie (seen here in the foreground) has a nephew with autism.

Reviews & Prizes



BOOK

Neurotribes: The Legacy of Autism and How to Think Smarter About People Who Think Differently

By Steve Silberman
Published by Allen & Unwin
Available from the publisher for £16.99
ISBN 9781760113643

Although Neurotribes is chunky enough to be used as a doorstop, don't let it put you off. Steve Silberman's down-to-earth writing style is engaging and enjoyable, making Neurotribes accessible for parents and professionals as well as to those with little previous knowledge of autism.

Silberman is an investigative reporter whose interest in autism was sparked 15 years ago after meeting a number of families in Silicon Valley who had children with autism. He published an article titled 'The Geek Syndrome' which gained widespread interest and left Silberman with a full inbox.

Fueled by this interest as well as the view that most books about autism are by professionals, parents or individuals with autism, Silberman put his journalistic talents into writing Neurotribes, now a winner of the Samuel Johnson Prize for non-fiction.

Neurotribes describes the history of autism dating back to the time where it was known as 'childhood psychosis', through to the first descriptions of autism by Kanner and Asperger in the early 1940s right up until the current day where he sheds light on the expanding 'neurodiversity' movement. He meets individuals on the spectrum, their families and professionals as well as delving into historical records.

In doing so he attempts to provide answers to much asked questions, such as why the number of autism diagnoses has climbed in recent years. The author writes in a sensitive and compassionate way throughout. Be warned, there are some tear-jerking moments as Silberman uncovers some ugly mistreatments in autism's history, but overall the message is positive. Silberman celebrates what he calls 'Autistic Intelligence', highlighting the huge losses that society would suffer without the diversity in thinking that individuals with autism grace us with.

A mother that Silberman meets along the way perfectly sums up the tone of the book when describing looking at her son ... 'I think, he's not broken he's just neurologically outnumbered'.

Hanna Venton-Platz,
AuKids' reader panel



BOOK

I Am AspienGirl

By Tania Marshall
Published by
www.aspiengirl.com
£14.05
ISBN 9780992360900

I am a hardened soul, but this best-selling book of photographs and quotes compiled by Tania Marshall did make me feel a little gooey. Spectrumite girls (or AspienGirls® as Tania dubs them) are so different to their male counterparts. Parents can feel they've got a one-off. Girls can feel that there's nowhere they belong. That's why this book is so important.

Often seeming wise beyond their years – sometimes appearing TOO empathic rather than not at all – non-conformist, creative, fiercely independent and well, individual, you could be forgiven for thinking that these precious 'AspienGirls' have been blessed with an overwhelming number of gifts. So often, though, their talents are overrun by social challenges. Aspie girls stand or fall by their ability to accept their own differences. The sense of belonging that this book creates could be just what they need.

Each page contains quotes from an AspienGirl alongside one from their parent or teacher, with a gorgeous full colour photographic illustration. Easily read in

one sitting, this book celebrates diversity on the spectrum whilst highlighting some of the key areas that girls have in common. There are no straight answers - simply shared experiences, both good and bad.

Designed to be read by AspienGirls themselves (there's a section at the back for them to fill in which is quite cool) as well as their parents, this really is a coffee table paperback to savour. Its useful section at the back lists common differences between boys and girls on the spectrum in illuminating detail.

There are a number of forthcoming books in the same series – including Aspien Powers and I Am Aspien Woman. Author and psychologist Tania Marshall is also working on The AspienGirl and AspienWoman Mentor Project and Interview Series. She is seeking role models and mentors willing to showcase their successes for it and can be contacted at tania@aspiengirl.com

Debby Elley,
AuKids co-editor

Win

a copy of I Am AspienGirl. Simply write to competitions@aukids.co.uk with your name and address and 'AspienGirl' in the subject header by the closing date of May 31st 2016. Two lucky winners will be selected at random to win a copy.

Good luck!



BOOK

How to Parent Your Anxious Toddler

By Natasha Daniels
Published by Jessica Kingsley Publishers
£11.99
ISBN 9781849057387

This book is written by a well qualified and experienced American Child Therapist. Natasha Daniels is also a mum of three and creator of Anxioustoddlers.com, a website designed to offer 'support, guidance and laughs' to parents.

The book, aimed at parents, carers and professionals, intends to help gain an understanding of a range of anxious behaviours seen in toddlers and to support the tots in developing methods to overcome their anxiety.

It's a very accessible read, divided into chapters tackling common difficulties. Each chapter begins with a parent scenario, followed by a depiction of how the child perceives the same scenario. I found this really enlightening; I often advise parents to try to see things from the child's point of view, but this gave a real insight, based on the author's

extensive experience, advocating we support, challenge and understand children's behaviour, whilst not pushing them beyond their limits.

The rest of each chapter suggests approaches to modify and resolve the behaviour, some of which depend on the child having a reasonable level of spoken language and understanding. Although some of what I read was familiar, much was new and perceptive. However, I would struggle to advocate some of the scripts and ideas for parents of children with autism.

This is the issue here - this is not a book aimed specifically at the autism sector. In her conclusion, Natasha describes children as 'resilient and adaptable'; adaptable is not a word I would necessarily associate with children with autism!

Nonetheless it's a very instructive and enjoyable read and I have been happily recommending it, with the proviso that - as with all attempts to address behaviour - small steps are the way forward. Timing is crucial (for parents as much as for children) and there is a need to be aware of what your child is capable of developmentally.

Elizabeth Cox,
Early Years SEN Teacher,
Aukids' reader panel

WIN!

We have two copies of Neurotribes to give away. Simply answer this question. What prize for non-fiction did Neurotribes win? Send your answer to competitions@aukids.co.uk no later than May 31st 2016 with Neurotribes in the subject header. Winners will be drawn at random after the closing date. **Good luck!**



GRAPHIC NOVEL
The Blue Bottle Mystery - An Asperger Adventure (Hardcover)

By Kathy Hoopmann,
Illustrated by Rachael Smith
Published by Jessica Kingsley Publishers
£12.99 • ISBN 9781849056502

This graphic novel has been cleverly adapted from Kathy Hoopmann's best selling Blue Bottle Mystery. The comic strip format is one that its target audience – youngsters on the spectrum – will especially enjoy and it includes many small scenarios that its readers will relate to. My son read it and loved it. Here's what he wrote...

This book is an adventure explaining Asperger Syndrome. There are ten

chapters, however they are all made into comic strip kinda pages, so you could say it's short. I think it's probably aimed at kids aged 7+.

The story is about a boy called Ben and his friend, Andy. Everything was going wrong for Ben. His teacher was angry all the time, mostly at him. He was bullied and no one understood him, not even his own father. Then everything changes the day Ben and Andy discovered an old blue bottle in the school yard. In the midst of it all, Ben was diagnosed with Asperger Syndrome.

He, his family and Andy begin a journey of discovery, understanding and acceptance.

This book is fun! I learnt a bit more about Asperger Syndrome.

Would I recommend it to other kids? I sure would. I think they would understand it as well as me.

