

Autkids

Issue 1
Summer 2008
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Positive parenting for children with ASD

Launch Issue!

INSIDE:

Rhythm of Change –
Kids find a voice through
music therapy

The Buffer Zone –
It's full steam ahead for
new *Thomas* theme park

What makes your toddler tick?
Ask our expert panel

PLUS – WIN a brand new
animation DVD and
computer game



Tori Houghton
Editor, AuKids



Letter from the Editors

Welcome to AuKids

Welcome to our first edition of *AuKids* magazine, designed especially for parents of children on the autism spectrum. We want to bring you a mixture of features, ideas and personal stories, all designed to inspire you in your quest to find the best positive parenting techniques for your child.

Every person is unique, and that's as true for a child on the autism spectrum as it is for any other. Given that, we've designed *AuKids* to be a magazine where parents can find some common ground. As an example, our first 'expert panel' feature is on spinning, a common past time for those with ASD. Throughout the magazine, we've gathered together the freshest information possible to help your child get the most from their precious early years.

Who are we?

I'm Tori Houghton, a Speech and Language Therapist working in the Stockport area, specialising in autism. I first met deputy editor Debby Elley when I came across her twin boys Bobby and Alec, who are both on the autistic spectrum. Soon we were snapping up each other's hints and ideas and passing them on.

During speech therapy sessions, we would often talk about babysitting, places to visit and other key resources for parents of young autistic children. I thought it would be fantastic to collate the ideas into a single publication.

Having worked as a journalist, Debby was the obvious choice for this professional-parent partnership.

What's in a name?

Why *AuKids*? Orchids are beautiful flowers – special and unique. They need the right conditions in which to grow and flourish. Subtle changes in the environment can make a huge difference to these delicate plants. There is a pre-conception that orchids are hard to grow. Actually, if you find out about them, begin to understand them and adapt to what they need, they – like our children – can turn out to be exceptional. We took a few liberties with the spelling and then we had it – *AuKids*.

Inside

In this issue, you'll find plenty of ideas. For our cover story, we've talked to an experienced music therapist to find out exactly what it involves.

We've also cherry picked some great places to visit, including the new Thomas Land at Drayton Manor Theme Park – bound to be very popular with lots of children who are on the autism spectrum.

We hope that *AuKids* will become a great parenting tool for you, as well as a really enjoyable read. Sit down, put your feet up, and take a closer look...

Tori Houghton
Editor, *AuKids*

auidsmag@googlemail.com



Debby Elley, with Alec, husband Gavin and Bobby
Deputy Editor, AuKids



What would you do with more time?

Do you spend all of your time doing the daily routine?

We can help to provide more time to do the things you want.

We provide specialist babysitters to families of children with autism in the Manchester area, whether this is for a well earned night out or just a spare pair of hands to let you do things round the house.

Time babysitters all want to work with children with autism and can provide the classic babysitting or act as a buddy for your child to give you that much needed time for yourself.

For more information please go to our website
www.timebabysitting.com

Or phone us: 07942 815845



New animation is a galaxy of fun

The first commercial cartoon series and computer game designed for kids with ASD has blasted onto our screens! *The Space Place* features 12 computer-animated stories focusing on the link between emotions and facial expression. Eight characters, all lunar vehicles, come to life after their space museum closes its doors for the night. Their computerised faces form definite expressions that are central to the story and the dialogue. The animation series is narrated by Rob Rackstraw, the voice behind Bob the Builder's Spud.

The DVD's Fun 'n' Games menu allows children to play four interactive games, too. A CD-Rom game is included in the pack alongside the DVD, allowing kids to play *Spot the Face* – a game for recognising emotions – in 3D. For play time away from the screen, the set also includes a pack of colour-coded playing cards, each illustrated with a character and emotion.

Catalyst MD Nik Lever believes that the UK studio has come up with a powerful learning tool. 'With regular exposure to teaching tools such as this, children with autism can dramatically improve their awareness of expressions and the emotions that cause them, and be able to transfer this learning to different situations,' he says.

'Children on the spectrum tend to love programmes with vehicles, such as Thomas the Tank Engine and Roary the Racing Car. We're capitalising on this interest, so that whilst they're watching they can be advancing their social skills too.'

The Space Place has been endorsed by renowned developmental psychologist Dr Janine Spencer, who established the Centre for Research in Infant Behaviour (CRIB Lab) based at Brunel University. She says: 'This is an invaluable learning resource for children on the autism spectrum, who can also benefit from the accompanying interactive games.'

The DVD and CD-Rom pack is £39. Order through the Catalyst website at www.spaceplace.tv or call 0161 339 3353 quoting AuKids.

