



Aukids®

Issue 49
Autumn 2020

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For Parents and Carers of Children with Autism Spectrum Conditions



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Peace of Mind
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Dr Paul Kelly



PLUS



WIN! Talking is Not My
Thing and a Chewigem
Discovery Box!

Letter from the Editors

Debby

Tori

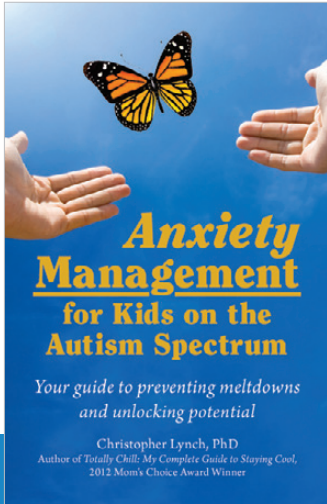


Welcome to our Autumn Issue

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Whilst parents can't do much about the wider changes happening as the pandemic continues, we can at least create a little nest of certainty at home. Structure and routine in the house is more important now than it ever was, so we asked top clinical psychologist Paul Kelly, who has vast experience with autistic children, to share with us his top tips to keep your children mentally healthy.

With extra time at home during local lockdowns, we do have an extra opportunity to work on our children's life skills, so out from the archive pops our Five Star Hotel feature, helping you to make the most of extra hours indoors during the autumn and winter.

The world wants Alfie Bowen at the moment! This world-class wildlife photographer is a real survivor – his story about how his special interest saved him will be inspiring to anyone whose child is going through a tough time right now.

As we complete our penultimate issue, a MASSIVE thanks to Dave Laslett (www.manchestercreativemedia.com) who has completed our final front cover shoot with little Ryan. This was conducted under social distancing measures and is our first live photo shoot in two issues. Dave, you've been amazing. We are so grateful for your talent, your kindness and your gift at getting the best out of our children. Our last cover will be illustrated.

We'd also like to thank you, our readers, for your tremendous

support since we announced that our final print issue will be in January 2021. Most of you haven't worried about your full year's subscription and have allowed us to use any remainder as a donation. This has ensured that we can make it to the final issue without worrying about production costs. We've been so lucky to have such a loyal following and we really want to thank you for all for your kindness and good wishes. Don't forget, we continue to be around on Facebook.

Christmas Pressie Idea!

Finally, grab yourself a coffee, have a look at our back issues and their content descriptions under the Downloads section at www.aukids.co.uk, then treat yourself or a loved one to a **BARGAIN BUNDLE** of AuKids – at 10 issues of your choice for just £20 wrapped up in a bright red foil jiffy bag, this has got to be a brilliant gift for anyone interested in autism.



Tori & Debby

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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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www.periscopestudios.co.uk

Dear AuKids

May I take this opportunity to say very simply THANK YOU so much for starting your magazine all those years ago, to all your team. It coincided very well with the timing of our now 16 year-old son, Cormac, being diagnosed as autistic. I found the resources/suggestions/stories in your magazine VERY beneficial and always delivered with an air of optimism and celebration of our differences; this last reason was probably why AuKids stands out for me now, as being a really helpful tool particularly in the earlier years of our journey with Cormac.

I thought you might like to know that over the past eight years I have delivered talks about neurodiversity to health professionals (in my capacity as parent and health professional also). I have ALWAYS brought in a copy or two of your magazine and spread the good word! I too completely believe in the celebration of our differences and the need to get this conversation going in wider society, for the betterment of ALL.

So with this in mind I recently started my own business; Spectrum Talks (www.spectrum-talks.co.uk) just to try and 'go out there' and start this conversation...early days yet and of course Covid-19 is making me have to look at very creative strategies regarding approach (!) but be assured, I will continue to promote your great service with AuKids to one and all...

Many thanks again to your wonderful team; you have delivered an invaluable service that our whole society can only benefit from...

With warmest wishes,

Ciara, Cormac and the Jones family.



Name:

Ryan Cooper

Age: 4

Diagnosis: Autism

Family: Mum, Dad and sister

Lives: Burnley, Lancs

Loves: Jumping and bouncing, tight cuddles, being tickled, snakes, Andre Rieu!

Hates: Loud noises, not being understood

If he were Prime Minister:

We think if Ryan was the Prime Minister, he would have trampolines put up everywhere! And definitely spread more awareness of autism, and being non verbal.



Autism Animation Shortlisted for International Prizes

Very well done to Alex Amelines and his team at Studio Tinto in Harpenden. Alex's latest film on autism, *Amazing Kids*, blends the words and voices of autistic youngsters with wonderfully engaging animation. It was recently announced that this has made the official selection at the Helsinki Education Film Festival International and at the San Diego International Kids' Film Festival. Congratulations team! You may have seen the original film on autism from this animator in 2017. *Amazing Things Happen* explains autism beautifully, with actor David Gant adding a richness and vibrancy to the narration. In our view, it should be shown in school assemblies. Here's a link to both:
www.youtube.com/watch?v=VAogdfYPstU
www.youtube.com/watch?v=7JdCY-cdgkl

(l-r) David Gant, Alex Amelines and sound engineer Mike Avgeros



Ice-cream Sundae Book Scoops Number 1 Spot!

Well heyyyy pop pickers, smashing news from the AuKids team here! Our latest book release, the *Ice Cream Sundae Guide to Autism*, charged to the top of the charts and made it to Number 1 on Amazon's *Teaching Students with Learning Difficulties* list this month. It's also been inside the top 5 on Amazon's charts for *Children's Books on Social Skills* and *Children's Books on Disability*. If you buy a copy, please do leave a review if you have time. We're delighted to hear that some children are bringing their copies into school to show their teachers. Parents, thanks for writing to tell us how well it's been received by your children. We love to hear from you! Don't forget, you can post your ice cream sundae drawings on Instagram or Twitter #myautismsundae



Christmas Present Idea

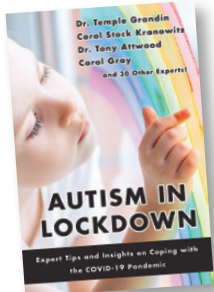
Social Stories™ to Order

If you're struggling to explain a certain social expectation, we can still write a Social Story™ tailor-made for you. Just write with details to aukidsmag@gmail.com and we'll ask you for a £5.00 donation to AuKids in return - we'll send you a payment link.

Your Chance to Say Goodbye

We will try and print as many goodbye messages as we can in Issue 50, our final issue, due out January 2021. In particular, we'd be delighted to hear about specific articles that have helped you, that you can recommend for other readers to find on our website archive.

Reviews & Prizes



BOOK

Autism in Lockdown:
Expert Tips and Insights
on Coping with the
COVID-19 Pandemic

Various authors
Published by Future Horizons
£13.50
ISBN 9781949177534

In all my working years I've never come across a book published as fast as this one, which took about three months from writing to release. For this accomplishment – and for its efforts to give timely advice – American publisher Future Horizons deserves some editorial space. Since living with Covid may well mean on/off local lockdowns in the future, the material is still relevant.