Bobby Elley, 12,
AuKids readers' panel



BOOK
The Loving Push

By Debra Moore and Temple Grandin
Published by Future Horizons
£15.95
ISBN 9781941765203

Interesting, this. Not a book on looking after kids, nor a book for adults with autism, but a (rare) guide on tackling the transition to adulthood effectively. Non-autistic teens are different to autistic ones. They get into new interests and explore new territory – striving for independence by going out late at night, learning to drive and generally being a pain in the backside. Whilst an autistic teen may not keep you up at night worrying about drugs and alcohol, there's a different concern ahead; how to foster

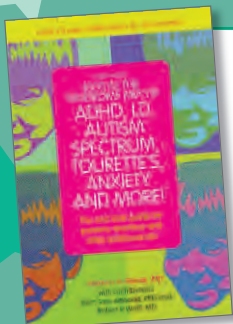
independence in someone who's content to stay at home, let stuff be done for them and play video games all day. "Do these authors actually *know* Bobby?" I mused to myself.

This is what The Loving Push is all about. Parenting never stops, it just changes shape. So if your child is 9-12 and teenage years are imminent, I would say this is essential reading.

Notions of what create independence can be terribly vague, but the authors pin it down into practical actions. The advice is illuminated with detailed case studies from a varied selection of autistic adults who have succeeded in finding their own way, not always without hitches.

An invaluable guide to help nurture those talents whilst tackling head on the difficulties that lie ahead in the uneven road to a promising future.

Debby Elley,
AuKids co-editor



BOOK
Kids in the Syndrome Mix of ADHD, LD, Autism Spectrum, Tourette's, Anxiety, and More!

By Martin L Kutscher, MD
Published by Jessica Kingsley Publishers
£13.99 • ISBN 9781849059671

This is the 2nd edition of an 'all-in-one guide' to a wide range of often co-existing special educational needs and disabilities.

Written in an easy and accessible style, the author presents information on causes, symptoms, interactions with other conditions and treatments. Marketed as a 'companion for parents, teachers and professionals', it is just

that – not a ground-breaking academic text or detailed, in-depth analysis of specific disabilities, but a handy guide for the lay-person or busy parent.

The author transforms some of the more complex information and re-packages it into a reader-friendly format for parents/carers or busy professional. This is however not without its difficulties. Some of the language could be seen as problematic; the phrase 'magnitude of problems' for example, established a deficit discourse from the start of the book. This should be considered against the more positive language and terminology used in the US, from which the author is based.

One chapter specifically on autism written by Tony Attwood is a strong summary for parents/carers and professionals. I particularly like the resounding "yes" with regard to

WIN SOMETHING VERY SPECIAL!



Golden Bear (www.goldenbear toys.com) has designed and developed a range of fantastic toys based on the much-loved Mr Tumble character from the CBeebies programme, Something Special. The range is designed to encourage sensory-centred learning around touch, sound and light. Textured Mr Tumble with Fun Sounds is super-soft and cuddly and when you squeeze his hand he will play his signature phrases, fun sounds and song. He carries his iconic spotty bag which opens to reveal a hidden mirror. The multiple textured fabrics will offer lots for little ones to discover, too. The stars on Mr Tumble's waistcoat magically glow, providing visual stimulation. Approx. size 36cm.

TWO lucky readers can win a Textured Mr Tumble with Fun Sounds, worth RRP £29.99 each.

All you have to do is find Mr Tumble hiding in this issue of AuKids. Send your answer, name and address to competitions@aukids.co.uk with 'Mr Tumble' in the subject header, by the closing date of May 31st 2016. Or you can post your answer to AuKids, PO Box 259, Cheadle, Cheshire SK8 9BE. Winners will be chosen at random after the closing date. Usual AuKids competition rules apply. Good luck!

Textured Mr Tumble with Fun Sounds is available now from Argos. For more information please visit www.argos.co.uk/static/Search/searchTerm/Textured+Mr+Tumble+.htm



'should you explain the diagnosis to your child?' However, the emphasis on DSM-5* criteria threatens to distance the reality of specific needs and medicalise thinking into an 'assessment and treatment' process.

Overall, this is a useful text and is what it suggests, 'an all-in-one guide' that is a good starting point for deeper thinking and further discussion.

*The DSM-5 is the most recent version of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, published by the American Psychiatric Association but used all over the world to diagnose autism.

Gareth D Morewood,
Director of Curriculum Support at
Priestnall School & Honorary Research
Fellow at the University of Manchester



“My son thinks his willy is the centre of the universe and proves it anywhere and everywhere. Any ideas on how to keep him appropriate? He is not even a teenager yet! Is this normal or down to his autism? He is not verbal but understands some signs and picture symbols.”



Heather MacKenzie

Speech and Language Pathologist and Founder of the SPARK* programme (Self Regulation Program of Awareness and Resilience in Kids)

The majority of children I've worked with are boys so I know this issue well. I've watched ordinary, garden-variety pre-schoolers in classrooms and found that many of the boys had their hands down their pants, hanging onto their willies like handles. They seemed to be calmed and centred by this. That seems to just be boys. As they mature, they find that their once-centring 'handle' has other pleasurable properties as well. What a bonus!

Now to learning about appropriate times and places... The number one issue is to ensure there's no body-shaming. That is, no child should be led to believe his body or any part of it is 'dirty' or shameful. This means that parents and caregivers must stay calm and deal with masturbation and self-exploration as just part of life and a pleasant one at that. Children just need to learn that masturbation is something that needs to be

done in their private place (typically, the bedroom).

I've been successful in putting a sign on the child's bedroom door that labels it a 'private place'. That becomes the go-to place for a few things, like whining, self-exploration, screaming, singing loudly, playing and replaying his favourite videos, etc. It works really well for the child to have a place where he can be himself and for the parent to calmly send him when needs be.

The next issue is to help him learn to go to his private place. I've had good success using the TEACCH concept of the 'power of the match'. You make 'private place' cards (picture of bedroom door, labelled 'private place', laminated and Velcroed). Have the same image and label on his bedroom door. Show him how, when he's given one of the 'private place' cards, he needs to take it to the matching picture on his bedroom door, place it on a Velcro tab on the door ('matching' the two images) and then go in and close the door.

You'll have to work with him to ensure he views going to his 'private place' as a positive thing, a place where he can be himself. This follows the notion that you 'get to go' to your private place versus you 'need to go'.

Once he learns to go to his private place when he's given the card, catch him as soon as he seems to be about to engage his willy. Calmly hand him a 'private place' card and help him find the matching picture on his bedroom door if necessary.



NAS Award for Achievement by an Individual Education Professional 2016

Luke Beardon

Luke is a senior lecturer in autism at The Autism Centre, Sheffield Hallam University, as well as a speaker and author.

First off - as a bloke, I can reveal that his views are not at all uncommon in the male population, so good on him! This doesn't necessarily solve any problems, but at least it puts things into perspective. Lots of prepubescent lads will fiddle in the nether regions - but most will have learnt from an early age when and where to do so.