AuKids has free copies of The Space Place to give away to five lucky readers. All you have to do is write to us with your views on our launch issue. What do you like? What would you change? Have you any great ideas to add? Send your views to auidsmag@googlemail.com no later than September 15 2008, stating your name, address and contact number. The first five answers will win a DVD from Catalyst Video Ltd. Only one entry per person.

Foundation funds AuKids launch issue



The team behind *AuKids* magazine would like to give a big thank-you to the Joshua Short Foundation, which has covered the cost of printing our launch issue. Lesley Short, who runs the foundation, told AuKids how the charity can help children with ASD:

'The Joshua Short Foundation was set up in June 2006 and is named after our son Joshua, who was diagnosed with autism in September 2003. We run annual workshops for parents of children with a recent diagnosis. A range of professionals host these workshops and parents don't have to worry about childcare – the foundation also funds a crèche for children and their siblings.'

'Feedback has been positive and we hope to extend the workshops in the coming year.'

For further information about the charity, or if you have fundraising ideas or would like to donate items for the annual auction at Bramhall Golf Club, please e-mail lesleyannshort@hotmail.com

News

Conference dates for your diary

The 5th annual autism conference in Stockport, organised by professionals and parents, will be held on November 5 2008 at the Pinewood Medical Education Centre, Stepping Hill Hospital, Stockport. The conference fee is £30 for parents. Among the many topics covered will be challenging behaviour, autism in girls, ASD and ADHD and bullying. To find out more or apply for a place, contact Tanya Farley on 07966 399 709.

The National Autistic Society's own 2008 conference will be held at the Novotel London West Hotel from September 19–20. For details on how to apply for a place, contact The National Autistic Society Conference and Events Department on 0115 911 3367, fax 0115 911 3362 or via e-mail to conference@nas.org.uk.

Help is at hand!

A Support Group for parents who have a child with autism is held monthly from 7pm–8.30pm at Independent Options, 67 Chester Rd, Hazel Grove. Get advice from professionals and compare notes with other parents. Forthcoming sessions include: Behaviour issues – July 29; Using visuals – August 21; Obsessions – Sept. 23; Education Issues – Oct. 23 and CADS/Sharecare – Nov. 25. For details contact Cheryl Salt or Becky Jackson on 0161 249 4474.

How was it for you?

The Care Services Improvement Partnership (CSIP) is conducting research through the National Autistic Society to find out how diagnostic services in the North West could be improved. Interviews with parents will be taking place throughout June and July. Research findings will result in a set of best practice recommendations about the identification and diagnosis of ASDs in the North West. For further information call 0161 998 7860.

Blokes Can Talk Too!

A new support group for dads of autistic kids has been set up in Stockport. The Autistic Spectrum Disorder Dads Support Group, or ASDADS, meets informally at the Arden Arms in Stockport on the last Thursday of the month from 7.30pm–9.00pm and is free to join. For details call Jonathan on 0161 439 7773.

Drop into Inscape

The Living with Autism group continues to thrive at the Inscape Centre in Cheadle. Parents and carers are invited to get together, share information and give support. For details of the group call Sue Allison on 0161 283 4750.

And finally...

We'd like to extend our thanks to: graphic designer Sarah McCall (sarah.mccall@ntlworld.com), who has weaved pure magic with our words, as well as cartoonists Justin Wyatt (www.phantomdoodler.co.uk) and Dave Noonan who have also given their time for free; to the Joshua Short Foundation (lesleyannshort@hotmail.com) for covering printing costs, to Creative Print (lee@cp-s.co.uk), to our expert panellists and to parents Tanya, Deborah and Rick.