The book comprises 29 contribution essays from some of the most well known names in the field, all tackling a specific issue connected with lockdown. The essays have been grouped into six themes – Coping, Insights from the Spectrum (personal stories), Homeschooling and Behaviour Management, Activities and Occupational Therapy, Practical Matters and Surviving and Thriving.

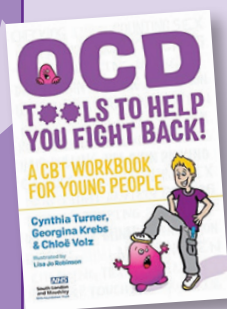
Think of this as a compilation album. Some of the tracks you'll no doubt love, and some you won't. Some of the essays can only scratch the surface of complex subjects. In fact if you're switched on enough to seek out and buy this book, you may even find some authors' solutions boil down to common sense. I certainly craved a little more specialist discussion at times – it's difficult to pitch when you're only contributing a chapter. Yet rather than write it off on this basis, I'd recommend you use the book to get a sense of the voices that speak to you most – and buy their own books to delve further.

It came as no surprise to me that Tony Attwood (the opening 'track' on the album – always start strong) sang out among the participants here ('If fear is contagious, so is calm'), as does Jed Baker, author of *Overcoming Anxiety in Children and Teens* (see his feature in *AuKids* Issue 31) and occupational therapy expert Carol Stock Kranowitz, who shares a few practical ideas. Diana Friedlander's essay on learning styles is useful with or without the considerations of Covid.

I found the information here largely more relevant to parents of verbal children than non-verbal ones. Plus if anything, the ambitious nature of the compilation thwarts its purpose somewhat. There's a lot of information to wade through, with messages and ideas inevitably overlapping. The most helpful essays – for me at least – were those with strong practical applications.

That said, the best bet is to dip in rather than read cover to cover, and then follow your heroes from there.

By Debby Elley, Co-editor AuKids



**OCD Tools to Help You
Fight Back: A CBT
Workbook for Young
People**

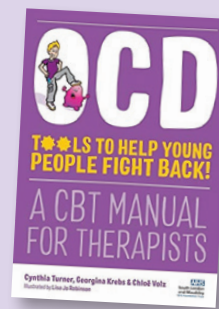
By Cynthia Turner, Georgina
Krebs and Chloë Volz
Illustrated by Lisa Jo Robinson
Published by Jessica Kingsley
£18.99
ISBN 9781849054027

Repetitive behaviour is part of autism, so when OCD is added to the mix it can be difficult to separate the two. However, it's good to know the difference, because OCD can quite commonly occur alongside autism, especially in teenage years as anxiety builds. When my son's ordinary repetitive behaviour turned into something far more intense and started to get in the way of his everyday functioning – and when it started to distress him – I suspected this was OCD. Autistic repetition is comforting, repetition caused by OCD feels compulsive and demanding.

Unfortunately, you might find that it takes a while to get help for OCD and the pandemic has made this sort of help more hard to come by despite being more needed than ever. Once that help comes, the practitioner needs to have a great understanding of autism to make any therapy effective.

Some professionals believe that Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) – the weapon of choice when it comes to tackling OCD – isn't effective when it comes to autism. Whilst I'd agree that those with limited language or analytical skills may not be able to access CBT, I wouldn't write it off for children on the spectrum who are able to reflect on their thoughts and behaviour. It just needs to be done in the right way; for instance, a lot of auditory language and abstract analogies won't get you very far when faced with a literal thinker. Visual resources and 'solid' examples work far better. In this respect, last year's **OCD and Autism: A Clinician's Guide to Adapting CBT by Amita Jassi and Kate Johnston Ailsa Russell** (JKP) is extremely useful. Don't worry about it being for a clinician; the language isn't beyond most parents.

Two books that could be of great use to you are **OCD Tools to Help You Fight Back – a CBT workbook for Young people** and its accompanying manual for therapists (as usual I just ignore the fact it's for therapists). They're not cheap, at around £20 a pop each, but perhaps think of it as private therapy to soften the blow. These are published by Jessica Kingsley in conjunction with NHS South London and Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust. Its authors have great credentials – Cynthia's an Honorary Consultant Clinical Psychologist at the Maudsley and Chloe is a Consultant Clinical Psychologist and



**OCD Tools to Help
Young People Fight
Back: A CBT Manual
for Therapists**

By Cynthia Turner, Georgina
Krebs and Chloë Volz
Illustrated by Lisa Jo Robinson
Published by Jessica Kingsley
£25.99
ISBN 9781849054034

Team Lead at the National and Specialist OCD, BDD and Related Disorders Service at the same hospital. Georgina is an Honorary Principal Clinical Psychologist at the OCD, BDD and Related Disorders Service at the Maudsley.

The book they've created isn't designed especially for autistic children, but it's easy to read and digest, very interactive and highly visual, with fantastic lively black and white cartoons. The workbook is structured as a flexible 14-session programme but each section isn't long and the exercises aren't too demanding. The language, as you'd expect for a kids' book, is nice and down to earth and avoids being patronising.

The workbook moulds around each individual's experience of OCD. I'd advise that you tackle a small section at a time when your child is in the right mood for it – and quit whilst you're ahead so that it becomes a pleasurable session. When we read it at home, we tend to recap the last section before we go onto the next. Don't race to finish it – there's some very powerful learning to be had here and it's better to go slow and steady. You could buy the workbook minus the manual for therapists, as it will stand alone. The therapist manual, however, will give you an in depth understanding of what you're doing and why. Buy that and you'll be well-versed in no time!

These books I think play a very powerful role in bridging the gap between home and a clinical setting; for parents, OCD is so puzzling and so upsetting – just understanding how it works is terrifically empowering, especially in that awful zone of silence between asking for help and the date of your referral appointment.

If you're getting help for OCD, do show this to the practitioner so that they can work in parallel with you. There's nothing here that's outside the remit of most CBT practitioners. Sometimes I've found that my son will be far more honest writing in the book than he will be facing a therapist, and so the book's exercises can provide useful reflection points at therapy sessions. Some kids no doubt won't respond to this, but Bobby, who is at mainstream school and was 14 when we looked at this book, found it very reassuring.

By Debby Elley, Co-editor AuKids



BOOK
Talking is not my thing

By Rose Robbins
Published by Scallywag Press Ltd
£12.99 • ISBN 9781912650224

If I could wave my magic wand, we'd have a world where families with an autistic child were accepted and included in a natural way. No strange looks, no long explanations, no tension in public. It's starting to happen, and I've witnessed this in some places - but books such as this bring us one step closer. I hope as many children without a connection to autism read it as those who do. I may have missed it, but I've not seen a children's book that presents a non-verbal character in this way before.

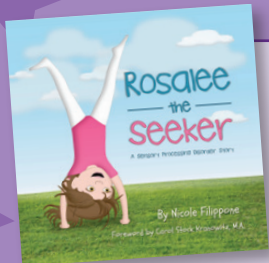
This large, fun bedtime hardback book is aimed at under fives and features a cute non-verbal animal and her bigger brother. Through the author's use of thought bubbles, the main character explains her thoughts to our readers. She vocalises and gestures as well as using flashcards to get her point across. Her bigger brother, like many reading this book, knows her so well that he can often guess what she's thinking.