Possibly a good way of putting it is this: he *is* behaving perfectly normally, but in an autistic way! In other words, the 'behaviour' is not unusual, but the way in which it might be displayed is.

Secondly - and I really think this is so important - we have to ensure that any dealings with the onset of sexuality (be it touching, dreaming, chatting - whatever) are not dealt with in a negative way. Comments such as 'that's not very nice' are not only clearly untrue (why would he be doing it if it's not nice?) but also may couple a child's first exploration into sexuality with negative feelings - not beneficial in the long term.

Thirdly, as is so often the case, if you can get a communication

system in place *before* the need to apply it, so much the better. Take a pictorial system, for example. If a child has already learned the meaning of a 'stop' and 'go' set of pictures, those images can be applied equally in any situation.

So, when the willy makes an appearance at Sunday lunch, a 'stop' card can be produced, followed by taking him to a private place where the 'go' card can be used. The card system can be learned relatively easily; wait until a favourite activity is about to start and then show the 'go' or 'start' card.

Similarly, use the 'stop' or 'finished' card at the end of activities (e.g. time to stop brushing teeth). Used often enough, it's likely that the child will start to associate the cards with start/stop, at which point they can be used in other circumstances.

I always think it's useful to encourage the use of appropriate environments in which exploration can occur - such as the bedroom. Having a portable 'private' symbol can be useful too - so 'private time' can be accessed when away from the bedroom, with the parent or guardian the one to take responsibility for the use of the symbol or picture.

Lastly, it might be useful to think about things from his point of view. Possibly for the first time in his life, he has discovered something eminently pleasurable, totally in his control, and accessible 24/7 - what a bargain! Is it any wonder that it becomes the centre of the universe?

The trick is not to disillusion him of this train of thought, but to manage it so there are no negative connotations.



Kate E. Reynolds

Kate worked for seven years as a Clinical Nurse Specialist and Senior Counsellor in the field of sexual health. She has a son with autism and is the author of *Sexuality and Severe Autism* and the Tom and Ellie series of books about puberty. These books were written especially for children on the autism spectrum, illustrated by Jonathon Powell and published by Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

This is a common issue for families involving girls as well as boys masturbating in inappropriate places. Touching their own genitals is absolutely normal for prepubescent children and needs a low-key, positive and consistent response. The difficulty for children with autism is that they don't pick up social behaviours and messages the way that mainstream children do, so need clear explanations.

To help your son understand, it's important to establish a form of communication with him. The ideas provided by the other panellists are useful. You need to be explicit about what we mean by 'private' – being somewhere or doing something that other people cannot hear or see – and how it is different to 'public'. Take care when using a 'private' card that it doesn't look the same as signs on office doors – this can lead to children with autism thinking that private offices are places where they can masturbate.

You can emphasise the concepts of private and public in everyday life by repeating that you're in a public place when you're in the supermarket, for example. The private place for masturbation

should be your son's own bedroom, so when you are teaching him this, have a photograph of his room, not a general picture of a bedroom.

If your child needs help washing or getting dressed, you can reiterate that his penis, testicles and buttocks are private as you help him.

On the subject of language, it's important that children with autism know the medical terms for their genitals, even if you use words like 'willy' at home. If your son were to experience a sexual assault or sexual abuse, he needs to be able to explain clearly what happened.

It's important to set boundaries around privacy at home. For example, teach your son to knock on doors to others' bedrooms, then wait for a response. You can script this for your son, so he learns to enter only when he hears "Come in" or waits outside if he hears the words "Private" or "No." You can use a system of cards on others' bedroom doors, such as a red card for 'private' and a green card for 'come in.'

The key to this is that the household agrees to do the same for your son, so he understands that if he is having private time in his bedroom, no-one will burst in without waiting for his words or respecting the colour of the card on his bedroom door.

I imagine your son uses visual timetables to let him know what is going to happen throughout his school day. If you don't already, you can extend this to the home – timetable in some 'private time' for your son, allowing him plenty of time to self-explore without interruption in his bedroom.

I would also liaise with your son's school to see if he's masturbating at school and how they manage this. Working with school will help you to give consistent messages about masturbation. Timetabling a period of private time immediately he returns home may alleviate any self-exploration at school.

Above all, remember that this is a natural part of his maturing into a young man which you can support – and he can celebrate!

FURTHER INFORMATION

Things Tom Likes/Things Ellie Likes

Both by Kate Reynolds, published by Jessica Kingsley.

Part of a series of three autism-specific books written especially for boys (in the Tom series) and girls (in the Ellie series) entering puberty, Kate's short and invaluable book uses simple language and honest cartooning (by Jonathon Powell) to help children understand the times and places that are appropriate for masturbation.

*Subscribers – Use your username and password to read the full review of the Tom series of books in Issue 26 of AuKids.



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Do you have a question for Ask the Experts?
E-mail us at editors@aukids.co.uk

Cause For Alarm?

What to Do When Anxiety Gets Out of Hand

We are used to dealing with every day anxiety in our children with autism; it comes with the territory. But what happens when a particular anxiety starts to take over a child's life? When both the child and the family are held hostage to unrealistic fears, what can we do?



Jed Baker is the director of the Social Skills Training Project in the USA and his book *Overcoming Anxiety in Children and Teens* has some fantastic advice for parents and professionals.

Jed says: "The art of anxiety treatment is figuring out what to do to persuade someone to gradually face their fears. Studies have shown that if you can get anxious people to do this (a technique called gradual exposure), their anxiety will decrease and they will no longer be controlled by it."

All of the following steps are detailed in Jed's book and are appropriate for verbal children, but steps three and five can be used for those with less verbal communication too.

Jed's Steps:



Step 2

Learning about the alarm system

All of us have an alarm system to help us survive in the face of perceived danger. When a significant threat is detected, we are wired to react automatically with an intense emotional response to fight, flee, or freeze as if our lives depended on it. Author Daniel Goleman refers to these moments as a state of being 'hijacked by emotions'.

It is as if the emotion centre (the limbic system) has taken over the rest of the brain so that we don't have easy access to our reasoning ability. This

quick, non-thinking response certainly has survival value.

When walking down the street, if a car suddenly veers off the road in your direction, this is not a time to reflect. You must move quickly to a safer place. This is a TRUE ALARM.

Yet in a world where perceived threats may not always be life threatening, the fight, flight, or freeze response can lead to FALSE ALARMS, causing us to react when no actual danger is present.

Some of us have a more sensitive alarm system that can set off many FALSE ALARMS.

Learning about this alarm system can help children to understand why they react as they do.



Step 1

Motivating someone to address anxiety

Therapy can be threatening. There is an unspoken message that something is *wrong* with you that needs to be fixed. For children who are verbal, I prefer to begin with what is *right* about them to help them see their value and feel optimistic about the future. From this position of strength we can talk about challenges that get in the way (like anxiety symptoms).

I start by explaining that everyone has both strengths and challenges. We begin by making a list of their strengths (at least 7) and a smaller list of challenges (3 and under). Strengths can include special knowledge, traits, and characteristics. Strengths are things that lead to successful careers and relationships. Challenges are things that can get in the way of reaching those goals.