Dancing To Their Own Tune

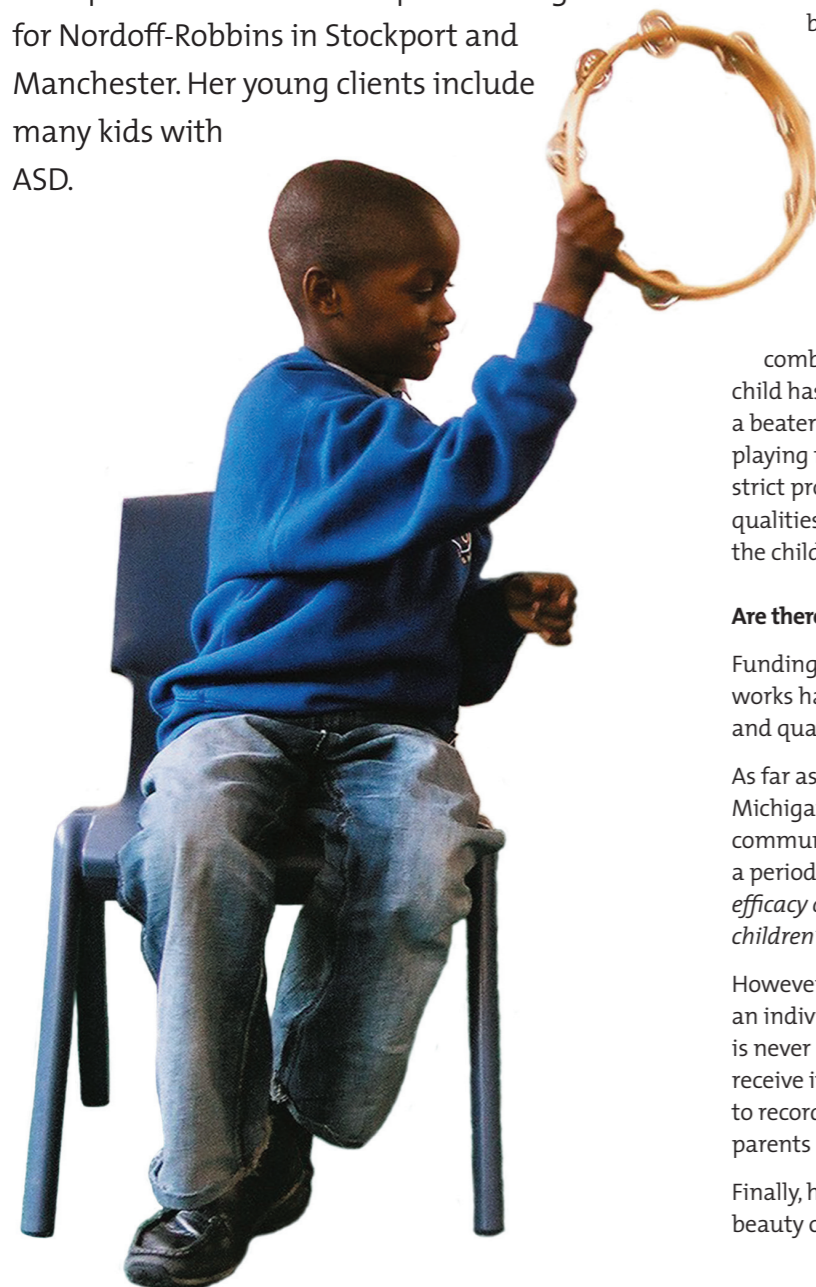


Brigitte Schwarting

So many therapies, so much information – but which ones are right for your child? In this regular section, *AuKids* will be helping you to decide by giving you facts at your fingertips.

The first of our therapy features focuses on music, often thought to be a gateway through which kids with ASD can begin to communicate.

To find out more, we spoke to Brigitte Schwarting, an experienced music therapist working for Nordoff-Robbins in Stockport and Manchester. Her young clients include many kids with ASD.



What inspired you to become a music therapist?

Both my parents were professional musicians and believed in music as a life force. I am the third of four children; the oldest has severe learning difficulties and lived with us at home until he was 30. With the experience of an older mentally disabled brother and an immersion into music, I learnt very early on that music can reach far beyond words.

What exactly does a music therapist do?

A music therapist holds individual or group sessions with clients, who might have special physical, emotional, neurological, social or developmental needs. They invite the client to improvise music with them on simple instruments or the voice and use these shared, spontaneous improvisations to bring about positive changes. These could be developing listening skills, lengthening attention span or furthering cognitive development. It is also beneficial for developing speech and language skills, learning to initiate, increasing confidence and self-esteem and improving relationships.

What happens during a session?

Every child and every session may be different, but all music therapy is based on joint musical improvisation between client and therapist. There will be a range of simple percussion instruments available, and a piano. The child may play several different combinations of instruments during a session. Sometimes the child has to get used to the idea of using an instrument or holding a beater first and then slowly develop an ability to sustain their playing for more than just a moment. Rather than following a strict programme, the therapist will improvise using the musical qualities in a child's playing to guide them, and meet and engage the child.

Are there any studies that show the effectiveness of music therapy?

Funding agencies' demand for evidence that music therapy works has grown steadily. A lot of research, both qualitative and quantitative, has been undertaken to meet this demand.

As far as autism is concerned, a 1994 study by Cindy Edgerton from Michigan State University measured the musical and non-musical communicative behaviours in children during music therapy over a period of ten sessions. The study (quote): *'strongly suggests the efficacy of improvisational music therapy in increasing autistic children's communicative behaviours'*.

However, there is difficulty in providing scientific proof that an individual has benefited from music therapy, because there is never an identical individual in a control group who did not receive it. Also, the undertaking of research is complex: in order to record change in the client's daily life, close contact with parents and carers is needed.

Finally, how do you measure instillation of hope, experience of beauty or the joy of being creative?



How have autistic pupils benefited from music therapy in the past?

At the school for children on the autistic spectrum where I work (Grange School, Rusholme) teaching staff have observed remarkable changes as a result of music therapy.