By creating a mainstream children's book with a non-verbal character, the author - whose work is well recognised - sends a message to non-verbal children and their siblings that their family isn't unique and that their experience is both recognised and accepted. When your experiences aren't generally reflected in mainstream culture, this gives you a powerful feeling, one that shouldn't be under-estimated.

This book is an important example - I'm sure young readers will appreciate it for generations to come.

By Debby Elley, Co-editor
AuKids

WIN
a copy of this book! Just send us your name and address to auidkidsmag@gmail.com no later than November 30th, with **Talking** in the subject header. **TWO** lucky winners will be chosen at random.
By entering this competition you agree for your address details to be sent directly to the publisher so that they can send you your prize. Your information will not be shared with any other third party.



BOOK
Rosalie the Sensory Seeker

By Nicole Filippone
Digital PDF - download for \$6.99 (£5.40) or pre-order hard cover version at \$25 (£19.27) from www.nicolefilipponeauthor.com/product-page/rosalee-the-seeker-a-sensory-processing-disorder-story-pdf
FREE with KindleUnlimited

American author Nicole Filippone grew up with undiagnosed Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD), and now has three children who have special sensory needs. It has become her passion to spread awareness and education about SPD.

This book is a beautiful introduction for a young child who sensory seeks in order to explore and enjoy the world. The illustrations are engaging for younger eyes and although not every child will relate to every page, I would hope that a child will be able to see themselves in some. A wonderful book for children to explore and feel seen, understood and accepted.

As well as the benefit to the child, this book will be great for parents in understanding their child's way of being in the

world and offers a reframe to some of the more seemingly challenging aspects of having a sensory seeking child. The book offers tools and ideas enabling parents to provide their children with safe and enjoyable sensory experiences.

I would hope that this book offers the reader a way of normalising sensory seeking ways and contributes towards a child's positive self-identity.

There are some free printables to go with the book on the website.

Nicola's next SPD book is Alexander-The-Avoider, out soon.

Reviewed by Jodie Smitten,
Children's Well-being
Practitioner specializing in
autism

Box Clever with Chewigem Goodies

Chewigem, formed in 2010, sees a world where sensory seekers are accepted and embraced. Their mission is to meet sensory needs through a range of discreet and fun products that make them feel part of the world, not different. As well as being a company, Chewigem is a community, offering advice and support to those with sensory needs through a membership plan. As well as accessing a range of support, being a Community Member with Chewigem entitles you to discounts from its wide range of products.

So, with all these goodies, where's the best place to start?

The Chewigem Discovery Box range is a great way to find out which chewy products offer the best sensory input for your child. There are seven boxes in the range, and we're offering two of them to give away.

The Collection Discovery box includes a Rainbow wave bangle with smooth texture, a red Tread bangle with sensory nubs, a Rainbow button - smooth and strong for

chewing, a red Skull Pendant - smooth one side, textured on the other, a Hexichew (a chewable hand fidget) and a Chewipal strap for use with the bangles or Hexichew to attach to clothing, buggies, seat belts or wheelchairs.

Or...

Shine some light on the dark nights with the sensory **Glow-In-The-Dark Discovery Box**. It includes four glow-in-the-dark Chewigem products and is perfect for those who need to stim, fidget and chew.

Inside the glow-in-the-dark box, you'll find four luminous items: a children's tread bangle, a button pendant, a Hexichew to gnaw on and a Chewipal strap that can be chewed and used to attach either bangles or Hexichews to clothing, buggies or wheelchairs.

All Discovery boxes in the range include The Chewing Diary to help you understand your need to chew plus access to Chewigem's 30-day support programme.



The Collection Discovery box



Glow-In-The-Dark Discovery Box

WIN either of these Discovery Boxes worth £39.95 each!

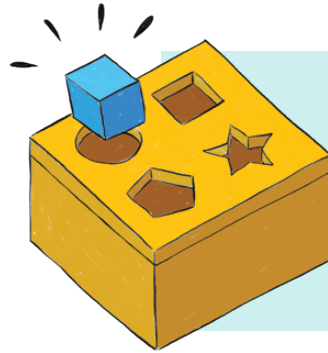
To be in with a chance of winning your choice of these two boxes, just answer this question: **How many types of Discovery Boxes does Chewigem sell?** Send your answer to auidkidsmag@gmail.com with your name and address, marking the subject header with **CHEWIGEM** plus either **GLOW** or **COLLECTION**, depending on your choice of prize.

Competition open to over 18s, no cash alternatives. Two winners will be chosen at random after the closing date of November 30th 2020.

Find out more about Chewigem at www.chewigem.co.uk



“ I’m a teacher. An autistic student of mine feels his behaviour makes him ‘stick out’ from his peers. How can we help? ”



‘Autists are the ultimate square pegs, and the problem with pounding a square peg into a round hole is not that the hammering is hard work. It’s that you’re destroying the peg’.
- author Paul Collins



Chris Bonello

Chris, (AKA Captain Quirk) is a special needs teacher with Asperger’s Syndrome, formerly a primary school teacher. Since 2015 he has become a national and international speaker on autism issues, and the multi-award winning writer behind the site autisticnotweird.com. He is also the author of the Underdog novels, a near-future war series featuring autistic heroes.

pretending to be non-autistic for the approval of others), although perhaps encouraging them to explore more subtle autistic behaviours (e.g. stimming less visibly under the table) would help with their anxiety. Important note: the objective behind this subtlety is NOT to make the autistic child less of an “inconvenience” to the rest of the class, but to help alleviate their anxiety about whether or not they’re being judged.

Because that’s the other angle to this: that autistic students (and autistic people in general) are often accustomed to being judged by other people without good reason, so even with the kindest classmates in the world, the worries about being judged may still exist in the autistic child’s head.

Nevertheless, I think the answer is a whole-school one: make sure the school in general promotes an attitude that celebrates diversity and difference (and doesn’t just say they celebrate it!). Make sure the children understand that distractions in class by an autistic child’s behaviour should be discussed and resolved like civilised people, rather than seen as a source of annoyance or an excuse to bully or exclude.

Because if non-autistic children are allowed to grow up believing it’s OK to exclude people because of their “embarrassing” behaviours rather than learn about them and discuss them, they run the risk of becoming adults who don’t tolerate neurodiversity either.

I may be unashamedly biased as an autistic person, but first thing’s first – this seems to be a problem with the peers, not the autistic students. Unless the student’s behaviour can be *objectively* considered harmful, distracting etc., then what right do their non-autistic peers have to describe their behaviour as “wrong” or “embarrassing”? I don’t consider it the autistic child’s responsibility to feel ashamed of themselves because other people are different from them.

There’s a tricky balance here which I remember having to tread myself as a young person. On the one hand, I didn’t want to draw too much attention to myself, but on the other hand I didn’t want to hide who I truly was. So I’m hesitant to give any advice that would result in masking (i.e. a child



Debby Elley

Debby is co-founder of AuKids magazine and has twin autistic sons Bobby and Alec. She is a speaker and the author of 15 Things They Forgot to Tell You About Autism and co-author of The Ice Cream Sundae Guide to Autism.