Then I explain that we do not need to totally overcome challenges like anxiety; we just need to get to the point where they are no longer in our way.



Step 3

Identifying fears: creating a fear ladder

This step is a crucial part of therapy. In *Overcoming Anxiety in Children and Teens*, I cover some of the major anxiety disorders for children and teens including simple phobias, social phobia, separation anxiety, school phobia, panic disorder, generalised anxiety disorder, somatic symptom disorder and illness anxiety disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder and other common fears like perfectionism, fear of loud environments, and medical procedure phobias.

For each type of fear, the child is asked to make a list of situations from the least fearful to most fearful. Then the child can gradually face those fears. For example, a little boy who is afraid of arranging a get-together with a peer might break up the task into smaller steps, or rungs of the ladder.

The first step might be just to say "Hi" at lunch. The next time, he may find out which video games they both like.

Up another rung and he might be asking a peer for a phone number in case they want to talk about video games. The rung after that, he could be asking that other person to hang out to play video games. The top rung would be the actual get-together.

It's important to reward each new step on the ladder. There are two broad categories of rewards for facing fears: **intrinsic** rewards and **extrinsic** rewards.

Intrinsic rewards refers to the buzz you get from doing it - feeling pride and knowing that you are able to do so much more than you used to do. We can help children to see the payoff of being able to break out of their patterns of avoidance. We can help them feel proud of themselves for no longer letting anxiety control them.

Extrinsic rewards are things that we give from the outside, like letting your daughter play a video game or buying a new toy for your son as a reward for taking his first step towards facing a fear. For those who may not understand intrinsic payoffs, extrinsic rewards may be especially useful.



Step 4

Use Cognitive Behaviour Therapy to Combat Worries

The basic concept of Cognitive Therapy (CBT) for anxiety is to use logic and scientific reasoning to challenge those worrisome thoughts.

For children, we help to show them two main ways of looking at anxious thinking. Firstly, that they may well be overestimating the probability of negative events and secondly that they are overestimating the severity of those negative events.

I prefer to excuse kids from copious record keeping! Instead, we write a brief summary of ways to "Think Like a Scientist".

The essence of CBT is to behave like a scientist and collect evidence to determine the actual probability and/or severity of anticipated negative events.

For example, Ellie was a relatively typical nine year-old afraid of bees and wasps. She often missed out on outside play with others during the summer months because she was afraid of being stung. She had never been stung, but she had heard some people have allergies and could go into anaphylactic shock and maybe even die from a sting! Her parents had taken her to an allergist who confirmed that Ellie **was not** allergic to insect bites.

To help her combat her worrisome thoughts and begin to face the fear of going outside in summer months, we created the following summary:

"Think Like a Scientist"

Feared situation: Getting stung by a bee or wasp

Anxious thought:

Being outdoors in the summer makes it likely to be stung.

Realistic outcome:

Bees and wasps are not aggressive away from nests. Not likely to sting unless swatted, hit, or stepped on. If I avoid nests, wear shoes when walking in leaves, and do not swat, I am not likely to be stung. I can also cover up food or stay away from garbage cans where those insects gather.

Anxious thought:

Getting stung really hurts and maybe I could even die.

Realistic outcome:

It is not possible for me to die because I am not allergic. I can reduce the pain by immediately flicking or taking out the stinger to limit the venom and apply ice for the swelling. I have had injections before and stings are actually less painful.

By researching the actual scientific evidence of the dangers of bee and wasp stings, she was able to gradually face fears on a fear ladder, with rewards for facing each step. In Ellie's case the longer she stayed in the backyard (in five-minute increments), the greater the reward (a small amount of money and sweets). The rungs graduated from backyard to park, with the very top rungs being staying outside at the park for over 20 minutes and staying outside for at least 3 minutes longer when a bee or wasp was visible.



Step 5

Using biological and physical interventions to lower anxiety

Exercise, physical activity, and sensory soothing actions can all reduce anxiety. Studies show the positive effects of exercise on increasing confidence and reducing anxiety. Several studies show exercise to be at least as effective as antidepressant medications. It seems that aerobic exercise may have the largest effect, followed by weight training.

There are times, however, when it is not possible to be physically active. Repetitive sensory movements and special interests can serve to reduce anxiety in kids with autism and can be incorporated into the child's schedule to reduce stress.

Meditation and mindfulness techniques are powerful and don't depend on movement. Periods of time allocated to focusing the mind on the present moment are associated with a sense of well-being and reduced anxiety.



Putting It all Together

Anxiety itself is not always a problem, but when it disrupts your life with unnecessary worries, or causes you to avoid activities - then it becomes one. The purpose of calming strategies is to increase a sense of well-being and lower anxiety enough so that a child no longer avoids situations that aren't dangerous. Here are recommendations for using calming tools:

1 Active calming: I'd recommend that children who are anxious get regular exercise. This is cost-free, reduces anxiety and can increase attention, memory and learning.

2 Quiet calming: Encourage children to experiment with progressive muscle relaxation, deep breathing

3 Use CBT to challenge anxious thinking in verbal children. Learning to avoid overestimating the frequency and severity of negative events is crucial. You can create "Think Like a Scientist" cards for your child to use as a reminder.

4 Create a 'fear ladder' with your child to gradually overcome those fears. For young children (12 and under) or those less willing to face the feared situations on the ladder, use external rewards.

and mindfulness meditation to see which strategies are easier for them and which strategies reduce stress. They should become part of daily practice and are detailed in my book.

5 Consider medication only if these strategies and lifestyle changes don't reduce anxiety. Medications can be quite helpful, yet should not be a first choice since they carry the risk of side effects. Consult your paediatrician for further advice on this.

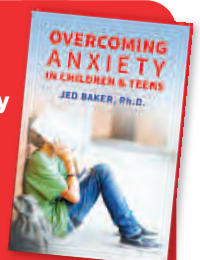
MORE INFORMATION

Overcoming Anxiety in Children and Teens

By Jed Baker

Published by Future Horizons

www.socialskillstrainingproject.com
www.jedbaker.com



OOPS I did it Again...



We all shout at our kids sometimes. But when you're wrong, do you ever admit it?

EVER had that feeling you've messed up? We've all been there. Just like our own children, sometimes we know exactly the right thing to do, but in the heat of the moment our anger takes over.

But have you ever admitted this to your child?

Being the adult can be tough. We know that autistic kids need structure and have a tendency to see things in black and white. Would admitting you were wrong confuse them – make them more anxious, even?

We are not talking about constantly doubting yourself aloud, giving mixed signals or saying one thing and meaning another. Those things DO lead to anxiety.



SORRY, HONEY: Well okay, she's overdoing it a bit, but you get the picture...

It's good parenting, though, to have the confidence to occasionally hold your hands up and say: 'You know what? I'm sorry, I could have handled that better'.

Just as your child can warn you when their feelings are getting too big, you can warn them too. They may not pick up on the non-verbal signals. Tell them you're getting angry.

Great reasons to admit mistakes:

The Winner Takes It All?