One 12 year-old boy has liked coming for his music therapy ever since it started. Outside the room, he was painfully shy, hid his face behind his hands and never made eye contact. In the sessions there was beating of the drum with maximum strength, maximum noise, chaotic and uncontrolled, unsynchronised beating, which often got faster and was accompanied by high-pitched shrieking.

I accompanied this with very energetic and strong music, providing pulse and structure, but offering brief experiences of contrasting music. Over the course of a year, his playing became less driven, more controlled and he started to sing.

His confidence has grown, his posture and voice outside the music room are completely changed, and he talks and jokes.

Another child comes for music therapy sessions with his class – six children aged seven and eight. They started last September. He found the sessions really difficult at the beginning, sitting on his chair facing away from the group and me, covering his ears with his hands and making loud repetitive noises to ward off what he must have perceived as a threatening wall of sound. In the following five sessions he experienced repeatedly 'being met in the music' and his sounds being answered and related to in the improvisations.

Carefully selected activities brought structure to the session and aroused his interest. He learned to trust the situation, sat facing forward with his ears uncovered and dared to make eye contact occasionally with me. In session six he came in giving me a huge, beautiful smile. Now he volunteers for instruments, he responds in the 'Hello' song and takes turns.

How much does it cost?

It's about £18 per session, which includes listening back to the audio work and analysing it.

How often does the child attend and how long do you see them for?

Normally a child will come for a weekly session, which lasts half an hour. I think that a short intervention of six to ten sessions can have a profound effect on a child, but in the area of ASD I would imagine working with a child for one to three years.

When searching for a music therapist, what should I be looking for?

'Music therapist' is a protected title and only individuals who have undergone this very specialised training at one of six UK institutes can call themselves a music therapist. We have to register with the Health Professions Council and fulfil their requirements for continuing personal development. The Health Professions Council at www.hpc-uk.org holds a list of all accredited music therapists. Most of us are also members of the Association of Professional Music Therapists (www.apmt.org), which can advise on music therapy services nationwide.

Paul Nordoff/Clive Robbins – *Music Therapy for Handicapped Children*, published by Rudolf Steiner Publications 1965.

Leslie Bunt – *Music Therapy – An Art Beyond Words*, published by Routledge 1994

Helen Patey and Rachel Darnley-Smith – *Music Therapy*, published by Sage Publications Ltd, 2003.



Nordoff-Robbins Music Therapy is the UK's largest music therapy charity with a clinic and training centre in London and 40 outreach projects all over the UK. Look up www.nordoff-robbins.org.uk for further information. The regional office for Nordoff-Robbins in the North West is at Chethams School of Music. E-mail us at nrmt.northwest@nordoff-robbins.org.uk

Ask the panel

‘Why does my son constantly spin things and what can I do to help him?’

The debate:

Why this repetitive behaviour is a common feature in autism has been the cause of much debate. Is it purely a pleasurable experience or something far more – a way of coping with stress, perhaps, or a method of regulating confusing sensory input? And should we as parents try to limit the time spent on this obsessive behaviour? We put the question to our expert panel.



Julia Dyer MCSP BSc (Hons)

Julia is an independent physiotherapist and advanced sensory integration practitioner based in Clitheroe, Lancashire.

For details look up www.juliadyer.com or call 07752 365 487



Tanya Farley

Tanya has an autistic son and is an organiser of Stockport’s annual *Autism – A Hands On Approach* conference.



Luke Beardon

Luke is Senior Lecturer in Autism at The Autism Centre, Sheffield Hallam University

Contact him at l.beardon@shu.ac.uk



Joan O’Rafferty MSc Dip COT

Joan is a highly specialised Occupational Therapist and independent practitioner.

Contact her at joan.orafferty@googlemail.com

‘From a sensory integration perspective, children who spin objects are often seeking sensory input from their vestibular (movement and balance) system and/or their visual system. These systems are closely linked, which is why we feel motion sickness when there is a mismatch between vestibular and visual information.’

‘It is thought that children who seek sensory input are under responsive to sensory input and this leads to them actively seeking out sensory input – hence the term ‘sensory seeking’. In order to work out the sensory systems that are involved, I would need to look for clusters of signs/behaviours which indicate a difficulty processing information in that system.’

‘In terms of changing this behaviour, one strategy would be to identify alternative sensory activities that meet the same sensory need for your son. For example, if your son was seeking vestibular (movement and balance) input, you might provide him with a trampoline to bounce on which would provide vestibular input but in an acceptable way. Many children with autistic spectrum disorder have sensory processing problems and I would recommend an assessment of your son’s sensory needs to identify the cause of the behaviour.’

