

4-page
extra for
Christmas!

Aukids®

Issue 37
Autumn 2017

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Positive Parenting for Children with Autism Spectrum Conditions



WHAT, NO FOOTBALL?

Lads and Dads share magic moments



Laughter Therapy

Autism comedian
John Williams
performs for AuKids



Literally speaking

Author Michael Barton
has been told to 'hang
on' one too many times...

PLUS

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Letter from the Editors

Debby Tori



A big
THANK YOU
to all our readers!

Massive thanks to all our readers and supporters! Your votes meant we came 3rd in the Vernon Building Society's Jubilee Fund awards earning us a grand total of £968. This will help us produce more magazines for the places and people who need it. Thank you!

The extra pages for Christmas should give you some lovely ideas and we are delighted to be giving one lucky reader an illuminated pop-up POD worth £899 just in time for the big day! We've also got a host of brilliant contributors this issue, including autism advocates Alex Lowery, Michael Barton, Wendy Katz and Tim Tuff.

Talking of our autism advocate Tim Tuff, he recently presented his talk Jam on a Marmalade Day at Shropshire's Local Offer Live Event hosted by Shropshire Parent and Carer Council. Here he is with two of the event's organisers. Thanks to Golden Bear toys for sponsoring Tim's support costs for the day and to Alison Walters for supporting him.

See you next year!

Tori & Debby



Tim with Natalie Hughes, administrator for Shropshire PACC and Sarah Thomas, the organisation's participation worker

We are of course looking forward to our annual fundraiser in November, with John Williams putting autism at centre stage in his last ever performance of My Son's Not Rainman. See page 16 for details and your chance to win a signed copy of his book.

COMPETITION WINNERS FROM ISSUE 36:

- **Flying Starts book:** Andrea Ugrosdy-Nemeth, Surrey;
- **Hometown World book:** Janine Da Silva, Cumbria;
- **Island Animal books:** Thomas Keenleyside, York;
- **Emotions fan:** Mariann-Foster-Watt, Fulwood.



WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Orchids are beautiful plants which, much like kids with autism, require very specific conditions to grow. If they get them, they thrive. That's why we called this magazine AuKids. AU is also the chemical symbol for gold.

Whilst the products and services advertised in AuKids are recommended to us by readers, we are not an industry inspector or regulator. We advise readers to seek independent advice from regulatory bodies before signing up with a new service provider and to check that products and equipment meet with industry standards.

The opinions expressed in AuKids magazine are those of the contributor. Please seek medical advice before embarking on any therapy or behaviour intervention. All articles are copyright AuKids.

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Cover Star

★ **Joe** ★
Age: 6

Diagnosis: Autism and Developmental Co-ordination Disorder

Lives: In Stockport with mum, dad and sister Isla (shown here).

Likes: Cars and transport, and anything to do with the police or police vehicles (Daddy's a policeman). Also working out how things work.

Dislikes: Change and pink girly stuff.

If he were Prime Minister:

He'd drive a police car to meetings with the sirens on.



What's Your Vision of the Future?

Autism Together calls for help with research project

Charity Autism Together is asking families affected by autism to think about what life could be like fifty years into the future for people on the spectrum.

In an online questionnaire, people with autism and their families or carers will be asked what changes they feel should be made to improve lives, how they feel people with autism will be supported in the future and what they could be contributing to a future society.

A report based on the research will be published in early 2018 as part of an awareness raising and fundraising campaign to mark the charity's fiftieth anniversary.

CEO of Autism Together, Robin Bush said: "Next year is a big year for our organisation. We could spend 2018 looking back at our charity's first fifty years - we have a lot to celebrate. What we'd rather do, though, is use the remarkable energy and creativity within the autism community to look ahead and ask some big questions about society. As recently as thirty years ago, outside autism circles, knowledge of the condition pretty much started and stopped with the film Rainman. Yet look where we are today - with massively increased awareness. Our question now is: what do we want for our future?"

"Our survey will also be asking practical questions, more relevant to the here and now. The answers will shape our charity's campaigning, so that we can lobby for the change that matters most to the people we support."

Autism Together was founded in 1968 as Wirral Autistic Society by a group of concerned parents, one of whom refused to pay his taxes unless his autistic son was offered the opportunity of an education. This bold move resulted in a parliamentary debate and the beginnings of special education provision.

Today the charity employs a thousand people across Merseyside, North Wales and Cheshire. It's won a dozen awards in the last four years for its services for people on the spectrum.

The survey takes ten minutes to complete. One lucky respondent will win an overnight stay in a family room at the luxurious Malmaison hotel on Liverpool's waterfront. The Malmaison is an Autism Champion and supports Liverpool's drive to be the UK's leading autism-friendly city.

To complete the survey visit:
www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/XB6NFT5

To find out more about Autism Together, go to www.autismtogether.co.uk



AuKids Partners up for Dr Tony Attwood's UK Visit!

AuKids is proud to announce that we are media partners for a 2018 Manchester event hosting the world famous autism expert Dr Tony Attwood.

Tony Talks Autism, hosted by Medica CPD, takes place on January 12th at the AJ Bell Stadium, 1 Stadium Way, Salford, Manchester M30 7EY.

Tony is a superb speaker and author of numerous bestselling books on autism including 'Asperger's Syndrome: A Guide for Parents and Professionals' which has sold over 350,000 copies and has been translated into 26 languages.

As a Clinical Psychologist, he has worked with over 8,000 individuals of all ages with Asperger's or autism. He has limited speaking engagements in the UK in 2018, so don't miss this one!

During the day, topics covered will include cognitive abilities and managing feelings, sensory processing, the latest thinking on

autism plus new information from Tony's latest book on depression and autism.

The fee for the day including lunch and refreshments is £199 + VAT. Parents and carers get a discounted rate of £99 + VAT.

To register, book online at www.medicacpd.com, call 0141 638 4098 or email carolyn@medicacpd.com for a registration form. Places are restricted.

You can follow this event on Facebook and Twitter #TonyTalksAutism18



AuKids will be covering this event - see you there!

Tim Talks into the New Year!

Don't forget that our awesome autism advocate Tim Tuff is still touring with his talk Jam on a Marmalade Day, sharing his personal experiences of what it's like to have autism. If you're interested in booking Tim for a support group, school or event next year, please email us at editors@aukids.co.uk Tim will travel around the UK. Please bear in mind that outside Manchester and Stockport there are costs for his travel and support.

Co-editor Signs Publishing Contract

If you like co-editor Debby Elley's columns on her twins Bobby and Alec, you'll be pleased to hear that she is currently writing an upbeat guidebook for parents using her own experiences, to be published by Jessica Kingsley. We don't yet have a launch date, but you'll be the first to know and of course it goes without saying that we'll have some prize give-aways!

TALK

Adapting Your Skills for Autism and Asperger's Series 2: Preventing and Healing Mental Ill-health

Hosted by Autism Oxford
4th October 2017, Didcot
Civic Hall



This informative and enjoyable one-day conference was a popular event, thanks to the main speaker - Dr Peter Vermeulen - who is an autism consultant, lecturer and trainer in Belgium. Best known as the author of *Autism as Context Blindness*, Peter's engaging talk on autism and emotions highlighted the absurdity of teaching emotional recognition using pictures of faces. He demonstrated this through "teaching" the audience about a fictional species of humanoids using pictures of their faces and the (Flemish) label for that emotion. Rather than teaching children using "meaningless words linked to meaningless faces" he said we should start by helping people to recognize their own emotions and cope with them.

Given this is often hard for autistic people, you can start with just three feelings. A 'Yes' feeling (something happens that you like makes you feel good, with an example), a 'No' feeling (don't like...) and a 'Doubt' feeling (don't know if you like, which is okay). He then applied his maxim that nothing in life has a fixed meaning to emotions. We don't read emotions from faces, but rather project emotions onto facial expressions using the available contextual information. Therefore this is how we should teach emotion recognition, by linking it to relevant contexts.

Next was Dee McAlinden, an autistic speaker and author, who gave a frank talk about her late diagnosis and the difficulties she faced up until that point. She explained how her career has helped her learn more about herself, before moving on to outline her system for helping autistic people to thrive. The first stage should always be to reduce anxiety as other things won't work well if anxiety is too high. Next, work on increasing happiness by focusing on diet, exercise and sleep, as well as activities and special interests unique to that individual. Finally, you develop grey thinking (as opposed to black and white).