Autistic kids have a strong sense of justice. They will find it deeply unfair if you are refining their social skills on the one hand, while on the other hand refusing to admit your own mistakes.

In an ideal world, you wouldn't shout unless someone was in danger of hurting themselves or others. A firm tone works better.

This Is Real Life

Anger is natural. You get emotional just like everyone else. Sometimes (not always) your emotions get too big to handle. It can help an autistic child to know that they aren't the only one working on containing their emotions and that their thoughts and feelings have a real impact on other people.

Avoid the Stand Off

The alternative to admitting you're wrong is persevering with the idea that you are right. Backing yourself into a corner with an autistic child is not a good idea. You'll give up way before they do!

Forgive and Forget

It's nice for the child to be able to do the forgiving. Learning to forgive and let mistakes pass is very important.

Light Relief

There's nothing to break up an awkward moment like a bit of



SORRY, SON: That's okay dad, we all make wardrobe errors sometimes.

laughter. Say it: 'That was daft of me! That was stupid!' You don't have all the answers - revelation!

Show Them the Way

If you expect your child to apologise when they've done something wrong, what better example to set than to model this yourself?

Getting angry a lot of the time is a sign that you are overwhelmed and having difficulty coping. Seek extra help - see below.

Learning Opportunity

Explaining you were very angry and why helps a child to understand your viewpoint and take another's perspective. You can draw a simple comic strip conversation* about the incident afterwards and ask them what they thought you were thinking. You can also show them how other things that happened that day played a part. Only do this when everyone is calm! It's pretty nice for the child to be working on a comic strip conversation* when they aren't the subject of it!

Don't dwell on your own mistakes and encourage your child not to dwell on theirs.

Problem-solving the Grown Up Way

If you avoid conflict all of the time, children don't develop problem solving skills until they're with their peers, which isn't always ideal. Ask the question: 'What could we

both have done differently so that this didn't end up in a row?'

Rows Aren't Always Bad

Sometimes it takes the occasional row for your child to really appreciate the patient methods you use, such as taking turns to speak when tensions are high.

Eau No, It's Overflow!

If you imagine feelings as water and a person as an empty pail, sometimes when the pail is already three-quarters full of water, it doesn't take much for it to overflow. Explain this to help your little one understand that this is why you are sometimes more patient than others.



Extra Information

National Autistic Society
Helpline: 0808 800 4104,
Monday-Thursday 10am - 4pm, Friday 9am - 3pm.

MIND: www.mind.org.uk - Information and help online about anger management and where to go for advice and support.

* More about Social Stories™ and Comic Strip Conversations: www.autism.org.uk/about/strategies/social-stories-comic-strips/uses-benefits.aspx

Some excellent articles can be found at www.supernanny.co.uk including - How to stop anger affecting your child and How to handle anger positively with your kids.

BLOGDASHINA



A paper blog by autism expert Olga Bogdashina

Olga Bogdashina is an internationally renowned researcher and lecturer in autism and the author of books on sensory perception, the Theory of Mind, communication and spirituality in autism. Her autistic son Alyosha, 26, is the inspiration behind her career.

Over the years, the two of them have developed strategies to cope with the supermarket environment. Avoidance, she says, may be tempting, but in her own son's case, de-sensitisation helped...

Blog 5

Why Is Autism A Puzzle?

This metaphor of autism as a selection of jigsaw pieces has been chosen by parent and professional organisations to reflect one of the most visible traits in autism. Autistic children notice the tiniest details of places, objects, people - and often react to one 'piece' of the person or place instead of the whole situation.



I experienced this in the first few months of my son's life when I was feeding him. I used to wear the same red dressing gown and it was always the same ritual that allowed me to bond with my baby quietly and in peace. That was, until the day I changed my outfit. That day I wore blue.

What followed was one of the worst meltdowns I had ever seen with him. He was screaming so loudly that it wasn't just the neighbours in our block of flats I was worried about, but the ones on the other side of the street, too.

Luckily, instead of alerting the police, one of them decided to check on us. She asked me if everything was alright. She sure knew it wasn't, but reassured that I wasn't torturing my baby, she offered to help by taking Alyosha from me. Immediately, he stopped crying.

Deafened by sudden silence, I regained the ability to think, looked at the puzzled neighbour and literally saw the answer to the riddle: she was wearing a red dress!

My son did not see me as a whole, he

associated me with red. That day he was unable to recognise me because I was not wearing the same colour gown. This made me an imposter in his eyes. No wonder he was scared to death!

That was my first indication that Alyosha saw 'in bits' (fragmented vision) and could consciously process only certain aspects of his surroundings. When these were subject to change, he would feel frightened and disoriented. Troublesome behaviour would soon follow.

When he got older, his language made me realise his perception was indeed very different. I wasn't surprised to hear him reporting 'The cat's head has turned round.'

With this type of processing, Alyosha had difficulty in dealing with people, as they seemed to comprise both unconnected pieces and unpredictable movements. His strategy to cope with the problem was to avoid people and never look at them. It wasn't that he couldn't see an entire person, rather he was unable to process the meaning of an entire person - and would do this bit by bit instead. As a result, the mental image of a 'collection of bits' was meaningless and often frightening.

The worst were hands and arms. People tend to move or wave their hands while talking or pointing (especially teachers at school). Their hands seemed to be unconnected. He hated it when somebody pointed, as a disconnected hand appearing from nowhere in front of him could scare him. Alyosha's drawing of hands, here, show this.

Alyosha instinctively tried to calm himself during these times of anxiety by flapping his hands in front of his eyes. This helped him to ignore many 'offending' and confusing stimuli around him. His other strategy in times of sensory overload was to focus on one object - he would choose something recognizable to this particular place, event or situation. If this item had been unintentionally removed, it could lead to a panic attack as he couldn't identify the place/situation and everything became unpredictable (and therefore dangerous).

Fragmentation was not limited to vision. He would describe how his body would break into 'many little pieces' at night. Alyosha was also sure that he had two foreheads and for many years asked me to kiss both goodnight.

So why don't autistic children always see the 'whole' picture?

The term 'weak central coherence' is sometimes used to indicate that autistic people cannot see the whole picture. This can mislead some. In fact, autistic children DO see the full picture alright - the trouble is that they perceive too much! What their brain cannot do is simplify for the sake of coherence. In non-autistic people, the brain omits large chunks of information and generalises in order to make sense of experiences. In autistic people who experience sensory overload, no such filter is available.

Since too much information needs to be processed simultaneously (and no brain is capable of that), autistic people often select for attention minor aspects of the environment instead of the whole scene. Where we may see a room, an autistic child might see a door handle, a table leg or a piece of fluff on the carpet.

As some children with autism perceive everything in pieces, they need time to adjust to different surroundings. As the number of objects seen by them is greater (because they sometimes perceive different images for the same object

from different angles) they do not feel safe in this chaos.

In addition, fragmented perception can mean that small parts of a routine may carry huge significance. Whereas for most, leaving the day centre building at a certain time meant that the day was over, for Alyosha it was only complete when he had shut the centre's door.