I asked Bobby what he thought and he said: ‘Well I think it’s okay to be different!’ This is interesting; it’s because of the early messages he received about his autism. These came from:

- An inclusive primary school where all contributions were valued from every pupil and all pupils were taught acceptance
- His parents talking about autism as a difference rather than a disability
- All adults affirming that he didn’t have to change who he was

So, he isn’t embarrassed about it. But what if others are?

Firstly, I think good peer training is really important, so that there is less anxiety

around ‘fitting in’ because the autistic pupil is aware that others understand.

I also think it’s really important that children with autism get to see work by autistic adults who are successful precisely because they don’t ‘fit in’. In our children’s book, we talk about adults like Stephen Wiltshire and Willard Wigan, but you only need to look at Alfie Bowen in this issue to see what we mean! Bobby’s secondary school holds assemblies on great achievements by autistic adults.

I like the idea that if you are autistic you should get a sense of belonging to a ‘tribe’. What seems unusual in a mainstream school is completely ordinary behaviour for an autistic person. So, you should explain that their behaviour is not ‘weird’ it’s ‘autistic’.

If they fear being judged, it’s helpful to point out to our kids that there are plenty of things that can make us feel different from others, not just autism. If I were a teacher, I’d love to do a lesson titled ‘What is normal?’ and let the pupils realise that there is no such thing.

Bobby is different to some of his peers, but his school supported him by letting him run a lunchtime Pokémon club. In this way, his expertise gave him a place and a role. That sense of belonging is so important, so if there isn’t a niche for that autistic pupil, think about how you could create one.



Gareth D Morewood

Gareth is the Educational Advisor for Studio III (www.studio3.org). Previously he has worked for 25 years in U.K. schools. For the last 17, he was SENCo (Special Educational Needs Coordinator) in a large, inclusive secondary school in Manchester.

Look up publications, films and resources at www.gdmorewood.com

For me this is about peer education and awareness. Rather than think the autistic student has to 'fit' or 'conform' to the norms of others, we should allow all individuals to flourish as themselves. As my good friend and colleague Dr Damian Milton puts it 'personalisation - not normalization - is key!'

Over a decade ago, we established a partnership between our mainstream secondary school and a specialist setting for autistic learners. As part of this, a senior member of their staff team delivered peer education lessons to all the students in our mainstream school.

This was part of the Saturation Model that I've described in my academic work with other experts in this field. We 'saturated' the environment with information and practical support while ensuring policy and practice supported each other.

My lasting take on this is that children really do understand difference and grasp that pupils who may have different

challenges or starting points in life to them can do the same things as they can. Schools need to ensure that their curriculum directly and explicitly teaches about difference and equality and that it's supported with a whole-school approach.

Additionally, having individual discussions with young people and families is important in supporting them to know that it is okay to be different and they shouldn't feel they need to conform; the wider world and society needs to adapt and offer reasonable adjustments for them.

People throw around the word 'resilience' a lot, but for me it isn't about the young person building resilience to others; more that the environment and people in it need to change and adapt and build resilience there, so that the individual can flourish. As my colleague and friend Elly Chapple (founder #flipthenarrative) says, we must flip the narrative and stop parking these issues with the child.

Further reading

Paper: Morewood, G.D., Humphrey, N & Symes W. (2011) Mainstreaming autism: making it work. *Good Autism Practice Journal* 02.12.11, 62-68 – www.gdmorewood.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/G-Morewood-GAP-Article.pdf

Blog on Saturation Model: my.optimus-education.com/autism-and-inclusion-saturation-model-explained



Maura Campbell

Maura is Senior Editor and Features Writer for *Spectrum Women Magazine*. She was one of the contributors to *Spectrum Women – Walking to the Beat of Autism* (published by Jessica Kingsley) and she is one of three authors of *Spectrum Women – Autism and Parenting*. She was professionally identified with Asperger Syndrome in 2011 when she was 44 years old, a year after her son's autism diagnosis.

Web: neurodizzy.blog

I think the best way you can help this student is to create an environment in which autistic students don't need to feel embarrassed. All too often, the focus is on changing the autistic person, with the starting point being that autistic behaviours should be considered a source of embarrassment.

Autistic young people should not be expected to mask their natural behaviours in order to 'pass' for non-autistic – in the same way as a gay student or a student from an ethnic minority background shouldn't be told to adapt their behaviours to blend in - and thereby conform to an arbitrary idea of what constitutes 'normal'. Suppressing your natural self for sustained periods of time can lead to a crisis of identity and longer-term mental health challenges. It reinforces in the autistic person feelings of being 'lesser' and 'wrong'. Instead, the onus should

be on the school to make the learning environment a safe space for all students by promoting an inclusive ethos which understands and celebrates difference.

I attended a mainstream secondary school, long before I was professionally assessed as autistic. By the end of the first term, I was struggling with the constant flux of following timetables, moving between classes and the unwritten social curriculum. Most of the other girls seemed so much more mature and I was constantly teased, taunted and side-lined. I couldn't work out how to organise my books so I carried most of them around all the time. (My school bag weighed nearly as much as I did.) Primary school was so much easier because it was consistent and predictable – one teacher, one classroom and sitting at the same desk every day.

What would have helped me back then was someone to help me with the day-to-day practicalities of secondary level education, someone to listen when I was confused about what was going on around me, someone who could explain why a joke I didn't understand was hilarious to the other girls, and so on. What I did not need was compliance training.

There should be proper supports in place in schools, tailored to each autistic student, which match their individual profile of sensory needs, communication skills and executive functioning abilities. Intense interests should be encouraged and can be a great way to make friends.

Most importantly, schools should have zero tolerance for behaviours that demean or exclude any student, whether they're autistic or not.

HOW TO SOLVE A Behaviour Riddle

At AuKids we're used to answering questions from readers on puzzling behaviour. We then use our knowledge of autism, along with more personal details, to look for clues and solve the mystery. But one thing's for sure, parents are in a better place to get to the bottom of their puzzles than we are. The trick is knowing the right questions to ask yourself.



The Three Cs

Puzzling behaviours in autistic children usually (not always!) centre around three main areas:

■ Communication

Difficulties with COMMUNICATION can lead to puzzling behaviour.

What if there's a problem, but you can't express it in the usual way?

Naturally, you'll find another way of expressing your needs, your anxiety or dissatisfaction.

What if you know something is wrong but when people ask you, you don't know exactly what it is?

That's doubly frustrating.

Often, we assume that autistic children will, if given the chance, communicate what is troubling them. But communicating these things is complicated! We need to be able to form a link between an uncomfortable physical feeling or emotion and the experience that's produced it. Then, reporting it is a big leap in itself; autistic children might not know that what's in your head isn't the same as what's in theirs.

The way around this difficulty is a three-pronged approach that a Speech and Language Therapist can help you with. Firstly, help your child to understand the connection between feelings in their bodies and what their emotions are doing. Secondly, help them to develop language for their emotions by expressing how you are feeling and why. Also, tell them when you can see they are feeling upset or angry. This is called validation and goes a long way towards calming things down. Thirdly, give them the means to express their emotions. This can be symbols, signs or vocabulary, depending on the level needed.