The third speaker - Richard Maguire - is also autistic. Autism Oxford's events always feature an autistic speaker from their own Training Team and this time had two, which is commendable and highlights that other conferences often lack representation from autistic people. He told the moving story of an autistic adult who struggled to come to terms with a break up, which ended up with him being sectioned twice and emotionally damaged and made ill in the process.

I came away feeling inspired and better equipped to tackle the topic of emotions. To find out about future events go to autismoxford.org.uk

Mark Haworth, staff writer and support worker

Reviews & Prizes



BOOK

Ginny Moon

By Benjamin Ludwig
Published by HQ
£12.99
ISBN 9781848455429
(Hardcover)

Expertly written in the first person from the perspective of a young girl with autism, this emotionally charged novel has clearly been written by an author with first-hand knowledge and insight into how an autistic teenager would think, feel and react.

The New Hampshire-based author, Benjamin Ludwig, is a foster parent himself and has an adopted autistic daughter. The title character of Ginny is not her, but based on his experiences working with dozens of foster children.

The child at the centre of the novel has had more trauma to deal with by the age of nine than most people would in a lifetime - and the book deftly tackles Ginny's journey trying to make sense of it all despite a diagnosis of autism and developmental disabilities.

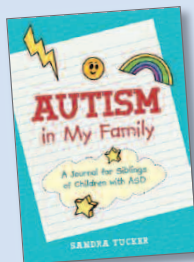
Taken into foster care at the age of nine, the now 14-year-old Ginny has found her 'forever home' with an

adoptive family - but whilst this should be a happy time, instead it is disruptive and distressing. It's hard for her to express her fearfulness - and the book brilliantly describes situations in which she does and says things in an attempt to explain and justify the position she is in - behaviour that is difficult for her adoptive family to understand. Essentially, it's a girl's desperate search for a place she belongs, a place she feels safe - a place in which she has purpose again as she cares for the baby sister she loves beyond words.

One of the most frustrating aspects of autism for parents and guardians is the intense difficulty of understanding exactly what is going on inside a child's head. This book heart-wrenchingly demonstrates that even when many people are trying to help a child with well-meaning intentions, we don't always get it right - and what appears on the outset to be the best course of action can inadvertently cause additional distress.

A great insight into how complex the thought processes of a child with autism can be - fantastic for parents who would like to gain a better understanding of the autistic mind.

Alison Walters, support worker



BOOK

Autism in my Family - A Journal for Siblings of Children with ASD

By Sandra Tucker
Published by Jessica Kingsley
£12.99
ISBN 9781785927072

Author Catherine Faherty, an autism specialist and mentor, had written a number of workbooks especially for children on the autism spectrum when she was approached by Sandra Tucker, founder of the organisation Sibling Tree. Sandra wanted to follow a similar pattern of workbook but focus on the siblings of children with autism. She wanted to help them communicate, boost their natural resilience and give them the confidence and the tools to become effective advocates for their siblings.

It's a fantastic premise and the journal fulfils its promise.

The book's main focus is in helping brothers and sisters to understand

their own feelings about autism. It also provides some simple explanations about the condition. There's a great section titled *The Sensory Experience*, where siblings are encouraged to use their own responses for a better understanding.

Apart from the therapy of self-expression, there are a handful of good practical ideas within these pages for support, too. I also liked the symbols throughout to indicate which sections should be completed with other family members.

I've no doubt that this book will be valuable in nurturing siblings' mental health. It's important to recognise, though, that its level of success relies heavily on the understanding and guidance of a listening, available parent or carer and their ability to spot signs from this journal if further help is required.

Finally, the author invites siblings to join a support forum via her website www.sandraellentucker.com which is a superb extra resource.

Debby Elley, AuKids co-editor



TV COMEDY
Atypical
From August 11, Netflix

**AuKids
Reader
Review**

Atypical is a comedy about Sam, an 18 year-old on the autism spectrum who has decided that he wants to start dating. I watched it with my teenage daughter (who doesn't have autism) and we both loved it and watched all eight episodes in two sittings as we couldn't wait for more!

Whilst the programme could have been improved had they cast an autistic actor to take the lead role, Keir Gilchrist plays the role of Sam extremely well, making us laugh and feel empathy in all the right places. Sam displays many autistic characteristics and whilst it could be deemed stereotypical that all of these traits are demonstrated in one character, we believed it gave a good insight into autism for people who have no experience of the condition

whilst showing familiar traits that would resonate with those who have family or friends on the spectrum.

We liked the way the programme focused on the impact of having a family member on the autism spectrum and how the effects on family relationships, work and school life were shown in a sensitive but humorous way.

Season 1 ended on a bit of a cliff hanger, suggesting that there will be another season - which my daughter and I can't wait for!

Hayley Edwards, Student Learning Disabilities Nurse.

What did you think of Atypical? We'd love to hear. Write to us at editors@aukids.co.uk



BOOK
Baking for Dave

By Melissa Palmer
Published by Future Horizons
£7.95
ISBN 9781935567677

engaging character, and I found myself rooting for her through every twist and turn in the story. The author's descriptions beautifully captured how Iris sees and feels the world around her, and gave a real sense of what life may be like for someone with SPD.

The book is formatted as short and snappy chapters, which makes it the ideal holiday read or just perfect for parents with little time for hours to sit reading. It addresses the challenges and intricacies of SPD without making the entire story revolve around it.

It's well worth a read - it is charming and you'll find yourself beaming with pride for Iris by the end of it!

Laura Keeling, Senior Speech and Language Therapist,
Wirral Community NHS Foundation Trust

'Baking for Dave' is a fictional story written by an American autism mum about a quirky teenage girl, Iris, who just so happens to have Sensory Processing Disorder. She goes on the run to compete in a national baking competition, taking a road trip in her mum's car, singing and humming Dave Matthews Band's classics all the way! The journey ends up being more about self-discovery and, for those who have always tried to protect Iris, an appreciation of the extent of her capabilities.

Iris is a compelling and

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Those lovely people at Learning Resources® were excited to hear that AuKids thought their Design and Drill construction range was great for kids with autism, so they've given you the chance to win some!

With the BrightWorks™ Design and Drill set, little designers can follow one of 12 included patterns or create their own custom, glow in the dark creations.

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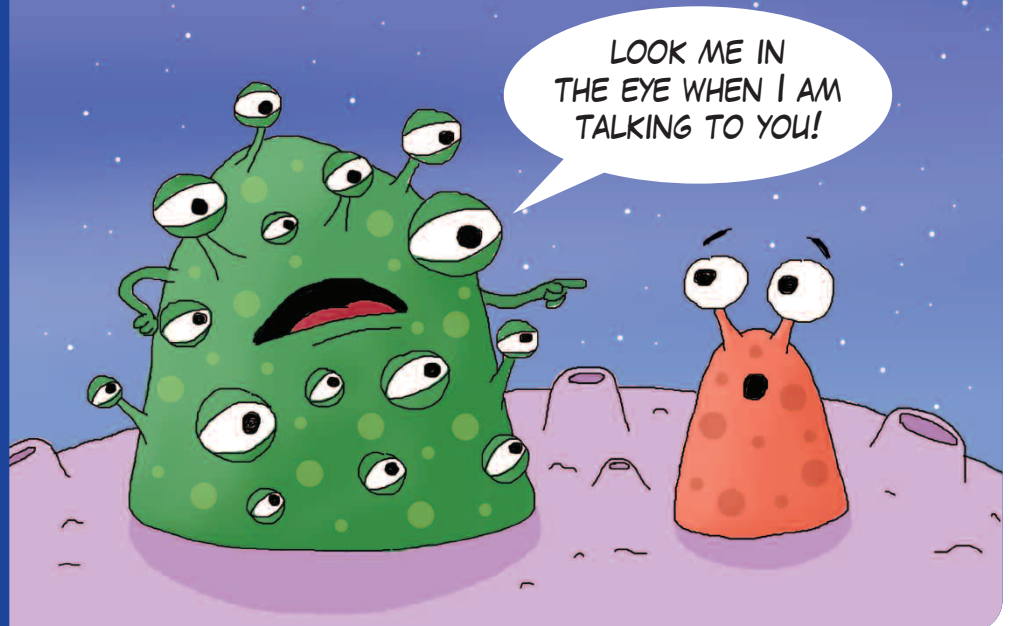
Just name three brands sold by Learning Resources. You can find the answer at www.learningresources.co.uk

Send your answer and choice of prize no later than November 30th 2017 to competitions@aukids.co.uk with 'Drill' in the subject header. Alternatively post your answer to AuKids, PO Box 259, Cheadle, Cheshire SK8 9BE. **Good luck!**





Why Doesn't my Daughter Make Eye Contact with People?