‘I enjoyed spinning coins or lids round and round, intensely preoccupied with the movement of the spinning coin or lid. I saw nothing or heard nothing. People around me were transparent’

Temple Grandin, an adult with autism, from *Emergence Labelled Autistic*

‘Repetitive behaviours are a common feature in the autistic condition. Spinning things gives your son some kind of sensory feedback or buzz – he likes doing it in the same way we may like to watch TV or sit on Google! It also enables him to focus in on an activity that’s safe, consistent, and predictable and tune out of a busy, uncertain, stressful world.’

‘Try using this activity to broaden the chances of interaction with your son:

Spin with him. Mirror him in effect just quietly following what he is doing and see what his reaction is. Persevere with this – he will eventually reference you and note that you are trying to join him.’

‘Depending on the child’s level of understanding he may get to the point when he will engage in activities on the promise of spinning time to follow – i.e. you allocate a special time in the day when he can have a box of ‘spinners’ and spin to his heart’s content.’

‘Just keep trying, be creative and flexible.’

*Proprioception is the sense of the relative position of neighbouring parts of the body. It is the sense that indicates whether the body is moving with required effort, as well as where the various parts of the body are located in relation to each other.

‘Why does he do this? Impossible to answer without meeting him, but potential reasons include (in order of likelihood in my opinion):

1. Sensory pleasure (probably visual, but potentially vestibular or proprioceptive* as well, especially if he is spinning himself)
2. Enjoyment of repetitive routine
3. Control of his own behaviour’

‘You could certainly encourage the activity within appropriate boundaries (temporal and social) by providing him with lots of lovely things to spin; if he likes spinning himself try one of those poles with discs at the bottom to stand on and whizz around, they’re great fun and a lot more convenient than having a roundabout installed in the house! If there is a problem with him spinning inappropriate things (baby brother, fish tank etc.) colour code things so he knows what is ‘allowed’ and what is not, but make sure he always has something available. Remember, all behaviour has a purpose, and something that in all probability causes a great deal of pleasure and satisfaction should not be taken away!’

‘Spinning objects and other self-stimulating behaviours may occur for one or more of the following reasons: 1) in times of stress with a new or unfamiliar situation; 2) when the environment is too busy – spinning objects can be a way to tune out; 3) as a way of improving concentration when carrying out a task – the task might also be listening and thinking as well as doing something. As your child may spin for one or all of the above it would be helpful for you to observe him for a pattern. Spinning objects is a form of visual stimulation and tends to occur when the child is under-responsive to sensory stimuli from the environment.’

‘Your child may be using spinning as a way of self-regulation to deal with other sensory information from his environment. Provision of a sensory diet can be helpful to promote better self-regulation. This would be provided by an occupational therapist following an assessment of your child’s sensory processing. You can also help by introducing him to new situations gradually. Check his visual environment such as lighting and cluttered environments as these are both visual areas which may benefit from change.’

‘Another explanation is that he has motor planning difficulties, and is struggling to pick out the details of a task/object and does not have the knowledge and script to play. More intensive help to break down tasks into smaller achievable steps could be necessary here.’



The National Autistic Society

FURTHER INFORMATION:

The National Autistic Society Autism Helpline can provide information sheets on creating an autism friendly environment and help with obsessions, repetitive behaviours and routines which you may find helpful.

To order a copy call 0845 070 4004 or e-mail autismhelpline@nas.org.uk

Do you have a question for Ask the Panel? E-mail us at auidsmag@googlemail.com by September 15th at the latest.

The views reflected in these pages are the panels’ personal opinions and may not be relevant to all children with ASD. Parents should embark on intervention programmes only after following the advice of their child’s paediatrician and/or occupational therapist.

Come and meet the really useful crew!



If your little one, like many on the autistic spectrum, has an unstoppable passion for Thomas the Tank Engine, then this summer they're going to be stoked. We've discovered paradise. It's in Staffordshire, on the A4091 close to junctions 9 and 10 of the M42. We know, we know. Heaven is in Tamworth? Unlikely, but true.

Europe's first and only Thomas Land has just opened at Drayton Manor Theme Park. Set within three acres of parkland, Thomas Land features twelve themed rides, including Cranky's Drop Tower, Harold's Heli-Tours, Terence's Driving School and the Troublesome Trucks Runaway Coaster.

There's great news for families whose children are on the autistic spectrum too. Contact Guest Services on 0844 472 1950 before your visit and you can arrange to be issued with an exit privilege wristband on arrival. Wristbands will allow the child plus up to four guests priority exit access onto the rides to avoid queuing. If the child with autism isn't going on a particular ride, the other members of their party will have to wait their turns in the queue as usual. Parents and grandparents are able to go on many of the rides with the youngsters, so really there's no reason to miss out on all the fun.

Central to Thomas Land is Knapford Station from where a special Thomas the Tank Engine train ride will take visitors on an exciting journey around the attraction, which extends towards Drayton Manor Zoo. For a gentle experience, you can take train rides on both Thomas and Percy.