This routine was interrupted recently and a very distressing meltdown, lasting some hours, followed. Knowing what's significant in your child's fragmented perception really helps. After we had recovered and I was able to unravel the day, I understood what had caused it.

Is it any wonder autistic people don't like changes and insist on sameness? Routine and rituals help to make life more predictable.

So introduce any change very slowly and always explain beforehand what is happening and why.

Make sure you recognise each piece of your child's particular jigsaw - only then will the full picture become apparent to you.

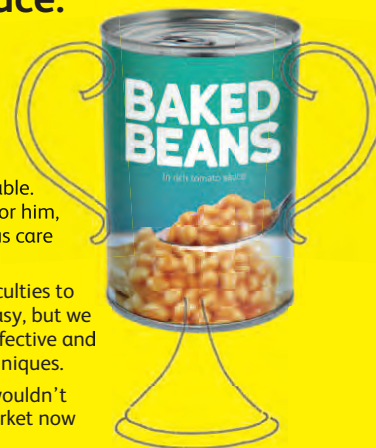
This isn't just a tin of beans. It's a milestone. A massive victory. A success story in tomato sauce.

For one of the young people we care for at Hesley, the thought of going to the shops to stock up on weekly groceries was unthinkable. A constant challenge for him, his parents, his previous care providers, but not us.

There were many difficulties to overcome. It wasn't easy, but we got there by finding effective and innovative coping techniques.

The young man who wouldn't step foot in a supermarket now shops for himself.

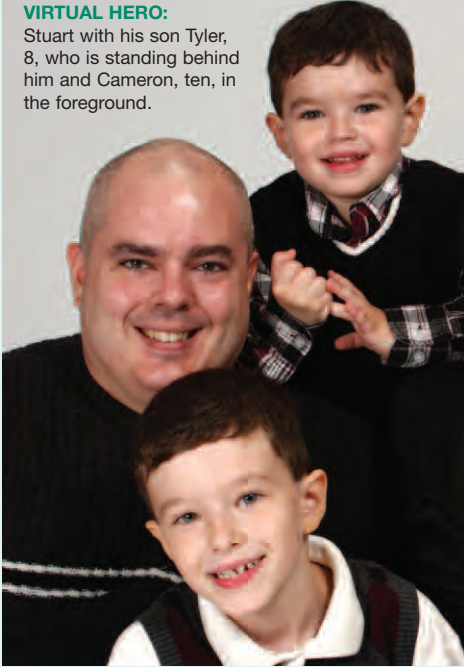
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VIRTUAL HERO:

Stuart with his son Tyler, 8, who is standing behind him and Cameron, ten, in the foreground.



Virtual World Becomes Autism Friendly Thanks to Dad's Minecraft Makeover

Like many autistic children of his age, Cameron Duncan loved the virtual online world of Minecraft. But his dad Stuart noticed that fellow parents were craving a gaming sanctuary where children on the spectrum could play without harassment. When he launched Autcraft, a Minecraft server especially for autistic people, he expected a few grateful smiles. In the event, Autcraft became an Internet sensation and quite literally a game-changer for autistic players the world over. AuKids spoke to the dad behind it all.

■ Tell us a little bit about yourself.

My name is Stuart Duncan, but I go by the name of AutismFather online. I live in Canada. I was diagnosed with Asperger's as an adult and I have two children, one with autism and one without. They're both gamers like myself, but especially Cameron, aged 10, who has autism. He could spend all day every day with a video game controller in his hand. They are both incredibly smart and amazing problem solvers because of it.

■ What is Autcraft?

Autcraft is a multiplayer server for the game Minecraft that is specifically for children (and adults) with autism and their families. In early 2013, I saw a lot of parents reaching out to other autism parents in the hope of having their children play Minecraft together. Their children were being bullied on the servers they tried to play on - people were destroying their buildings, taking their things, killing them repeatedly and worst of all, saying the most terrible things.

So I wanted to give them a space where their children could meet up together and play together where they wouldn't have to worry about those things happening. The kids wouldn't be judged or teased or bullied, they could just play together without fear. I got the server in June and opened the doors to the public on June 23rd 2013.

I told a few friends in my

Facebook friend's list and word spread from there. Within 48 hours, I had received over 750 e-mails.

■ What are the main differences between the Autcraft server and Minecraft ones?

I set the server up with some plugins which protect the player's belongings but also track everything that's done, so if someone breaks something, places something or even drops something, we know about it.

This way we can fix damage, replace lost items and see who did what. Also the server is very closely monitored not just by any random individual who is good at playing Minecraft but by parents of autistic children, autistic adults themselves, even autistic children - as those who prove themselves worthy are given roles of responsibility.

Probably the biggest difference for Autcraft is that we do not punish players for bad behaviour. On other servers, if you get out of line, they ban you forever without a second thought.

On Autcraft, we communicate with the player and attempt to find out what caused the problem, figure out how to solve it and work with them to help avoid problems in the future.

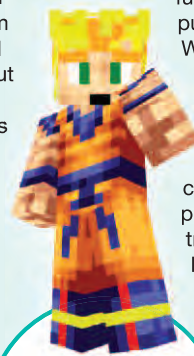
In some cases we'll even reach out to the parents so we can make them aware or find out if there's anything we should know to help us handle the situation.

We do have mute, jail and even bans for those that are far too angry or out of control to communicate with, but those are only ever set for 24 hours maximum in order to give the player time to calm down and come back to us when we can talk about it.

We only ever use those measures (mute, jail, ban) to protect the

other players from one player's anger but also to protect that player from themselves, as their fury may upset everyone and put them in a negative light. We simply don't want someone losing friends just because they're angry.

It's this approach that helps those players learn to control their emotions and problem solve their way out of troubling situations rather than lose control.



AUTISM AVATAR: Stuart as he appears in Autcraft, as AutismFather.

■ How many users do you have?

Currently we have over 6,500 names on the 'whitelist' and average around 1,200 unique players on the server each month. Generally, at peak times, the server has between 30-40 players on at a time but has been as high as 75 players on weekends. We have players from all around the world, so even though some times are slower (night time in North America) there are still players on from other places such as the UK or Australia.

Our primary age group is between 8 to 12 years old but we have players of all ages. We've had children as young as 5 years old and we've even had grandparents playing with their grandchildren. We encourage the entire family to play as it is a strong bonding experience for them but it also means added transparency. They can see everything that happens on the server and be a part of it with them.

WHAT KIDS SAY ABOUT AUTCRAFT

"When I first joined Autcraft, I honestly expected it to be simply a nice Minecraft server, and nothing more. I was very wrong. Autcraft has been a very amazing experience, that has helped me in many more ways than one. I was never very social. I, today, am still not very social. But Autcraft has helped me soooooo much on that, teaching me how to make friends, handle situations, and a million other things that really help me today. When I first joined, I really didn't know what to do. But you Autcrafters helped me, and today I love Minecraft even more than I did then".

■ **What have you learnt from the response that you've received about the needs of the autism community?**

The response was completely unexpected. I expected parents to tell me how grateful they were that their children could play peacefully without being bullied, but what I ended up hearing about was how children were making friends at school for the first time ever or using what they learned to get their first job. I heard about children even speaking for the first time.