Alex Lowery

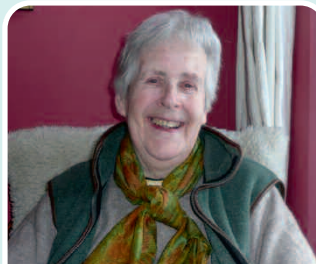
Alex is a 23 year old autistic man who is a professional trainer and speaker on autism. He is also a Youth Patron for campaigns with Ambitious About Autism. Alex has written a book about his life and travels the UK to share his story and understanding of autism. His motto is 'Changing attitudes towards ASC one person at a time.' www.alexlowery.co.uk

One thing to know about me is I'm not awfully fond of eye contact. I find that when people look directly into my eyes, it can feel as if they are looking right into my very soul. I think Luke Jackson puts it best when he says, "When I look at someone straight in the eye, I feel as if their eyes are burning me and I really feel like I'm looking into the face of an alien". I think this explains it better than I could.

A lot of the time I'm unsure how much eye contact I'm actually giving, since I don't really think about it, but people have told me that I do give it. However, I don't think I normally do. I think I've learned to look as if I'm giving eye contact. I am able to look at different points of the face. I might focus on people's eyebrows then move down to their mouth. I might even look into their eyes for like a second and then move off them. I can get away with doing this for the most part.

However, to even look at people to the extent I mentioned above is only when I'm feeling reasonably calm in a situation. When I'm stressed, I likely won't be giving any eye contact at all. I won't even be looking at a person's face! I'll tend to be looking right down, and will be unable to bring myself to look at them.

Like every aspect of autism, eye contact is very individual. Some autistic people may not give any eye contact whatsoever and there are others who have learned to give it. What is very important is to 100% accept it when someone doesn't give eye contact.



Phoebe Caldwell

Phoebe Caldwell is an expert practitioner in Intensive Interaction and trains professionals, therapists, managers and carers in the approach. Through her books and DVDs she has helped others to decode body language in people with autism. www.phoebecaldwell.co.uk

One of the things that seems strange to the non-autistic person is the reluctance of some children on the spectrum to give eye contact. They say, 'Why can't you look at me when we are speaking to each other?' And they may feel that the child is not to be trusted. This is totally to misunderstand how eye contact impacts on those with autism.

There seem to be a number of reasons for the lack of eye contact. Some children find it painful; they say, 'People have absolutely no idea how painful it is for me to look at them'. We are talking about real pain, not just discomfort.

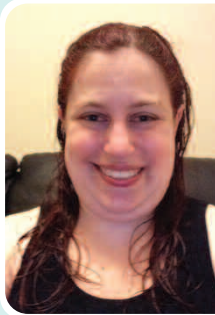
Secondly, some autistic children lack central vision and can only see out of the periphery of their visual field. Imagine a black disc in the centre of what you are looking at. This can be attributable to visual distortions due to Irlen syndrome, also known as Scotopic Sensitivity, which may be corrected by using Irlen tinted lenses.*

Thirdly, eye contact may be emotionally overloading, the sympathetic nervous system 'blows its fuses' – an autistic friend describes this as, 'like being hit with an emotional taser'.

Another reason is that eye contact is in itself sensorily overloading, since it is difficult to process visual information at the same time as speech.

Many children learn strategies to collect visual information by quick glances, or looking sideways, or focusing on another part of the face, say the chin. But all in all, avoid pressurising a child to give direct eye contact. Even if they manage it, it will raise their anxiety level and make it more difficult for them to process incoming sensory information, with possible knock-on consequences to behaviour. They do want to see: let them do it in such a way that minimizes stress.

*Contact Celia in Guiseley, at celia@irlennortheast.co.uk for information. She is good with children with autism



Wendy Katz

Wendy Katz is a contributor for the superb online autism forum The Mighty at www.themighty.com. She lives in Virginia and works as the Manager of Strategic Innovation for ao Strategies, a small female owned business helping disability non-profits to change the world.

Here is an extract from the article Wendy wrote for The Mighty. The full article can be found at www.themighty.com/2015/11/to-the-people-wondering-why-i-struggle-with-eye-contact/

Most people seem to have a built-in sense of knowing how to make suitable eye contact so that you can be warm and fuzzy with strangers without invasive fits of staring. To make a long story a bit shorter, I don't. My brain is missing that wiring. If I make eye contact for more than a moment, I feel as though I'm staring at you and I instinctively bounce my eyes away for two reasons. Ironically, number one is that I'm trying not to be rude!

The second reason is intimacy. Staring can be a pretty heavy thing. Every good romance movie or novel has that long, beautiful, pregnant moment when the hero and heroine lock eyes and truly "see each other" for the first time. Well, try to imagine being me. I'm feeling that kind of intensity pretty quickly, so if I barely know you, I'm going to feel awkward if I don't look away quickly.

WHAT GOES THROUGH THE GIRL WITH THE CURLY HAIR'S HEAD WHEN SHE'S TALKING TO SOMEONE AND HAVING TO MAKE EYE CONTACT?



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To see cartoon books from the Girl with the Curly Hair, go to www.thegirlwiththecurlyhair.co.uk



Tim Tuff

Tim Tuff is AuKids' autism advocate. He lends a personal angle to the features that we write and shares his insights through talking in person to parent audiences.

I like what Phoebe says about eye contact. The one thing I was always taught was to try and look behind or at the side of someone so it doesn't look like you're bored. Like Phoebe said, we do glance, we do take in information, but it's painful to look because of sensory overload.

When I look at you, your face changes so many times that I can't understand its meaning. It feels like your face is moving up

and down, up and down, people's eyes look up and down – the eyebrows move like caterpillars to me. Trying to understand all that is so difficult.

I can't tell how you're feeling by the tone of your voice either. Angry tone of voice to me just sounds either like you're trying to be clearer or it actually sounds amusing – I used to get into trouble at school because of this. If you don't understand facial expressions it doesn't mean you don't know what's going on in other ways, though.

I pick up emotions in a different way from non-autistics; usually with the words that you use, but this might take me a while to process. So, people need to say exactly what they are feeling and why. I can't easily tell when someone has been crying for instance.

I do spot big changes in body language, so if someone behaves in a way that I'm not used to, I realise that their mood is different – perhaps if they're not as animated. I wouldn't be able to say why, though. I always think it's something I've done.

Living with autism isn't easy. But finding out all about it should be.

Everything you need to know in one place www.autismlinks.co.uk



Why Parents Are the Real Therapists

When children are diagnosed with autism, one of the first professionals they'll meet is a Speech and Language Therapist. All our lives we have known the word 'therapy' in medical or mental health terms, so we often have pre-conceived ideas of what that means. This leads to a bit of a shock when we find that Speech and Language Therapy is totally different. Parents have far more involvement in it than they think. Why?

Co-editor Tori Houghton, a Speech and Language Therapist, explains.

Speech and Language Therapists really should be called Communication Therapists. The word 'Language' often gets dropped from our job title which misleads parents into thinking our focus is always on your child's speech itself. In autism, speech is really the icing on the cake. Our first focus is helping autistic children to understand the purpose of communication; this isn't something that comes naturally to them. Only when they understand its purpose will they start to use words meaningfully.

If we don't focus on communication rather than just speech, and if we just encourage autistic children to copy our sounds, they may well develop some words, but these will just be an echo. Speech without language or communication is just meaningless sound.