Expressing themselves can be difficult, but language heading in the opposite direction can be equally problematic. Receptive language is the incoming sort, which requires active listening. Making sense of lots of spoken information can quickly lead to overload, because of processing problems. Autistic children need time to take in new information.

Think of the autistic brain as a museum that is only open to the public by prior arrangement. Everything in that museum is neatly ordered. So, if you go barging in when the museum isn't open, removing things from shelves and putting in extra exhibits without labels, it causes anxiety.

That's sometimes how it feels when new information is imposed on an autistic child when they haven't had a chance to make room for it and categorise it in a way that makes sense to them.

Finally, don't forget that other people's communication styles can also increase overload, as autistic kids are quick to absorb others' moods and energy levels, and can be sensitive to the speed and volume of their voice, especially if they are non-verbal.

Albert Einstein: 'If I had an hour to solve a problem and my life depended on it, I would use the first 55 minutes determining the proper questions to ask'.

The second common area that generates puzzling behaviour is the need to exert CONTROL. Autistic people are straight-line thinkers. They like to know what's coming next and tend to reject sudden change.

Let's be clear, autistic people CAN learn how to be more flexible, but a person needs to feel safe and secure before that can happen. Without a sense of control, they'll be more rigid than ever.*

The autistic mind takes comfort in its own environment. That's where the word 'autistic' comes from – 'aut' meaning 'self'. Anything outside of its own orbit lacks predictability and can feel threatening.

But – and here's the big BUT...As autistic children may need extra guidance when it comes to safety, independence and planning, they are often subject to EXTRA control from the outside world. Sometimes, they just need to take back control!

As kids get older, some realise that when they experience stress, they find it hard to self-calm. This can also lead to feelings of being out of control.

If a child is acutely aware that they might struggle to calm themselves, puzzling behaviour can include withdrawal and avoidance. It's logical; it's simply the result of trying to escape the tsunami of emotions that happen when too many demands are made.

Autistic behaviour is a logical fix; if it's causing a big problem, you simply need to provide a better fix for the same issue, rather than just removing the logical fix.

■ Control

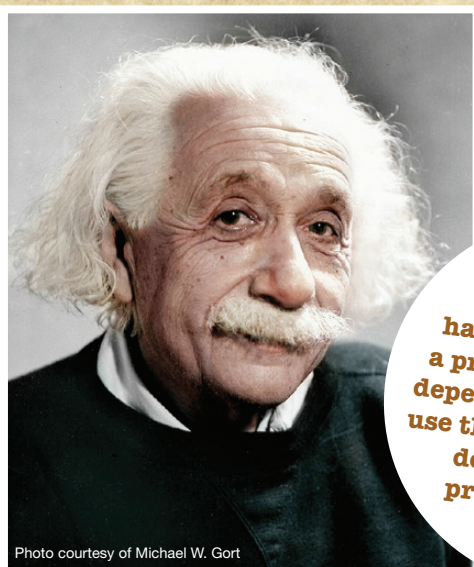


Photo courtesy of Michael W. Gort

So, are they aware of what it feels like when their emotions start to heighten? Do they feel confident they can warn people when they start to feel uncomfortable? How can they confidently remove themselves from a situation when it gets too much?

Putting these things in place can help with avoidance.

■ Comfort

The third area is COMFORT. Sensory discomfort caused by the environment (including people in it who are too loud or demanding) can trigger the fight or flight response in children. The trouble is that you can't always fight or flee, so an alternative means of escape may be necessary. Some autistic people 'switch off' in order to prevent themselves from getting overwhelmed. They zone out or move repetitively (sometimes known as 'stimming' – self-stimulation), examine things closely or put their hands over their ears. If they feel they can't escape at all, they might get angry or upset.

Again, behaviour that looks odd to you could be a successful coping mechanism.

When we think about sensory issues we often focus on lights and sounds, but if your child moves about quite a bit or is destructive, other sensory factors could be playing a part. The vestibular sense takes care of balance, whilst the proprioceptive sense is what tells us where our limbs, muscles and joints are in relation to the world around us.

A person seeking proprioceptive feedback may well move about clumsily, even break things deliberately. Some puzzling behaviour is a result of the need for specific types of physical stimulation. The key here is to observe your child's mood as they're bashing things about. Are they frustrated, or not? Angry breakages may be down to control or communication, the happy bull in the china shop may be indicating a sensory need or just simply the need to communicate with you in a slightly less sophisticated way, through action and reaction. Your aghast squeal may really be quite rewarding!

Sensory needs can be subtle and very difficult for parents to interpret, because often behaviour is a reaction to things that we don't experience ourselves. Even something like a pattern on someone's top might aggravate a child with sensory problems or they may be drawn to a particular sound or pattern which is the cause of confusing behaviour (the white noise of the washing machine, for instance).

Great Reading

- Sensory Perceptual Issues in Autism and Asperger Syndrome – Olga Bogdashina, published by JKP. Will help you to decipher confusing sensory behaviour.
- The Anger Box – Phoebe Caldwell – Published by Pavilion. Great in-depth guide to solving behaviour puzzles, quite complex.
- Issue 35 AuKids magazine – Redirecting Behaviour. Download for £2 at www.aukids.co.uk
- Issue 33 AuKids magazine – Proprioception. Free to download at www.aukids.co.uk
- *Issues 33 and 37 both have features on flexibility of thought – look them up online.

The Three Cs Working Together

The three Cs overlap. Often behaviour isn't due to just one thing, but a combination. Communication problems with processing can lead to a feeling of loss of control, and those problems can be compounded by a noisy environment (comfort issue due to sensory needs).

For example, imagine being asked to go somewhere new. You know you might like it, but you aren't sure what to expect (you've not been prepared), so you experience a loss of control, which causes you anxiety. You worry that if you don't like it, you'll lose control of your emotions. Yet, you can't express any of these things to your carer, because all that your brain is sensing is a feeling of deep unease that you can't put into words. In the end, if there's even a remote possibility that things may go wrong, chances are that you'll resist going. Better safe than sorry. The answer? Heaps of visual preparation and an exit strategy.

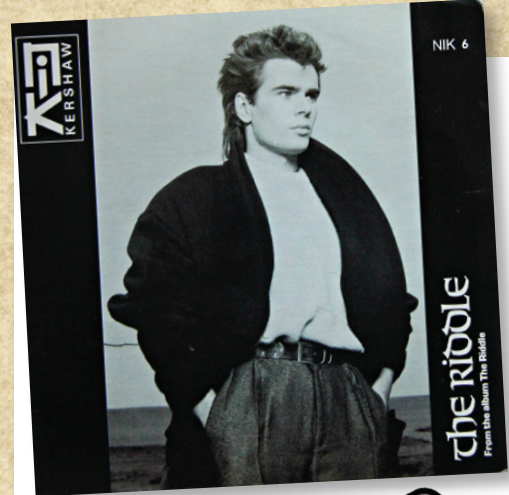
An aversion to a teacher could be that your child just doesn't like their personality – it happens. But why? Could it be that this lively person who wears over-stimulating patterns is just overload in human form? Maybe they ask too many questions. Or maybe, they're a little too controlling.