I just heard from a parent today who said that some of the players got together with his son and they played another game together and they were the most well-behaved children he'd ever seen online - and thanked us for that.

Children aren't just feeling safer on Autcraft, they're gaining self-confidence and learning how to socialize and even be a friend. That is something that they take with them off the server and into their everyday lives.

■ **What do you think Autcraft has achieved?**

Since word got out about Autcraft, I've been approached by researchers, universities, autism organizations and even large pharmaceutical companies that want to learn what I've learned and find out what it is that we're doing that makes such a big difference.

They want to try to replicate and expand what Autcraft does to

benefit more children with autism, children with other disabilities and even children in general.

More and more people are starting to see the benefits of not just Minecraft but virtual communities in general and, when used properly, they can be a very powerful tool in helping children learn social structures, gain self-confidence and navigate the world independently.

■ **What are your future plans for Autcraft?**

I recently started a second server that we call Autcraft Obsidian which is for players of 15 years-old and up. This is because many older players, older teens in particular, find the Autcraft rules and structure rather strict and stifling. This is because we have to keep things appropriate for all ages which go all the way down to 6, sometimes 5 years old.

By making a second server for the older players, they are able to discuss topics and tell jokes and just be themselves without worry of children picking up something their parents would disapprove of. It's not that those older players want to be rude or vulgar, it's just some things can't be done with the younger players, such as pranks or PVP (player vs player) combat.

It's our goal to expand but stick within that structure. We wish to accommodate all of our players as best we can but not overstretch our reach. One of the things that makes Autcraft successful is our presence, monitoring and mentoring. If we over extend ourselves, we lose that. Especially myself. I can't take on too many projects without sacrificing my time and attention on one or all of them.

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HOW TO JOIN AUTCRAFT

Autcraft is a whitelisted Minecraft server for children (and adults) that have autism and their families. What this means is that if you or a family member has autism and you own the computer version of Minecraft you can register and apply to be put on the whitelist and play with other people just like you. Waiting time for assessment of applications is approximately 2 weeks. Go to: www.autcraft.com/whitelist



WHAT KIDS SAY ABOUT AUTCRAFT:

"Autcraft changed everything about me, the second I joined Autcraft people treated me wonderful. I love Autcraft and all its terrific players. Autcraft made me the helper and generous person that I am today, and without Autcraft I would be lost and confused. I love Autcraft and nothing will ever make it so I don't!"



HOMework

HOW TO WIN THE BATTLE WITHOUT MAKING ENEMIES

To understand the problem that autistic children have with homework, you only need to look at the word itself. It requires a child to take a task that they are used to doing at school and perform it in a completely unrelated setting. Combined with that is a deadline. Oh good. If you want to guarantee a meltdown, we'd suggest you add some noise and flashing lights, but there's usually no need.

But wait, there's one extra ingredient here – your own anxiety. Will they fall behind if they don't do it? Will they get into trouble and if so will that cause extra battles, extra stress...?

And breathe.

All this worry causes so much pressure. For these reasons, homework can turn the living room into a war zone, with both sides entrenched until Sunday evening. This isn't a good state of affairs as it can damage an otherwise good relationship with your child.

We can do this with peace, love and understanding. Honestly, it's possible!

Here's AuKids' top tips on tackling homework:

Points to Discuss with Your Child's Teacher

- 1 Can they be flexible with the amount of homework expected?
- 2 Could time be made available during the school day for them to spend 15 minutes on it instead?
- 3 Agree with your child's teacher how much time should be spent on homework. It's better for autistic kids to have a set routine for homework involving the same amount of time each session.
- 4 Can they let you know the learning objectives each time they set homework? If they can make these clear to you and are flexible about how you achieve them, you'll stand a better chance of success.
- 5 Make teachers aware that a definite expectation, such as completing a series of questions, is much easier for a child with autism than tasks involving imagination and general research that are more vague in nature.
- 6 If it's the handwriting aspect of homework that causes upset, but handwriting isn't the aim itself, discuss with your child's teacher whether it's okay for your autistic child to type the work. Many autistic children find the motor planning of handwriting combined with the executive functioning required to complete a task extremely challenging.
- 7 Discuss adapting homework so that where practical it uses your child's interests as a motivator.

PREPARING THE GROUND FOR HOMEWORK

✓ Make a timetable

Having a colour-coded home timetable showing your child's hours of leisure and time set aside for homework will help them to make homework into a routine. Also, it will help them to see that in the grand scheme of things, homework takes up hardly any of their time.

✓ Make an agreement

Ask your child for the best time to do homework and put it on a visible calendar. The calendar then becomes boss, not you.

✓ Discuss timings

You might prefer the homework to be done in one go, but your child may prefer a collection of 15-minute slots. Discuss what might work best. They can't control being given homework, but it will help if they in control of when and how it's carried out.

✓ Rate difficulty

Ask your child to rate each task according to difficulty using a traffic light system. Start with some 'green' tasks. After the ease of those, try something tricky. Grab a brain break by sneaking back to 'green' tasks for a bit – have a giggle about it.

You can use 'green' tasks as motivators. E.g. 'How about we do that difficult bit for five minutes, then head back to the easy stuff?'

Ratings are really powerful as they allow children to see homework not as one big insurmountable mountain, but as a series of small hills to climb – some difficult, some not so bad.

✓ Get a timer

If you or I were told to sit down for a meeting without being given an idea of how long it would last for, I doubt our attention would be that good. Set a timer for the length of time they'll be working and stick to it. Hours of struggle are damaging to enthusiasm, so providing the child has done their best, don't move beyond the time set. Let the teacher know that you're making this very reasonable adjustment for your child's disability.

✓ Reward system

Autistic children won't do homework just for the applause. Use other motivators, such as promising a favourite activity later, or having rewards that are reserved exclusively for when homework is done.

WHAT YOU NEED

✓ Secure surroundings

A special 'homework' place helps a child deal with the concept of schoolwork at home and creates a routine.

✓ Equipment to hand

Make sure that all the tools are nearby. There's nothing like having to wander off for a pencil to add an extra 10 minutes to the proceedings.

✓ Minimum distractions

Think of how your child focuses best. Try and cut out distractions and clutter.

✓ Comfort items

Make sure they're physically comfortable with a snack if it relaxes them.

✓ The right mood

If you are feeling even slightly impatient, reconsider a better time. Make sure the person helping is *always* in the right frame of mind. One bad session can damage your future chances of success.

✓ The right position

Sitting side by side means you can focus on a task together and perceive it in the same way, but if you sit to the



side and slightly behind the child, you'll promote their independence and reduce their reliance on you. If you sit face to face, you're placing extra social and sensory demands on a person. Try different ways, find what works best. Thanks to Heather Mackenzie's book *Reaching and Teaching the Child with Autism Spectrum Disorder*, published by Jessica Kingsley Publishers, for this one.

DURING HOMEWORK

✓ Unveil the homework

Treat it as if it's the most exciting thing you've ever seen. If you approach it as a drag, your child will definitely think it's a drag.