To encourage a child to want to communicate, we start by developing what we call joint attention between a parent and child. This is when we know that you are both focusing on the same thing. To do this, we teach you to follow the child's lead –

that way we can be sure that they are really motivated. Then, when you name objects and supply words (called 'modelling' in speech and language therapy), we can be reasonably sure that your meaning is understood. We know you'll do this many times, as it takes autistic children a lot longer to develop vocabulary.

Traditionally, you may imagine a therapist sitting at a table looking at pictures with your child, asking them to repeat words. Well, that may happen down the line or with children who are working on improving their speech sounds, but for a child who is struggling to develop basic communication skills, we like to get down on the ground! Whatever your child is interested in, that's what we'll follow.

.....
We are the experts in communication, but YOU are the expert in your child.
.....

So your child wants to spin the wheels of a toy pram? We understand that they don't engage in pretend play, but we can use their repetitive interests to enjoy an interaction together, joining what they're doing, supplying the words they would use if they had them.

And why are you asked to join in – aren't we the experts? Yes, we are the experts in communication, but YOU are the expert in your child. That's why

we might work directly with you, rather than your child, explaining and supporting how *you* can communicate with them, using the ready-made mutual trust that you both enjoy. You'll be the one on the floor too and we'll be showing you to watch whatever your child is doing whilst sharing language that is meaningful to them, spotting signals and developing their ability to request.

You are the consistent person in your child's life and will be for a much longer time than any professional. So, you are best placed to help them build on their skills. Once you have learnt the strategies, you can fit them into your daily life – no desk required!

In a speech and language therapy session, we aim to assess a child's current level of communication and help parents move on to the next stage of their development. More sessions does not necessarily mean that they will improve quicker, if they are not yet ready to move on.

The more you learn as a parent, the more opportunities you will find to help your child with their communication and the more effective their communication will be.

Before long, you'll be the communication expert, too. This is something that gives parents lots of confidence. With a little know-how, you can achieve a lot. All it takes is adapting your own communication to fit their learning style.



4
page
extra!

Have Yourself an

AUTISM-FRIENDLY CHRISTMAS

Open any colour supplement at this time of year and your heart will droop. Apparently, you and your child are supposed to be making edible tree decorations, cutting out paper snowflakes, creating paper chains and designing pop up Christmas cards. Nah. That's not going to happen. They don't have the inclination (or in some cases, the attention span) and you don't have the time. Here's AuKids' alternative ideas for an autism-friendly run-up to the festive season...

FESTIVE SPELL

Does your child find a lot of Christmas presents overwhelming? Make the letters spelling 'Christmas' (or pinch them from a banner). Starting ten days before Christmas, hide a letter a day. When your child finds the letter, give them a present, big or small. There are nine letters in Christmas, which means that when you've finished spelling it, you can have the last present ready for Christmas Day. This does two jobs - helps your child to count down and creates the excitement of a present without overwhelming them with too many at once.

IT'S A CRACKER!

Don't feel you have to miss out if your child doesn't like the unexpected noise of crackers - use fortune cookies instead. Try www.partydelights.co.uk You can also hide small prizes in shredded paper, great for discrimination skills.

COLOUR CODE

Does your child rip the paper off every present, whether or not it's theirs? Colour coding theirs will help them and you to stay focused on the right thing! Show them the colour they are looking for beforehand. Tell people to put their gift labels INSIDE the present to prevent them from being lost in the confusion of Christmas Day.

GLITTER GIFTS

Your child can make really effective cards for the special people in their lives which don't require great fine motor skills. Buy black card, a fine tube of glue and glitter. Support their hand if you need to, and get them to do a squiggle pattern from a height with the glue, then ask them to shake whichever colours of glitter they choose over it. Shake it off and dry. Use a cheap shower curtain to contain the mess!

BET ON A BAUBLE

Have you seen the human fruit machine sometimes used at school fairs? Three children pick from a box of fruit with their eyes closed and, arms outstretched, pretend to be a fruit machine. The player pretends to pull down the 'arm' of the machine (usually someone's real arm) and everyone reveals their fruit. If three fruit the same are revealed, the player wins a prize. You don't have to understand a real fruit machine to play this. You can use the same idea with different colour baubles or tinsel. **DO MAKE SURE YOUR CHILD DOESN'T MOUTH OR CRUNCH ON THE BAUBLE.** It's a simple but fun matching game.

multi-sensoryworld.co.uk



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BREAKING NEWS: Now available in Apple stores.

SENSORY DISCOVERY

The Nanoleaf Aurora

By Debby Elley, co-editor AuKids

We're excited at AuKids. We have just tested this brilliant product that has until now been unknown in special needs circles. Got a sensory seeker? You'll love the Nanoleaf Aurora, the first ever modular smart light. This is an interactive lighting system that gives exciting displays at the touch of a button. Having tested it, I can confirm that it's AWESOME.

The clarity of light from this is astonishing, sending the room awash with colour, even in full daylight. My son Alec, 13, has learning difficulties as well as autism and is a world-expert at breaking toys. But so far it's Alec-proof, too - there's nothing much that curious minds can do to damage it and it doesn't heat up since it's LED.

For immediate effect, there's a button on one of the triangles that

scrolls through a pre-recorded series of spectacular lighting themes. They include Northern Lights, Inner Peace, Forest, Snowfall, Fireworks and Firecrackers and my personal favourite, the Aurora Disco. At this point, I was asking Gavin whether Alec really needed it or if we should put it in the lounge...

Want to have a go at programming it yourself? Download the Nanoleaf app (compatible with Apple and Android) and it immediately 'knows' how you've put your jigsaw together. By selecting colours on your tablet, you can change the panels to whatever colour you want, or choose a theme.

I showed Alec how to adjust the colour palette himself with the app and he was mesmerised. It can even be voice operated (use

IOS, Siri, Google Assistant and Amazon Alexa). Better still, Nanoleaf has just launched The Rhythm - a music visualizer that syncs the Aurora with audio.

The team at Nanoleaf, based in Toronto, were delighted when we got in touch to tell them of its appeal for children with autism. Their director Gimmy Chu told us: "The belief that lighting should be a more joyful experience was largely what inspired the Aurora. We see the Aurora as the ultimate tool for self-expression."

The Nanoleaf Aurora Smarter Kit pack comes with nine triangular lighting panels, linker pieces that slot the panels together, tracing paper triangles so that you can experiment with shape patterns and double sided mounting tape for attaching the panels to a wall.



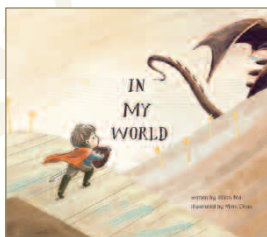
Included is a remote controller and plug.

Extension kits are also available and you can add up to 30 panels per controller. Genius.

Order the Nanoleaf Aurora Smarter Kit at Amazon for £179.99 including free shipping. Or, to use an AuKids discount (we wouldn't let you read this without one!) go to shop.nanoleaf.me where you'll get **£18 or 20 Euros off** the marked price if you type in **AUKIDS2017**.

CELEBRATE THE CHANCE FOR SOME CALM READING TIME THIS HOLIDAY WITH THESE UNIQUE CHILDREN'S BOOKS

Perfect for reading aloud together



IN MY WORLD

Jillian Ma
Illustrated by Mimi Chao
Aug 2017 36pp, illustrations
9781941765432 Paperback
£9.50 / €11.00

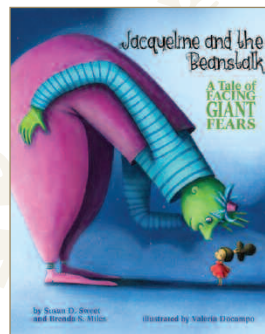
A simple, heartfelt story that follows the life of a child with autism through his

imaginative journey as he seeks to be accepted, loved, and celebrated for his strengths and abilities. This book is a powerful reminder that, with a little help from each of us, children with autism can fulfil their dreams.

Future Horizons

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JACQUELINE AND THE BEANSTALK

A Tale of Facing Giant Fears

Susan D. Sweet & Brenda S. Miles
Illustrated by Valeria Docampo
Sep 2017 32pp, illustrations
9781433826825 Hardback
£16.95 / €19.00

A princess named Jacqueline is surrounded by overprotective knights at all times. They want to protect her from

danger, but they're not even sure if there is any! When Jacqueline climbs up a beanstalk, she meets a giant who is just as afraid of the unknown. This modern retelling of a classic fairy tale helps kids face their fears so they don't miss out on the fun!