When looking at these three areas, bear in mind things that happened yesterday, or even last week. Unease can be invisible to start, peaking after an accumulation of factors. That's why it's important to give children a means of 'checking in' with their emotions, understanding their feelings and reporting them to you. Point out feelings as you and others experience them, give them a name, and show kids what they look like.

Questions to ask yourself

■ Communication

- Which communication style suits your child best?
- What's your child's preferred way of absorbing information?
- Have you chosen the right time and place to tell them something new?
- Does your child understand what their



Puzzle Solved

Thirty-six years after Nik Kershaw released the perplexing song The Riddle, we reckon we've solved it. The 'old man of Aran' goes 'around and around' the hole in the ground because he's autistic and self-calming. His mind is 'a beacon in the veil of the night' because it's full of interesting facts that no one else knows. And the 'strange kind of fashion' was just because it was the Eighties, when all fashion was kinda strange. This is clever of us, since Nik Kershaw himself admits that he didn't know what he was on about. If you don't understand any of this, that's because we're older than you.

negative emotions feel like physically? Can they express them to you?

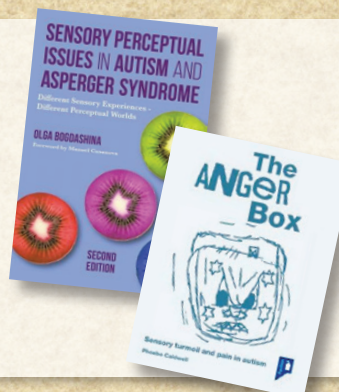
- Could new information be hooked onto the theme of something your child loves? The calming effect of a special interest provides an antidote to the anxiety caused by new information.
- What's the ratio of 'telling' to 'discussing' here? Look for opportunities to problem-solve together, rather than create lists of instructions.

■ Control

- What level of control is the child being subjected to in this situation?
- Have they had the opportunity to select preferences?
- Do they have a way of warning people if they start to feel anxious, plus an 'exit' strategy?
- In larger situations they can't control, what smaller decisions could they make?

■ Comfort

- Is there a pattern in the things that they are drawn to, and those they avoid?
- Is this behaviour seeking something out, or avoiding something?
- Could this behaviour be redirected to 'fix' the problem in a better way? For instance, a 'smasher' may enjoy overseeing the bottle bank!
- If you feel your child has unmet sensory needs, ask for a referral to an Occupational Therapist specialising in sensory integration.

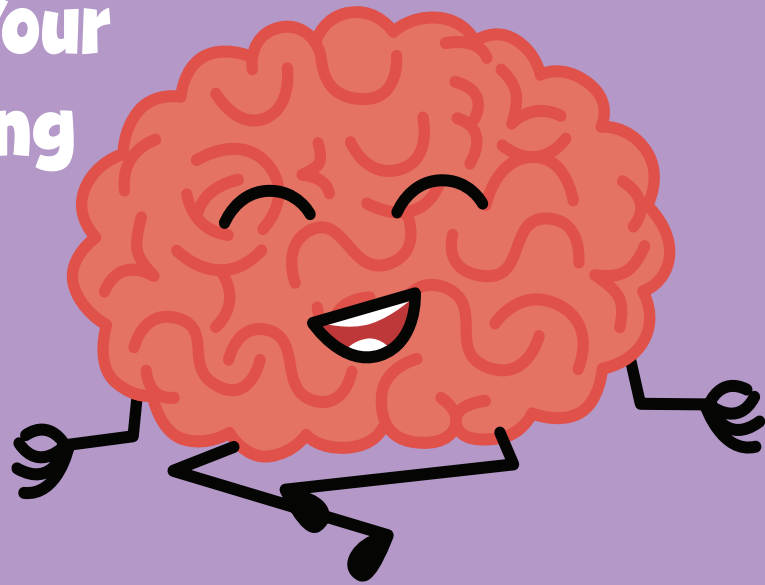


10 Ways to Support Your Child's Mental Well-being



Positive mental health is essential to our daily functioning and our ability to cope with life's stresses, especially during an ongoing pandemic. Now, more than ever, is a good time to pause and reflect on ways to develop and encourage positive mental health in our children. Here's my top tips.

By Educational and Child Psychologist
Dr Paul Kelly



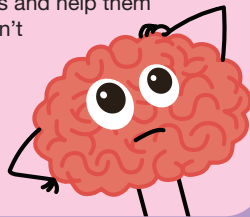
1. Understand the Brain

The amygdala is the brain's alarm system. When a child is stressed or anxious, it triggers the body's emergency fight/flight/freeze response. This process is vital to our survival and helps us to escape from danger. In autism, however, it can be over-sensitive and triggered more easily. As a result, it can cause common responses such as hitting out, running away or disengaging.

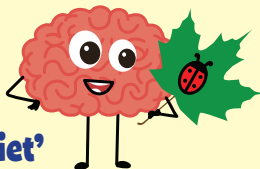
If a child lives in a situation where they are constantly stressed or continually feeling unsafe, this can lead to 'toxic stress' where the 'fight/flight/freeze' response is continually 'switched on'. It can lead to emotional problems and mental health difficulties such as generalised anxiety or phobias.

Stress is normal: an acceptable amount of it which is regulated and managed is healthy and can be positive. However, a continuous pattern of stress or feeling unsafe can result in negative outcomes for children.

We need to find ways to reduce our children's stress, increase their ability to manage those sudden emotional responses and help them to feel safer so that they aren't constantly experiencing toxic levels of stress. Some of the tips below will help you do just that. Keeping yourself calm is the first step.



2. Ensure a Balanced Mental Health 'Diet'

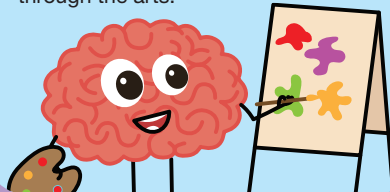


Being surrounded by nature for just 10 minutes a day reduces levels of the stress hormone cortisol in children (and adults!), making them less prone to stress.

So, help your child to choose a carefully balanced lifestyle in the same way you support them in making good choices for physical health. Try and aim for an hour's exercise a day.

3. Try Expressive Arts

Encouraging children to engage in art forms can boost their mental health. Sing, dance, paint, sculpt just for the sheer joy, expression and release. Many research studies have shown the importance of the expressive arts in developing positive mental health. As human beings, the arts give us something which can satisfy our soul and can help us make sense of our world and ourselves. Particularly at the moment, as this is written in the midst of a global pandemic, there is a need for children to explore their world and make sense of it through play and through the arts.



4. Re-frame Your Questioning

Boost young people's mental health by asking not what grades they are getting at school, but what they are enjoying and what they are curious about. Returning to school can often trigger stress and during a pandemic children may find it more difficult to cope with new strategies and changes in place at school.

Consider what you could ask your child at the end of their day, curbing too many enquiries about school work, exams and results. For example, instead you could ask your child what funny things happened at school, ask what challenges they overcame or ask what they enjoyed best about their day.