For younger kids there's also Lady's Carousel and Terence has his own Driving School where little ones can operate Terence the Tractor themed vehicles under their own steam.



Jeremy's Flying Academy is a family ride in which little passenger jets fly around a central hub, with riders (for riders, read dads...) operating a joystick to move up and down. High-fliers will also enjoy the Harold the Helicopter ride where the helicopter flies high above the Engine Shed.

For mini adrenaline junkies, there's Cranky's Drop Tower and the Rockin' Bulstrode, which travels back and forth on a short track, spinning as it goes. Bertie bus fans can jump aboard for a ride that scoops you up in circles and the dizzying fun continues with Diesel's Locomotion Mayhem, a flat ride featuring six character diesel engines – travelling in a figure of eight.

Finally, try the Troublesome Trucks Runaway Coaster for another thrilling adventure.

That's not all. Sodor's Classic Cars are the original but refurbished 40-year-old Ford Vintage Cars made in England that drive through an area with animated characters popping up along the way.

Indoors, Emily's Play Arena caters for younger children whilst outdoors, Spencer's Play area includes swings, slides, a sandpit and climbing activities, alongside a specially designed play area for wheelchair-bound visitors.

Last but not least, Thomas Land has a huge store where visitors can choose from a massive range of Thomas and Friends goodies. Start saving that pocket money!

For more information visit www.draytonmanor.co.uk or www.thomaslanduk.co.uk.



Taking the Soft Option Makes Good Sense

By Debby Elley

WHEN Cheshire mums Jane Mitchell and Joanne Griffiths dreamed of a soft play centre designed for children with special needs, they had little idea that within a year they would land enough cash to turn their vision into a reality.

Yet that's exactly what happened after the pair from Macclesfield won a £50,000 windfall from the People's Millions after thousands of regional TV viewers voted for their idea.

The two mums, who had no business experience, became overnight entrepreneurs in charge of a dream budget. Suddenly they were on the look out for business premises, negotiating with landlords and choosing the latest high-tech sensory equipment for their new centre.

In August 2006, Jane and Joanne finally saw their dream come true with the launch of JJ's Sensory Centre on the outskirts of Macclesfield.

This is the first play centre in Cheshire designed especially for young children with special needs and is equipped with a dark room with fluorescent and UV lights, a soft play area with calming sensory equipment, an interactive room and even a chill-out room for siblings.



The dark room, with its bubble columns, infra-red red rods, fibre-optic 'spaghetti' and gentle light projections provides superb sensory stimulation for kids on the autistic spectrum. The darkroom's ballpool is lit from beneath and filled with transparent balls, giving a deeply soothing play experience.

The soft play area features a dark tunnel with light panels that toddlers can work themselves. There's also a colourful mat that responds to touch by activating a corresponding light on the wall. The walls are dominated by colourful murals and sensory panels.



When I was at home with my twins during the day, JJ's was somewhere safe to visit. Since Alec has little sense of danger, this was particularly important. At JJ's he can't climb anywhere unsafe, I can see him everywhere he toddles because it's on one level, and he'd have to be Houdini to escape the double doors!

Owners Jane and Joanne keep numbers limited to create a calming experience. Buy yourself a drink, sit on a comfy leather sofa and relax. Yes, that's right – you'll actually be leaving here in one piece!



One thing you need to remember – this centre is popular among kids with and without special needs. You are required to pre-book in advance and weekend mornings are always busy.

JJ's is open Tuesday to Friday, 9.30am–5.00pm, and on the weekends from 10.00am–noon. Saturday and Sunday afternoons are available for birthday parties. You can pre-book a one-and-a-half hour play session at these times:

9.30am–11.00am	1.30pm–3.00pm
11.30am–1.00pm	3.30pm–5.00pm

Special offer £3.00 sessions that include juice and biscuits run on Tuesdays between 9.30am–11.00am and on Friday afternoons between 1.30pm–3.00pm. Juice and biscuits are also served on weekend mornings, where the sessions last for two hours. Thursday mornings are reserved for young people and adults.

Prices are £2 for children under 12 months, £4 for young children and £5 for young people and adults.

For further details call 01625 667872 or email info@jjsplaycentre.co.uk



By Tori Houghton
Specialist Speech and Language Therapist in Autism

Spreading the Word

The stressed-out boss you worked for. The shy, awkward teenager down the road. The lazy call centre operative who wouldn't deal with your complaint. All these were just a dress rehearsal. Throughout your life, you've been fine-tuning your empathy skills. Now's the time to cash in your experience. Now it's time to use them on your child...

What does it actually mean when you read about or hear professionals saying that children with autism lack empathy?