Magination Press

* Due to currency fluctuations and publisher price changes, prices charged may vary from those listed.

win with
Aukids!

PLUG IN, POP UP AND PLAY!

We all know that having their own space is important for kids with autism. We also know that a great immersive experience can provide them with superb sensory stimulation. Both benefits are combined in PODS, a pop-up, illuminated, portable sensory space designed to fit easily inside any bedroom, classroom or living space.

PODS have remote controlled internal sensory lighting to create a perfect space for children to learn and play. Although great for all kids, they make a particularly special environment for children with sensory needs.

From a wellbeing point of view, PODS is a safe space where anyone from the age of 3 can go to unwind, calm their mind and generally relax. If you want to use a colour-illuminated POD without the graphics – no problem.

Just unzip the graphics from the inside and outer layers of the POD to use lighting only, which can be controlled through your remote. Fully adjustable, the LED lights can be altered to change colour, brightness or light changing speed. In low levels of ambient light, PODS turns into a mesmerizing and engaging personal environment.

Used with graphics, small groups of children can make the POD into their own story-telling space. Pop up PODS are also an engaging place for kids to do homework on their own, as they can work as an exciting 'mini office'.

PODS was recently featured on Channel 5's

The Gadget Show. Founder and head designer Alex Ford says his illuminated invention is "the next step in children's learning and play; PODS offer an exciting alternative to digital devices and a safe and relaxing surrounding that can increase periods of play and learning for children."

He added: "We wanted to develop children's inquisitiveness for environments that wouldn't ordinarily be accessible to them - for example being high up in outer space or underwater on the floor of the ocean".

The POD is inflated and deflated within 40 seconds and comes with a storage backpack so that you can take it with you,

providing a familiar environment wherever you go. As well as being easy to store, it's easy to maintain - the removable graphics can be wiped clean.

PODS are a completely British design and each comes with its own theme – choose from Sub Aqua Quest, Galactic Space Adventure or a

Magical Princess' Palace. You can easily adapt a POD for a school or support group by buying the other themes separately for £225.

As well as in homes, PODS have been used in specialist schools, hospitals, creches, respite centres and hotels. For on the road carers it's easy to transport. For potentially stressful situations, it can provide a soothing distraction, too.



Magical Princess' Palace

Toby loves his POD, he runs around it looking at the colours and feeling the touch of the pod itself. It is just such a great idea, we have our own pop-up sensory room that we can put away.

H. Kay, Surrey

WIN A POD WORTH £899!

One lucky Aukids winner will be receiving delivery of their own POD in time for Christmas. All you have to do is complete this tie-breaker in under 35 words: **"My autistic child/ren would like this POD because..."**

Send your answer, along with your choice of either **MAGICAL PRINCESS' PALACE** or **GALACTIC SPACE ADVENTURE** and your name, address and phone number to competitions@aukids.co.uk no later than November 30th 2017 with 'POD' in the subject header, or send us a postcard to Aukids, PO Box 259, Cheadle, Cheshire SK8 9BE. Winners will be notified by email and their contact details passed onto PODS so that they can arrange delivery to suit.

Good luck!

The POD was a great success with our students, and indeed I am sure we would like to purchase one, maybe two in the near future.

M Lagner,
Chailey Heritage



Sub Aqua Quest



Galactic Space Adventure



You're off the Hook for Christmas

(Even If Your Stocking Isn't)



Great Xmas Gift Book Ideas FOR AUKIDS



Use the code X17 to get 10% off all autism books

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Offer ends December 31st



By Debby Elley, co-editor AuKids magazine

Quite a lot of autism-friendly advice is based on things you must do. So in this special festive column I'm going to focus on the opposite - things to avoid doing at Christmas.

Sit back and relax - I'm going to give you permission to skip all the 'shoulds' and the 'musts' and get through Christmas in one piece.

The first thing to avoid is buying and signing on behalf of your disinterested child 3,000 mini Christmas cards for their class in the belief that it will help them to fit in socially.

You go to plenty of effort to help your child's social skills during the year. If there's one job not worth doing, it's sending meaningless little pictures of penguins in scarves to a lot of children they hardly know because it fits in with social protocol. Choose the friends who matter.

Another thing to avoid - feeling disappointment if your child is not picked to play Mary or Joseph because they hate being on stage, hate pretending to be other people and can't remember any lines. Unless a career on stage beckons, whether they are a shepherd, a sheep or have nothing whatsoever to do with the entire play, it is no indication of their intelligence or future prospects. Their contribution has to be their own idea of what's meaningful. Re-telling an ancient biblical story may not feel that meaningful to them.

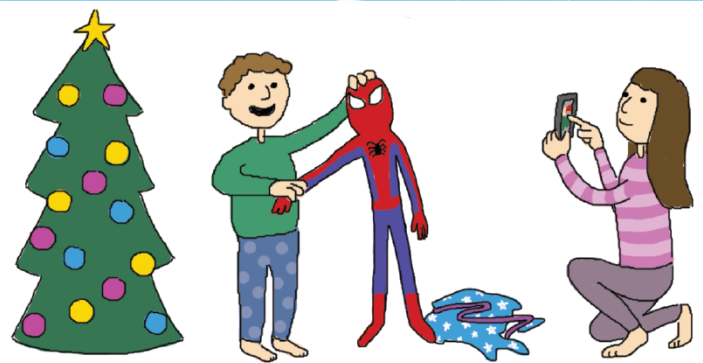
Excuse yourself from going to visit Santa at a grotto unless it's an inclusive one. Despite me thinking

this would be a sensory wonderland, mine have never enjoyed the experience. From the mile-long queue ('Good waiting!') to the strange bloke at the end of it and the highly irrelevant present (our worst was a 500-piece jigsaw) I have decided that I'm no longer up for it. Over the years, I've had to ask myself the question: 'Am I doing this because my twins want to or because this is what you are supposed to do with kids?' If it's the latter, I've learnt to ignore the temptation.

Another thing to avoid with autistic children: feeling obliged to spend the same on every child and thinking you are somehow being unfair and cruel if you don't. Buy them what you think they'll like and forget the price comparisons - they won't be doing them.

A delicate matter, this. The question of family. If being overwhelmed with heat, noise and crowds is upsetting for your child, you need to discuss beforehand seeing your family in short bursts and small doses. Christmas is no fun for parents when their children are unhappy. It may take some explaining, but if you spread out visits beyond December it will make things less stressful. Alternatively, let people come to you so that your child can 'escape' to their bedroom, but ask them to bring a dish, so that hosting doesn't mean you also have to do all the cooking.

Finally, good manners dictate that presents should be acknowledged with a thank you. Autism dictates that your child will hit the roof if they have to sit down for an afternoon and write thank-you cards. Video a little 'thank you' from them on your mobile (showing the present preferably!) and send that instead. It's still personal and works as a lovely non-verbal thanks.



Mobile Movie: For a non-verbal thank you card, send a quick mobile video message!

Happy Christmas to all our readers!



The confusing world of idioms, metaphors and everyday expressions

Twenty-five year-old **Michael Barton** started school in a Special Educational Needs unit, then progressed to mainstream with support and finally went on to gain a physics degree at the University of Surrey. He is now in full-time employment working as a Market Analyst for Dennis Publishing. An experienced speaker, he gives talks to professionals, parents, students and support groups, emphasising the positive aspects of being autistic. He is the author of the two best-sellers *It's Raining Cats and Dogs* and *A Different Kettle of Fish*, which provide a unique insight into the autistic world. He is Patron of CASPA - Life with Autism - a charity that runs youth clubs for young people on the autistic spectrum.

The English language is full of idioms, metaphors, colloquialisms and figures of speech. Particularly when I was in junior school I found it very difficult and confusing to understand what people were saying to me, due my very literal way of thinking.

Take for example "He laughed his head off". This could be quite concerning if taken literally! I remember being told to "Hang on" and wondering what to hang on to. When visiting the GP, I was asked to "take a seat". Where was I supposed to take it to?