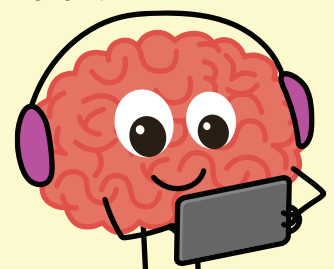
5. Manage Technology

The use of technology is a normal, positive and healthy part of our daily modern lives. So, don't be too concerned about 'screen time' itself; instead switch your focus from 'screen quantity' to 'screen quality'. In other words, be interested in *how* your child is engaging in technology rather than just focusing on *how much* they use it. Technology can be used in positive ways which help connect them with friends and which are creative.

Mobile phones and other technology are not to blame for the increase in mental health problems we are seeing in young people, but the ways in which some young people are using them may be part of the problem.

It is therefore important to talk with children about their use of technology and explore the pros and cons. Stay involved with your child's use of their devices: ask what they are doing with technology, preferably have them use it in a family area so that you're in touch and agree on clear ground rules from day one.

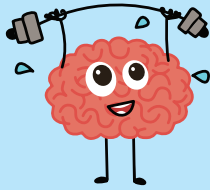
Ensure there's a balance in your child's use of technology; avoid them becoming over-stimulated or overloaded with information. Social media and gaming can become addictive, so help your child to manage their time away from it. Social media use has been shown to increase anxiety, reduce self-esteem and contribute to depression (particularly in teenage girls).



6. Look After Yourself

On a flight, when oxygen masks are released, adults are told to put theirs on before helping a child (an oxygen-breathing adult can assist children more easily). In the same way, look after your own mental health so you can support your child. Together, you can both learn useful techniques for managing stress. This can involve connecting with others, keeping active, giving to others, and practising mindfulness.

Do recognize that a stressed-out parent or carer is unlikely to be able to meet all their child's psychological needs at that moment. Sometimes giving yourself the time and space for a few minutes to regulate your own emotions can mean that you are then better able to meet your child's emotional needs.



7. Develop a 'Growth' Mindset

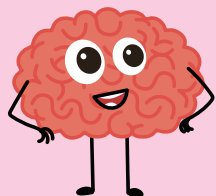
The psychologist Carol Dweck has spent her career researching the importance of a 'growth' mindset, rather than a 'fixed' mindset. Her research has shown that in situations where people believe that they can improve and develop their skills, they have more resilience and perform better.

She encourages parents and carers to move away from phrases that encourage a fixed mindset, such as "I'm bad at maths" or "You're really clever".

If you describe yourself as either 'good' or 'bad' at something, it can give your child the impression that people are somehow born with skills in some areas, which is not the case. We do all have areas of strength and areas of difficulty, but we become better at those activities and skills that we practise.

Praising your child for being 'really clever' is so general that a child doesn't get much information from it. Instead, Carol Dweck suggests we focus on *effort* rather than our achievement. Praise children for trying hard, or concentrating well, or showing resilience in a certain task – you get the idea.

She also talks about the power of the word 'yet'. If your son or daughter says that they cannot do something, you can help by adding that although they can't do it 'yet', they are getting better at it and will continue to improve as they practise and put effort into the task.



Well done for trying your best

8. Emotion Coaching

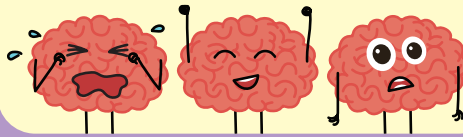
Emotion coaching is one of the best ways of helping your child with their emotional well-being and mental health.

Many traditional parenting approaches focus on a child's behaviour (what is on the outside), but emotion coaching focuses on the child's emotions (what is on the inside). When a parent or carer does emotion coaching, they follow these simple steps:

1. Be aware of the child's emotions
2. Recognise the emotion as an opportunity for coaching
3. Listen empathically and validate the child's feelings e.g. I can see you're very angry/upset about that.
4. Help the child verbally label emotions they're experiencing
5. Set limits while helping the child to problem solve

The first four steps of emotion coaching (1-4 above) are centred on the child's emotions and how they feel. It is only at the final step that any discussion of behaviour happens.

By focusing on the child's emotions, we get to the root of an issue; emotions drive behaviour. This approach gives you both a shared more positive focus to recognise different kinds of feelings, accepting them as healthy and normal. In an emotion coaching approach, for example, it is seen as healthy and normal for a child to be cross or angry about something and the first step is to name this and accept it, before then in the final step looking at other ways of managing their anger without upsetting or hurting others.



9. Increase 'In-flow' Moments

Enhance your child's mental health by noticing when they are in 'flow'. What things do they enjoy doing so much that they 'lose' themselves in it? When you have found it with them, try to increase it to boost their mental health. Why not make a list with your child of the activities they enjoy, and which boost their mood? Help them to make a list of their favourite activities which is balanced and healthy. Of course, when the activity that children find 'flow' in is computer games, this does need to be balanced with a moderated use of technology and possibly seeking new or linked activities to find flow in (*thank goodness for New Lego® Super Mario – ed*).

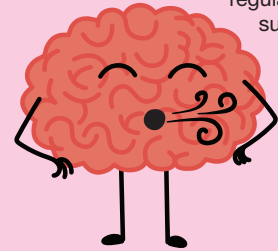
When we engage in activities which we enjoy, it reduces our levels of cortisol (the stress hormone) and increases our levels of serotonin (the happy hormone) which in turn boosts our mental health.

Computer games
Facetiming
Friends
Playing Lego®
Drawing comics
Football

10. Equip and Empower your Child

Teach young people to self-soothe when they are anxious or stressed. Help them to find their own positive ways to de-stress (and bear in mind that their preferences may be different from yours!). Often this can involve surrounding yourself with people and activities that make you happy, as well as practising mindfulness.

To combat anxiety and stress, all children and young people should know at least one breathing technique to help regulate themselves. There are many apps and resources, such as Relaxkids, available to help you to learn these skills, as well as useful breathing techniques to help regulate yourself, such as 7-11 breathing from the diaphragm (see further info).



About Paul

Paul Kelly Psychology is a Manchester-based service run by Dr Paul Kelly. A well-known face through his appearances on national media, Paul provides services to families, schools, colleges, Local Authorities, solicitors, courts and social care. His work has been published in international peer-reviewed journals.

To find out more, go to:
www.paulkellypsychology.co.uk
@paulkellypsych

Further information

YouTube: Paul uses Dr Dan Siegel's hand model of the amygdala's panic response, known as 'flipping the lid' in his training sessions. Jeanette Yoffe presents an excellent four-minute explanation of this for kids, at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=H_dxnYhdyuY

Apps: AuKids recommends the Headspace app, which has calming meditation for children for all sorts of situations, including anger: www.headspace.com



Web: For free resources on breathing techniques, go to in8 at: www.in8.uk.com/information-resources/7-11-breathing

For more relaxation resources go to: www.relaxkids.com

Magazines: For fun exercise ideas, see AuKids Issue 47 Page 7. For more on anxiety, see AuKids Issue 31. You can download either, or order them in print, at www.aukids.co.uk

Life Through a Lens

Alfie Bowen first took up photography in 2014 following a life-long interest in our natural world. Photography became his escape when faced with over a decade of constant bullying throughout his time in education because of his autism, and Alfie credits the art form with ultimately saving his life.