Children with autism struggle to understand the feelings, thoughts and attitudes of others. They find it difficult to put themselves in the shoes of other people and to see things from their perspective.

So if we know that it's difficult for our children to empathise, then it's up to us as parents, carers and professionals to be doubly effective at empathy, so that we can appreciate the world from their perspective and react in a way that lets them know this. Of course this is a challenge, but it can be a very rewarding one.

Now is your chance to have a go at this, using the knowledge you have acquired and really try and empathise with your child. By trying to understand your child's feelings, thoughts and attitudes, you will find communication easier and far more enjoyable. The following analogies may help.

Think back to a subject YOU found difficult at school.

For me it was maths. When we encounter something difficult it can be hard work. I used to put off doing my maths homework and often avoided doing it altogether, choosing to do anything else I could do instead.

Think about how you feel when you are constantly challenged

– when everything you do, is challenged. Although we all enjoy being challenged at times, it can make us feel tired and frustrated. We all want our children to do well and to move on to that next developmental step with their communication. If they can look and reach, let's listen for a sound.

Children feel the challenge – don't turn every activity into a therapy session, just encourage your child to experience success and enjoyment.

Lesson 1: Allow your child to enjoy success

*“Trust Dad
to throw a
spanner in
the works!”*



Illustration: Justin Wyatt
(www.phantomdoodler.co.uk)

For children with autism, communication is difficult. They may appear independent, trying to work something out for themselves rather than asking for help; like with maths and me, it's difficult for them. Faced with a challenging social situation, you may notice your child resorting to favoured behaviours such as spinning or withdrawing.

Wait to be invited in

If you were playing a computer game and you got to a critical point when someone came along, grabbed it off you and said 'My turn!' think about how you would feel.

Wait for a signal from your child to let you join in, otherwise he or she may think you are trying to take over. They might be in the middle of something important in their game. You are also allowing them the opportunity to initiate communication with you.

Remember – communication is a two-way process and is only as successful as the input of both parties involved. Have fun!

DID YOU KNOW....

That you can apply for a voucher that will entitle you to £500 worth of private speech therapy? The scheme is being run by Cerebra, a charity that supports kids with neurological conditions.

Your child must have an SEN Statement or be on School Action Plus, and must not have received speech therapy in the last six months.

For details on how to apply, look up www.cerebra.org.uk or call Alex on 0800 328 1159. You can also e-mail him at alex@cerebra.org.uk



By Debby Elley

Life on the Double

My twin boys were the most joyful little parcels of fun I could ever have wished for. There was crying, of course, as with all babies, but mostly there were giggles. We'd creep up to their room unnoticed in the evening, to see that they were hiding from each other, ducking under the sides of their cots and then surprising their twin into high-pitched mirth.

When Robert and Alec failed to sit up at exactly the appointed month, as laid out by the regulations in the small book left by the health visitor, I didn't worry too much. They were twins, after all, and it was known that twins could often be a little behind in development.

As their first year passed, neither twin had any clear words. People offered a variety of explanations. 'Don't twins have their own language anyway?' some of them said. 'Oh they'll catch up, they were premature weren't they?' Yes, they were premature, but at 35 weeks they were not exceptionally premature, especially for twins, who usually arrive at about 37 weeks.

Still, others seemed more anxious than we were. We didn't care that they didn't have language yet, and didn't point at anything. They communicated well, as far as we were concerned, through beams and cuddles. At about 18 months, I mentioned the word 'autism', but really it was a throwaway comment. I didn't expect it to be true.

Alec had an accident when he was 21 months old. He crawled through the bars of his bedroom window and fell twenty feet. That was when happiness seemed suspended for quite a while. As Alec recovered and learnt to walk and to swallow again, a speech therapist visited him and asked me how many words he'd had before the accident.



*Same child
Different label*

Illustration:
Dave Noonan



'About six,' I said, lying, because zero sounded daft. She raised an eyebrow. 'But then Bobby doesn't talk either' I said. She raised her other eyebrow. That was it. That was the start of a lurking suspicion that something had been wrong previously.

A year after the accident, when Bobby and Alec were two-and-a-half, they suddenly found themselves walking around wearing something new – a label. The label said 'autism'. The day before their ADOS tests, they'd been Bobby and Alec. Now they were children with special needs. Our former happiness sat under a looming cloud that pointed to the future. It was a future where they wouldn't be able to make friends, or build relationships, or hold down jobs. A future where people would see my two gorgeous boys as aliens, and my twins in turn would view the world as a strange planet.

Then I stopped worrying and I started thinking. I gathered stacks of free leaflets from the National Autistic Society. I learnt about the spectrum. I learnt about the triad of impairments. I learnt about the sensory difficulties. The more I read, the more confident I became that I could help my twins. Bobby and Alec had aspects of autism, but not every single symptom. Some of my worries had been unfounded.