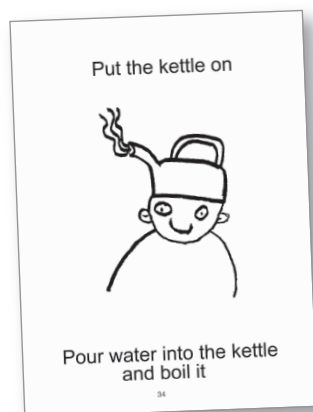
To help me make sense of these expressions my support assistant at junior school gave me an exercise book, in which I would write the expression and draw a picture of the first thing that came to mind when I heard it. She would then write the true meaning (or translation) beneath. Not only did this help me to learn a selection of confusing phrases, it helped my support assistant, other teachers and my family understand the autistic way of thinking.

It's not just idioms and metaphors that can have ambiguous meanings. Signs and instructions can also be illogical. At train stations you're often told that "Passengers must remain behind the yellow line at all times". This makes it physically impossible to board the train as the yellow line

stretches the entire length of the platform!

On GCSE exam papers, I have seen written "This page has been deliberately left blank." But it's clearly not blank with that written on it!

So, what should neurotypical people do to improve their communication? One simple solution is to just say what you mean. While it may sound rather boring, phrases and sayings that make people think they sound more interesting can often leave autistic people confused. Instead of saying "He was like a dog with two tails" (which would have me thinking "what kind of dog has two tails?"), just say "He was really happy". And when my GP said "Take a seat", he should really have said "Sit down".



Autistic people tend to be very good at focusing on details, and indeed this is why many autistic people make such good scientists. For example, Einstein wouldn't have come up with General Relativity if he didn't concentrate, focus and stick at the problem for nearly ten years! On the other hand, neurotypicals are very good at

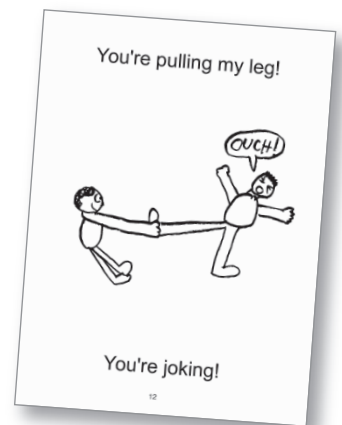
seeing the big picture and picking up context. Imagine sitting at a dinner table and being asked "Can you pass me the salt, please?" My immediate response would be "Of course I have the ability to pass you the salt!" Neurotypicals instinctively know that other people wouldn't question their ability to pass the salt and thus they easily figure out the more appropriate meaning - "Please pass me the salt".

Changing your language slightly doesn't take much effort but it saves autistic people a lot of unnecessary hassle.

It's also very important to just give autistic people that little bit more time to make sense of what you're saying. It often takes a while for autistic people to realise "Oh yeah, that's an expression. I wonder what it really means?" by which time they've lost track of the original conversation thread. They then spend the rest of the conversation playing catch-up rather than joining in.

As I found, it can take many years for autistic people to learn the meanings of each individual saying, whereas neurotypicals can easily pick them up "on the fly"

(intuitively). Hence it's important to speak clearly and without ambiguity.



So, all it takes to make autistic people's lives that much easier is to say exactly what you mean and give us a bit of extra brain processing time.

www.michaelbarton.org.uk

EDITOR'S NOTE:
Think closely about your language with non-verbal children as well. Are you asking them to 'eat up' or 'pull their chair up' when 'up' means high in the air to them?
It's easy to do!

WIN!

One lucky reader can win signed copies of both *It's Raining Cats and Dogs* and *A Different Kettle of Fish*. Just email your name and address to competitions@aukids.co.uk with **BARTON** in the subject header no later than November 30th 2017. You can also send us a nice postcard to AuKids PO Box 259 Cheadle Cheshire SK8 9BE. We never get any, but live in hope. One winner will be chosen at random after the closing date.



Good luck!

LADS & DADS

WHEN your son is autistic, life isn't quite what you thought it would be. But the dads we know have found plenty of ways to bond in a blokey way, even if it's not playing keepy uppies in the park! Here are some great examples from our readers to make you smile...

Laurence & Trevor

I have an autistic son, Laurence, who is now 15 years old. We share the same interests in computer games, especially Minecraft, so I have built a Minecraft server in our house so we can play in the same world and talk over headphones. His favourite holiday with just me was when I took him to the Minecon weekend event in London, the whole of the Excel Centre dedicated to his favourite game!

Now I regularly take him to London as a day out on the trains, DLR, Tube and buses, with a visit to Borough Market so he can buy his favourite Biltong. Oh, we also built a home arcade machine during this summer break...

BUILDING BUDDIES:
Laurence and Trevor build an arcade in the back garden. As you do...



...hanging out at MineCon 2015

Joe & Andy

Our front cover star Joe's dad Andy is a policeman and this has created a special bond and a shared interest. Andy says: "Joe is very interested in the police and loves to come to the police station to meet the other officers. He enjoys going to the family events, looking at the different vehicles and finding out about the equipment they have.

Joe and I also enjoy swimming and going to the cinema together."



MINI ME:
Joe loves wearing a police uniform, just like his dad.

SPIN DOCTOR:
Being spun by his dad is great therapy for Andrew!

Andrew & Rik

Andrew's mum Laura tells us: 'Andrew is both deaf and autistic, and is physically very sensory seeking - he loves to spin, be thrown around, to bounce and to swing. Dads are perfect for this - Andrew's Dad Rik is just as boisterous as his little boy.

'The huge smiles on Andrew's face, the fits of giggles, the sheer joy is plain to see - he loves his Dad and knows that, the louder he laughs, the more his Dad will play with him. Happy Andrew = happy Daddy = happy family!'



Aaron & Ben

My son Aaron is just about to turn 16. He attends a mainstream secondary school and has 15 hours of support. One of the things that has helped us to bond over the past couple of years has been music. He has always liked music but having recently taken up the bass guitar, he has developed a keen interest in a much broader range of musical styles and genres.

Before this he sometimes struggled to talk about things outside of his specific field of interest (which was mostly Nintendo related!). Now he loves to talk to me about new tunes he has discovered and we talk about different elements of them. Sometimes we'll end up singing in unison as we walk along. He encourages me to watch YouTube videos of the songs he likes and plays me music he has produced on his computer.

As a drummer myself it has also been great to 'jam' together. He also plays with other groups and it has been great to see him progress.

Music is more far reaching than some of his previous hobbies and has enabled us to discuss a huge range of issues and emotions. I hope it will be a passion we continue to share for years to come.



INSEPARABLE:
Eric and Laszlo
taking a rest
from tickling



IN TUNE:
Ben and his
musical
son Aaron

Erik & Laszlo

Erik is almost 4 years old (in December). His family came from Hungary to live in Sutton six years ago.

Laszlo says: "I think bonding is finding that special activity that is unique to me and my son. Something that creates memories that will always be with him, and make him smile. For my Erik and I, it's something a little different. Erik is non-verbal but he can clearly show me if he wants tickling. He just pulls up his T-shirt and says "Pfffff!" He jumps on me and we are laughing and laughing.

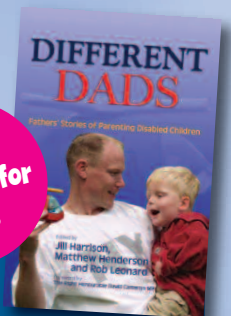
"Almost four years into fatherhood, it is not easy but I know my son and he knows me and tomorrow we'll know each other even better."

Alec & Gavin

Co-editor Debby's husband Gavin has a special bond with their autistic twin sons Bobby and Alec. Alec is non-verbal, but he and his dad have plenty of in-jokes. Gavin always pretends to eat the last mouthful of Alec's pudding and they have a play fight over the spoon. Alec thinks it's hilarious and even says 'Mine!'

Gavin also does 'Tickle Time' for Alec at night. "Alec vocalizes really loudly when he wants to be tickled and he loves the anticipation," Gavin explains. "We sometimes do a countdown to tickles from ten, and because he is really motivated he makes great attempts at saying the numbers". Tickles from anyone else are inferior – only dad will do!