✓ Check understanding

Ask them to explain to you what they think they need to do. Ask this as if you have no idea yourself. Put them in charge, but check they know what they're doing to avoid frustration later.

✓ Define expectations

In some cases it might help to provide some guidance on the effort required:

e.g.

Homework: Research the author of your book

☹ Google the name of the author and cut and paste the first two paragraphs you find. Oops.

😊 Google the name of the author and select 10 facts that you find the most interesting about them. This means you've had to think about it and that's what the teacher is looking for. Yay!

✓ Ask them if they need help

You know what it's like when you're working and someone is watching your every move. The temptation to tell them to get lost is overwhelming! Respect your child's wishes and keep a polite but available distance.

✓ Helpful helping

If they are stuck, use questions to direct their thinking and stay positive about their answers. 'I can see why you thought that, that's great, can you think of another way...?' Jennifer O'Toole and Heather Mackenzie, both heroes of ours, favour the 'adult playing dumb' approach. i.e. "What are we going to do, here?! Ooh this is tricky!" It feels so much nicer to be problem solving together than being directed. Express huge enthusiasm for the puzzle they've been set. Praise good thinking and any suggestions made by your child. Show them the end point and get excited about it: "Wow, you're doing such good thinking - I think we're nearly there you know!"

✓ Mask questions off

It can help autistic children to mask off a list so that only one question is visible, allowing them to focus and not get overwhelmed.

✓ Get creative

What if they could practise spellings in shaving foam in the bath? Or do maths with groups of Pokemon or Moshi Monster figures moving about the table? Holding ideas in your head is difficult, seeing them in front of you is easier. You could get a load of colour Post Its and write ideas on each one before putting them in order, or write each sentence in a different colour pen. If the equipment is fun, the work will be more fun.

✓ Hook onto special interests

Do we need to mention this?! Find what motivates them and work around it.

Not going in? If something hasn't clicked, don't explain it in the same way more than twice. Think of another way. Don't let a stumbling block ruin the session. Get through the easy stuff and go back to the trickier things later.

✓ Step back

You can help your child to plan the work and stay on task, but don't be afraid to leave them to complete written work themselves. Incorrect homework may highlight a problem in understanding during lesson time and that's still valuable information for the teacher.

AFTER HOMEWORK...

✓ Pat on the back

Give them a massive pat on the back even if it's only been a quarter of an hour. They have still focused themselves to do something that wasn't their choice.

✓ You're free!

Don't make any further demands on the child for now, such as accompanying you to the shops. Let them do what they like for a bit. They should be able to enjoy the breather.

✓ Praise where it's due

If your child has completed homework without fuss, praise like mad. Consider a surprise reward when they've not asked for one.

✓ Quit while you are ahead

If your child is happy and doing well, avoid the temptation of extending or improving on what you have already. If homework always ends with having had



enough, they will be less willing to give it another go.

✓ Reward yourself

They've done their homework without stress? It's time for you to sit back and breathe that lovely calm, meltdown-free air.

MAY THE FORCE BE WITH YOU!

Further Information

Why Do I Have To? A Book for Children Who Find Themselves Frustrated by Everyday Rules by Laurie Leventhal-Belfer, published by Jessica Kingsley Publishers.



WIN THIS BOOK!

We have copies to give away to two lucky readers. Simply send you name and address to competitions@aukids.co.uk no later than May 31st, with 'why' in the subject header, or write to AuKids PO Box 259, Cheadle, Cheshire SK8 9BE.

The Asperkid's Launch Pad: Home Design to Empower Everyday Superheroes by Jennifer Cook O'Toole, published by Jessica Kingsley Publishers



Self-regulation in Everyday Life: A How-to Guide for Parents by Dr Heather Mackenzie, published by Wired Fox Publications



I Hate to Write! Tips for Helping Students with Autism Spectrum and Related Disorders Increase Achievement, Meet Academic Standards, and Become Happy, Successful Writers by Cheryl Boucher, published by AAPC





The Last Word

By Debby Elley, journalist and mum of twins with autism.

Return of the Elusive 'Top Form'

The other day, someone told me that they thought I was in my early thirties. Since I'm actually in my mid-forties, I was rather chuffed. Plus, this is in stark contrast to the age I actually feel, which is about 900. In fact, if Doctor Who feels anything like me, it's a wonder he gets out of the Tardis every morning. Indeed, perhaps some mornings he doesn't, but that wouldn't make a very interesting episode. **'Day of the Duvet'** as an Easter special, anyone?

The reason I feel 900 is that currently my evenings consist of scurrying up and downstairs about 40 times. If I'm lucky, I catch Coronation Street just as it goes into its advert break.

Alec's internal signal for the toilet is distinctly unreliable and his verbal twin Bobby happens across a variety of matters that he urgently needs to discuss just before bed time. Imagine a nightly European summit meeting combined with 5 changes of pyjamas and you're roughly where I'm at.

Out of my three evening instructions: 'Wrap Blankie, unpack your Pokeballs and start up your bed engine,' two relate to Bobby's (unfathomable) imaginary routines and one (Blankie wrap) seems a distinctly odd request.

Like many autistic families though, we have become used to the surreal. To others, it's a welcome novelty. "I like being with Bobby," said his cousin. "You never know what he's going to say next."

'You'd get over that pretty quick if you saw Bobby with his hand up at the BBC Studio Tour,' I thought, recalling the radio sound effects technician knocking coconut halves together.

"What does that sound like?" he asked. Bobby's hand shot up: "It sounds like coconut halves!"

When things get a bit much, it's easy to fall into the trap of telling everyone how hard it is. Despite a positive nature, I have weeks where all I seem to do is inform the world that Fatigue is my new middle name. Join the club, they say. Fatigue is an epidemic in modern life. But in fact, no sooner have the words left your mouth than you feel worse than ever.

Tell your friends you're tired and the sparkle they had in your company turns to sympathy. This is lovely, but brings with it a descent into a draggy humourless conversation. Before

you know it, you've lost the buzz you had from other people's presence and you're both stuck in the quagmire of your gruesome (yet understandable) self-pity.

I have realised lately that

I'm at my best when someone comes along who doesn't know I'm tired. By upping my game, I really do allow them to invigorate me and it transforms my mood. Rather than reinforcing my own state of mind, they allow me to change it. So instead of avoiding people until that elusive top form returns, I discovered that if I let them into my life again, they can actually revive it.

"Hello Top Form," I think. "I haven't seen you for a while. What have you been up to?"

Top form replies: "I've just been waiting for you to stop telling everyone how knackered you are."



Cover Star



★ **Oliver Hulme** ★

Age: 8 **Diagnosis:** Autism

Likes: Attention, making people laugh, iPad, playing outside with school friends, wearing PJs at the weekend to chill, raw carrots and peppers

Dislikes: Loud noises, crowded places, having to wait for anything, hair combing and cutting, being told to be quiet, cooked carrots

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Support for me and my family

Our family support services offer a wide range of advice, training and free advice drop-in sessions



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