With education came intervention. As Alec recovered, Bobby was taught how to make good eye contact, and I signed Makaton to both of them. The twins had a magnificent Portage visitor, and went to Portage opportunity groups. Now they're four, Bobby is talking and Alec is using PECs cards. Both of them are as much fun as they ever were, and laugh as much as they ever did. Alec has learnt to walk and to feed himself again, when at one point it was uncertain whether he'd live or not. That rather put the autism into perspective.

And as for me, I've learnt over the last two years to ditch the label. It is useful when I speak about education, and it is useful when I talk to doctors. At home, I hang up that label alongside their coats. Then we go inside and watch *CBeebies* and eat biscuits, like the rest of the pre-school world.

Celebrity spotlight



Mark – age 4

Star sign: Capricorn

Diagnosis: I was diagnosed with autistic spectrum disorder the week after my third birthday.

Best habit: Protecting my little brother from the evil vacuum cleaner monster.

Worst habit: I enjoy playing with my little brother but can get too rough and push him around.

Hangs out at: Anywhere with tall trees or deep water, but especially the trampoline club on a Friday evening.

Popular with: With blond hair and blue eyes I am beating them off with a stick – apart from the woman at the supermarket deli who gives me free penang bites!

Song that most describes me: Ain't No Mountain High Enough.

Personality in four words: Fearless, stubborn, independent and loving.

I love: My family, especially Jake my little bro, trains, climbing trees (just to give Daddy a nervous breakdown), swimming and especially chips (but only from the chippie none of these oven chips for me!).

I hate: Lots of noise and having my hair cut (unless we go to the hairdresser that looks over the railway – heaven).

If I were Prime Minister: I'd make rock climbing a part of the national curriculum and bring back hanging for people who park in parent and child places if they do not have children with them.

Want your little star to appear on our Celebrity spotlight page? Send your own answers with a jpeg picture of your child in action to: aukidsmag@googlemail.com.



Max – age 3

Starsign: Capricorn

Diagnosis: I was diagnosed with autism in June 2007.

Best Habit: Acting out my favourite TV and DVD moments, in particular 'Scrat' from *Ice Age* and making everyone laugh!

Worst Habit: I drive my mummy and daddy mad by not wanting to get out of the car... unless it is somewhere that sells toys!

Hangs out at: 'Pets at Home' with the rabbits and guinea pigs, 'Whale Around', 'JJ's Sensory Centre' and feeding the ducks at Bramhall Hall.

Popular with: Absolutely everyone – especially the women! I can win over anyone with my cheeky smile. Brad Pitt has nothing on me!

Song that most describes me: Let Me Entertain You.

Personality in four words: Loving, funny, happy and determined.

I love: Baking (currently in training for the next Junior Masterchef!) and having my neck kissed (Mummy does this best). Playing with water, cars and trains. Running up and down the hall with my new puppy, Pippin.

I hate: Pulling the plug at the end of bath time and getting out of the bath. I'll still pretend to swim even when there is no water left in the bath!

If I were Prime Minister: McDonald's vouchers would be handed out every week and toy aisles would be compulsory in every shop.

HANDY HINTS...

If your little one is a late talker, buy identity bracelets. That way if you're out or on holiday, you can have peace of mind that if they go missing, someone will know how to get hold of you. FamilySafePlus+ makes wristbands as well as tags that you can tie to a child's shoe. Call 08700 62 49 14 or look up www.familysafeplus.co.uk for details.

One resourceful mum takes pictures of familiar places with her mobile phone. She shows her little boy the relevant photo before they go anywhere. So quick, so simple – why didn't we think of it?!

If your child finds it comforting to twirl objects in a new situation, keep some bendy drinking straws in your handbag for trips to the dentist and doctor.

Did you know that there are many shops on ebay selling autism and special needs resources, such as symbol cards, handmade visual supports and sensory toys? Just put 'autism' in the search box and start shopping!

A FOOD 'SNAP' WAY IS AN IDEAL WAY TO GET YOURSELF SOME CHEAP PICTURE CARDS TO USE AS VISUAL SUPPORT. THE GREEN BOARD GAME COMPANY AT WWW.GREENBOARDGAMES.COM MAKES A FOOD SNAP GAME FOR JUST A COUPLE OF QUID, WITH CLEAR COLOURFUL PICTURES OF ALL MAJOR FOODS, NICELY LABELLED IN LOWER CASE – JUST LIKE THE REAL THING! IF YOU REALLY WANT TO MAKE THEM LAST, BUY A COMPACT LAMINATOR. YOU CAN PICK ONE UP FOR AS LITTLE AS £10 FROM STATIONERY STORES.

Do you have a handy hint?

Share it with us by writing to aukidsmag@googlemail.com. Head your e-mail 'Readers' Page Handy Hints'

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