TWO'S COMPANY:
Gavin and
Alec share
mealtime fun



Great Reading for Dads

Different Dads - Fathers' Stories of Parenting Disabled Children

Edited by Jill Harrison, Matthew Henderson and Rob Leonard

Published by Jessica Kingsley Publishers

MY SON'S NOT RAINMAN

THE FINALE

John Williams was a stand-up comic long before he had a son with autism. Later, as a single dad facing the clash of cultures between the non-autistic world and his own, he decided to share his own life with readers of his blog, the ingeniously titled *My Son's Not Rainman*. John described his own world in refreshingly honest technicolour comedy. He didn't hide its challenges. With deep love for his son and self-deprecating humour, he took our own experiences as parents and reflected them back at us.

After the blog came the show by the same title. Last year, John's book, published by Michael O' Mara, marked the end of the road for this particular project. His son was growing up and the story was ever-changing. John didn't want to get stuck in a time warp.

AuKids' 2016 hosting of *My Son's Not Rainman* to raise funds for our magazine was such a success that we decided to repeat it this year – bigger and better than ever before. With help from the Stockport Plaza, John Williams brings the grand finale of *My Son's Not*

Rainman to you in great style on November 7th. The Plaza's General Manager, Ted Doan, said: "Stockport Plaza prides itself on being fully inclusive, with performances for everyone. This show, with autism at its heart, will be enjoyed by many parents, carers and teachers who spend their lives caring for others. We welcome them and hope that they really enjoy a rare night off!"

We'd just like to say a big thank you to John... he made autism accessible for those

who knew nothing about it and questioned any assumptions that being an autism parent makes you downtrodden or sad.

.....
"These children had spent their lives being dismissed as being unable to communicate, yet they imparted their needs loud and clear in their every action."
.....

The blog, the show and the book show the world the beauty as well as the challenges of autism.

They're a fine example of what comedy can achieve.

To celebrate his last show, we're giving away three signed copies of *My Son's Not Rainman*. To give you a flavour of the book, we've reproduced an extract.

In this chapter, John describes his job at a

children's care home - a respite centre for children with severe disabilities. He says 'I loved the sound of it - a place for the children to play, have fun, do whatever they wanted to do and be whoever they wanted to be without the constraints of having to follow a learning plan or strict rules'. He describes it as the most 'incredible job I'd ever had... What struck me the most was how these children had spent their lives being dismissed as being unable to communicate, yet they imparted their needs loud and clear in their every action. Every cry and every smile - in some cases, even every blink. The irony is that they were talking to a deaf world.'

The author then describes how his son - known in the blog and the book as 'The Boy' - visited the centre with him...in the run up to Christmas, we rather liked the anecdote that followed.

“ The Boy used to come and visit the respite centre. He loved it. There was a sensory room, a soft-play room, an IT suite and six bedrooms. We'd pop in now and then when I wasn't working, say 'Hello' to some of the young people and stop for dinner. He always wanted to stay the night, loved the idea of the bath that moved up and down when you pressed a button



and always eyed with suspicion the young person who'd be staying in room three – that was the room he wanted to stay the night in. It had a television and some of the older boys would try to sneak a peek at Babestation if you didn't catch them quickly.

My favourite memory of that time was the Christmas party. All the young people were invited and the Salvation Army band came along for carols that no one wanted as it was just delaying the sausage rolls. It was a brilliant event.

I was asked to be Father Christmas. I agreed. Like most immature men of advancing years I had a costume at the ready and a body that had long been in training for such a momentous occasion. There was one condition though; The Boy would have to come with me.

I sat him down and explained that Father Christmas had asked us to do him a favour. The Big Man couldn't make it to the party himself as he was so busy getting ready and wanted to know if we could help him out. I would be Father Christmas and he'd asked The Boy to be an elf. The Boy happily agreed.

At first the elf costume was, of course, too itchy and the pointy ears I purchased were never going to happen, nor the red, rosy cheeks. But after some cajoling and with 'normal' clothes underneath, the elf was sort of dressed for the occasion.

I'll be honest, I hadn't really thought the whole thing through. I imagined it would just be Santa sitting in his big chair while at his feet perched his doe-eyed elf, looking up at him with wide-eyed wonderment, passing presents to the delighted children who wandered in with their parents.

The staff had spent a week turning the sensory room into a grotto. That's what I loved

about that place and they'd completely gone to town on it. The party was only scheduled to run for two hours, but here was a grotto any department store would be proud of.

.....
"The bravest people in the world aren't necessarily the loudest and that there's courage in the small things, in the everyday."

Once we arrived and I went to get changed into my costume in the staff sleep-in room, I was trying to remind The Boy not to call me Daddy. 'It's your name,' he said. I reminded him that I was meant to be Santa and he was meant to be an elf. He nodded, said 'I know' and then called me Daddy every time he spoke to me. I just told all the bewildered-looking children and parents who filed in that 'I was like a father' to the elves in the workshop.

And so began one of the strangest one hundred and twenty minutes of my life. The Boy loved every bit of it. Between banging presents on the floor and eating mince pies, it turned out he had quite a lot to say to the children who came to visit Santa that day. As gentle Christmas music filled the sparkling festive sanctuary, I gave a performance Sir Ian McKellen would have been proud of. And as I talked wistfully about magic dust and children sleeping soundly while the sleigh bells tinkled in the cold December night, the elf had his own script to work from.

'BE GOOD OR YOU WON'T GET ANYTHING!' he barked at them. 'WILL THEY, DADDY?'

As I asked each child what they wanted for Christmas, the elf would once again pass his opinion.

'I'VE GOT THAT.'

'YOU CAN'T WATCH THAT. IT'S GOT SWEARING IN.'

'RUBB-ISH.'

Then came the lovely photograph with Father Christmas, a memory to cherish for years to come. And, as each parent went to capture the moment, with perfect timing a wild-eyed grimacing elf would suddenly leap up to occupy the screen where their loved one was meant to be. As the child went to leave, I asked the elf to pass me a small, wrapped present for them to take away. Each time he just threw the present in the general direction of the door for them to collect on their way out.

'IT'S A SELECTION BOX. THEY'RE ALL THE SAME.'

I've done lots of jobs in my lifetime. Some crap ones, some not so crap. Yet I

genuinely can't think of a single position that has even come close to teaching me as much about life and the human condition as those two years in the care home. I think I'd have stayed longer if The Boy's school days hadn't once again become unsettled. I learnt that the bravest people in the world aren't necessarily the loudest and that there's courage in the small things, in the everyday. I learnt that loving someone isn't always about walking over hot coals or making big bold statements and declarations. It can often be about doing the things you don't want to do, day after day. And I learnt that while McDonald's might not provide the most nutritious food in the land, it doesn't half come in handy when you're trying to coax someone out of the sea and into the back of a minibus.

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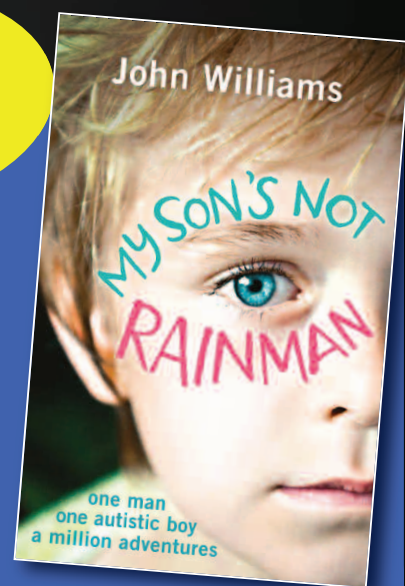
To win your signed copy of *My Son's Not Rainman* in time for Christmas, simply answer this question:

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My Son's Not Rainman is published by Michael O' Mara books at www.mombooks.com and is also available as an E-book. It is available directly from the publisher or through Amazon for £7.99.



When we learn the definition of autism, three key elements are mentioned, but only two of them are generally well explained. Problems with communication and social interaction are relatively easy to understand, but what exactly does 'imagination' refer to? Why is it sometimes described as 'flexibility of thought'? Are they both the same thing?

This issue, we're delving a little deeper into our Autism Sundae Dessert to identify the true flavour of this mystery ingredient.

By Debby Elley



Some years ago, AuKids came up with the Autism Sundae Dessert. It was a simple way of describing the various aspects of autism. On the run up to our tenth birthday, we want to delve a little deeper. A strawberry scoop of ice-cream was used to describe 'Imagination' (see opposite panel), and this is our focus for this feature.

The fact that an aspect of autism goes by so many different names shows just how confusing this subject is. Is it lack of imagination, flexibility of thought or restrictive behaviour? Is it all three?

To find out where these terms come from, let's grab a hefty clinical book from the shelf.

The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)* is a book developed by the American Psychiatric Association that classifies mental health disorders and conditions. It's unfortunate (to say the least) that the definition of autism should be listed in a book dedicated to mental disorders, but there it is. Autism means the brain works differently and tradition therefore lumps it under mental health.

In the previous version of the manual, the DSM-IV, an autism diagnosis was based on a triad of symptoms, which were known in autism circles as 'the triad of impairments'. These were language delays, social communication deficits and repetitive or restrictive behaviours.

Please don't be offended by the lack of anything

positive here, these are clinical descriptions and unfortunately passed on to parents with no thought as to whether they'd like to hear about the positive side of autism, too.

According to the new DSM-V criteria, autism diagnosis guidelines are reduced to two areas – social interaction (including language and social communication deficits) and repetitive or restrictive behaviours.



The flip side of not being able to see the wood for the trees is being very good at seeing trees.



We think of repetitive and restrictive behaviour as lining up things or talking about one particular hobby. How does this marry with imagination though?

Restrictive and repetitive behaviours and lack of pretend play all have the same root cause. Some term this lack of flexibility of thought. The brain works in a concrete, rather than abstract way. It's caused by autistic brains having lots of short-range connections and a lack of long-range ones. Good at seeing

detail, poorer at generalizing.

So, lack of pretend play doesn't actually mean that our kids lack imagination FULL STOP. It is just an early symptom of lack of flexibility of thought.

The first time that I came to grips with the term 'imagination' as used in the context of autism was when I realised that my twin toddlers didn't grasp the concept of pretend play.

They wanted to open and close pretend oven doors but not to use the plastic frying pan and food for their intended purpose. When faced with a toy telephone, Alec would press all the buttons but never put it to his ear. I ended up throwing away a toy farmyard, because no amount of my convincing clucking would persuade them that the white plastic thing was a hen.

This imitation indicates learning through play and it's rather worrying when it fails to materialise. So as parents, I think lack of imaginative play is one of our first inklings that something isn't quite right.

Perhaps that's why we stick like glue to the idea that 'lack of imagination' in the definition of autism means the inability to pretend or to dream up new things.

Autistic people can be hugely imaginative, though. The number of scientists and inventors on the

spectrum tell us that new ideas and original thinking really isn't a problem for them. In fact, quite the opposite. They aren't as influenced by other people as the rest of us, so are more likely to come up with radical solutions to age-old problems.

So the phrase 'lack of imagination' ends up causing a lot of confusion.

Pretend play means making a mental flip from *what is* to *what could be*. Where one thing represents another, a small leap of the imagination has been aided by different parts of the brain talking to each other. This is what we mean by flexibility of thought.

The ability to use our flexibility of thought to make a new situation bearable is something that provides us all with comfort and we take it for granted.

When we are going to a new place, we use our mental filing cabinets to collate past experiences and inform us about how to tackle new ones. This takes long-range brain connections.

In autism, those connections that give people the ability to compile and generalise don't work as effectively. As Peter Vermeulen puts it in his book *Autism as Context Blindness*, it's as if the autistic brain is an orchestra without a conductor. Individual soloists are great but the orchestra doesn't work together very efficiently as a whole.



Without this ability, new things can seem frightening.

Much of the stress and anxiety that autistic people experience is caused by fear of change or of the unknown. Sticking to the tried and tested (repetition) is for them a survival tool, to compensate for lack of flexibility.

As with much of autism, there is good news, however. Some prefer to say that this is simply a different thinking style. As one journalist put it, the flip side of not being able to see the wood for the trees is being very good at seeing trees. Although autistic people aren't always able to jump from one point in the brain to another, their more localised brain activity can be very powerful, which is why they often have an eye for detail.

Here's how you can help where rigidity might cause difficulties:

Join the Dots

When helping them to interpret a social situation, encourage your child to look in the right places for clues. What happened before a person became upset? What do we know that could help us interpret their emotions? This joining the dots doesn't happen naturally but you can get better at it through being shown what to look for.

Help with a Hook

In new situations, remind your child of all the key things about it that are familiar or similar to other things they already know.

Plain Speaking

Remind yourself that literal thinking can get in the way of understanding language and adapt your own language accordingly, or even better, explain it.

Small Steps

Take small, slow steps towards change with lots of preparation.

Mark Progress

At the start of a change, ask your child to mark their anxiety out of 10. After they have adapted to

something new, ask them to score how it makes them feel again. Show them the difference and what a little flexibility can achieve. As you store up examples, they can be used in future.

Connect to Adapt

To encourage trying new things, link them to your child's favourite hobbies or people. The more secure elements there are in a new situation, the easier it will be. Bear in mind that comforting things, including special interests, provide an anchor when new things are threatening. They are a survival tool.

It's All Down to Experience

As kids grow, they gather more and more experiences and so learn by doing that things can be okay. Don't force new experiences but do be aware that a back catalogue of them is very useful as your child develops!

With thanks to Richard Mills, Research Director at the NAS.

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The Autism Sundae Dessert

AuKids' Autism Sundae Dessert is a simple way of describing the main aspects of autism. The dessert is presented in a dish, representing your child's personality. The entire look of the dessert depends on that dish! The Neopolitan ice-cream relates to the core aspects of autism – chocolate for communication, vanilla for social interaction and strawberry for flexibility of thought.

Chocolate sauce is sensory issues – it covers the core aspects of autism. How do you know whether someone's difficulty socially is actually down to sensory issues? It's hard to distinguish, until you make their environment comfortable.

A chocolate Flake represents 'behaviour issues'. People sometimes think the

'challenging behaviour' is part and parcel of autism. It isn't, it's caused by a distressed response to the environment. Behaviour difficulties can be removed just like the Flake.

Strawberry sauce represents other conditions that can confuse the autism picture – much of the time we aren't looking at autism on its own.

Sprinkles are the things that autistic people are great at. Finally, a cherry on the top is to represent expertise, often caused by repetition and attention to detail.

See our full Autism Sundae Dessert article in Issue 20. Please credit AuKids magazine when you use it.





The Last Word

Usually by Debby Elley, guest columnist Ernie.

New Cat on the Block

Hi, the name's Elley. Ernie Elley. I'm Debby's new cat – licence to claw carpets. I came from a loving home but they were out quite a lot and felt that I needed more company. Boy, did I bite off more than I could chew here. I mean there's company and there's company.

Let me start by telling you about the adult human who wasn't that bothered about getting a pet...

When they're all out the room, he makes a serious fuss of me. He comes through the door at 6.30pm and I am the first person he greets. His hypocrisy is outstanding even for a human.

There are two young humans here and let me tell you they're weird. One of them bounces against the sofa continuously and makes loud whoopy sounds. He has tried to stroke me a few times with Debby saying the words 'gentle, Alec, gentle'. He seems scared he will

hurt me. He won't, because I've got the sort of boxing credentials that Mohammed Ali would be proud of – and I've got claws to boot. He'll learn.

Just in case he doesn't learn, I've found a broom cupboard that is bigger than all of the humans. I sit on top of it and blow raspberries at them. Sorry to sound smug, but there is no way that shouty human will reach me from here.

The other young human seems to be taking a while to get used to me. He says 'Yo, Ernie' occasionally and he flaps like a giant bird. When I looked up from my bowl after he did this, he said 'Sorry Ernie, just go eat your dinner'. He tried to show me cat videos on You Tube the other day, but I'm not interested in that sort of low-brow humour. I wouldn't be stupid enough to fall into a laundry basket.

Oh wait, I just did.



Why on earth does this human wear ear defenders? I'm not THAT loud.

Alec and Ernie

If you care for a child or young person with autism, you'll soon be able to access a comprehensive range of support from Seashell Trust.

We'll be offering training and events for the families of autistic children covering the everyday issues you face, from promoting independence and encouraging communication to health and mental well-being and understanding behaviours.

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Email us today to register your interest: info@seashelltrust.org.uk

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