Alfie was also fed up with seeing little being done about the plight facing many species across the world and so decided to use his love of photography to raise awareness of this and increase acceptance and understanding of autism. Age just 22 and with a coffee table book due out next year, he's already a renowned photographer, author and campaigner.

Empress



Despite being undiagnosed, the traits of autism were visible from an early age. I would rarely be settled and demanded near constant attention, and that need for attention and affection only intensified as I developed, and my sister was welcomed into the world. A few years later, aged just nine, I was diagnosed with autism.

Even at such a young age I would feel trapped, claustrophobic and deeply unhappy indoors, it just didn't feel right and I would escape to the garden whenever the opportunity arose. Many happy hours were spent outside in all weathers exploring the garden, playing in the mud and watching the many creatures that called it home. These experiences fuelled a great respect for the world we call home, something so many children are now deprived of thanks to the modern, technologically driven society we live in.

My love of the outside was further fuelled by our annual holiday to Weybourne Forest, Norfolk. These were family affairs with my mum, my sister Amie, grandma, grandad and my uncle all joining me in a log cabin deep in the forest. Many hours would be

spent resting my elbow on the windowsill, staring into the wilderness that existed the other side of the glass, and counting the concoction of dazzling colours. You see for a child with autism, a forest is never just a forest, it is a beautiful array of glistening greens, earthy browns, high-pitched squawks and laser-like beams of light fighting their way through the canopy.

.....
"I am now determined to use the platform I have built through my art to change the world for children with special educational needs."
.....

To me the forest was Earth's heaven, a wonderland where I would feel undeniably happy, where I could forget about the hierarchical conflicts at home and where I could allow myself to dream.

School, on the other hand, was hell. I

struggled with mainstream education, becoming the subject of relentless bullying and attempting to take my life for the first time, all at just 15 years old. I had been told I would never pass a GCSE or amount to anything and every day was a battle – the constant remarks, the stares and the utter inability for people to accept my differences made me feel like an alien and I subsequently tried to take my life a further four times.

The autistic brain is complex, it dances around from one thing to the next, never stops for a rest and always demands new, useful information and being laughed at for constantly reading about animals was a painful wake-up call, and knowing that I was no longer accepted for exploring my passion was scary. The high school I attended had a population of over 1,000 students, and I was placed in a form group of over 30 students none of whom bothered to even say hello – a scary prospect for a child who struggled to speak to one person, let alone 30.

It was during this time that I watched and tried to listen to what the majority of those around me were discussing –



Always Watching



Tiny Tiger

cars, motorbikes, celebrities, dating – and then there was little me, only interested in wildlife. But I'd had enough of feeling alone and clock-watching, so I tried to develop an artificial interest in the more 'normal' topics of discussion amongst teenagers. I came home from school stressed, and forced myself to research these topics, that were really of no interest to me, just so that I could attempt to chat with the others...although this ultimately failed, and I was still shunned from their discussions.

I left that school a broken person, refusing to speak to anyone, I had lost all trust in humans and rarely left my room for fear of being judged.

After many legal battles, my mum got me into a private special educational needs school in the Suffolk countryside. I blossomed at Centre Academy East Anglia and after a few years of hard work I passed six GCSEs, became the first head student in the school's history, was elected as head of both student council and eco council, beat many fears, passed seven A-level qualifications at grade A-A* and gained unconditional acceptance to five universities. More importantly, I had regained my love for the natural world. Now, three years later, I am a renowned wildlife photographer, author and campaigner.

Never underestimate an autistic child!

I think that if you have been afforded a voice, however small, then you should use it to instigate positive change. It's not an option – it's a duty, and to forfeit that duty, to keep life easy, to not rock the boat, is simply unforgivable and thus I am now determined to use the platform I have built through my art to change the world for children with special educational needs. I won't stop until I have done that.

The world can be a scary place for us autistics, but love can change that. We should greet each other with a smile, rather than being so quick to judge.

.....
READ MORE: www.alfiebowen.photography



BUY
ALFIE'S BOOK
Alfie's debut book, *Wild World*, is out in Autumn 2021. Sign up for updates at www.alfiebowen.photography/newsletter



You've just been given a host of helpful strategies to encourage your child's independence by someone whose enthusiasm demonstrates that they've probably had more sleep than you. You're feeling strong and determined. Then 8am on Monday morning happens.

Over the years, I've been the best butler my autistic twins could wish for. Eventually, I learnt how to avoid giving them the Five Star treatment. But it wasn't easy.

By Debby Elley

MY twins are perfectly capable of sorting out their own Weetabix in the morning. Sort of. One with a bit of prompting, one with a lot of prompting, gritted teeth, patience and a dustpan and brush.

Forgive my slovenly ways, but 7.15am isn't the time when I want to be teaching them independence skills. Unfortunately, it's the time when most of the independence-type activities take place. Getting dressed, brushing teeth, preparing breakfast.

So for Alec, I'm basically a butler. For Bobby I'm more of a stylist to ensure his shirt collar looks neat, his shoes are on the right feet and his hair is gelled in an artistic way.

Don't get me wrong, I want my kids to be independent. It's just I'd sooner it happened by magic, without the daily effort it takes to get them that way.

The only thing that stops me in my tracks is the thought that one day these little guys will be 20 years old. Whatever I do now will affect them as young men. Since they reached the age of 12 in the blink of an eye, that isn't so far away as I may like to imagine.

Plus, I know for sure that we need to teach our autistic kids social skills and so it's a bit illogical to assume that self-care is going to come any easier or happen by accident.

To understand why and how you need to teach independence skills, you need to know what's getting in the way of learning them.

Take a passive child, like Alec. Alec is 12 and by rights should be telling me to naff off out of his bedroom. But Alec is used to having a servant who comes in and puts his socks on for him.

It started when he hadn't got the fine motor skills to do it. Now he has, but is slow, partly through lack of practice but mostly because he has been programmed to think that this will be done for him.

And here's the thing: because Alec has autism, he has no

concept of what he *should* be doing himself and what I *should* be doing for him.

.....
"If I stop helping just on the odd occasion, Alec doesn't think 'okay I'll do it myself,' he thinks 'Where's the butler?' It's only when I stop helping on multiple occasions, that my expectation changes his thinking."
.....

How does he know that there's a difference between putting a belt on – something that I would help Bobby with – and putting jeans on, which I expect him to do himself? How does he know what a kid his age is *supposed* to be able to do? How does he even know that independence is considered a 'good thing' and something he should be aiming for in life?

We assume that independence is a natural motivation and for many of us it is a developmental step. But the thought 'I want to do it myself,' has to precede that motivation. Some kids may not experience that thought. In others, the task may seem so daunting that the thought quickly fades.

You might want to climb Kilimanjaro yourself, but if you don't feel you're capable, you'll quickly give up thinking about it.

So if there's someone who can do it quicker, why not?

My own expectations are Alec's only signal that this world view is mistaken.

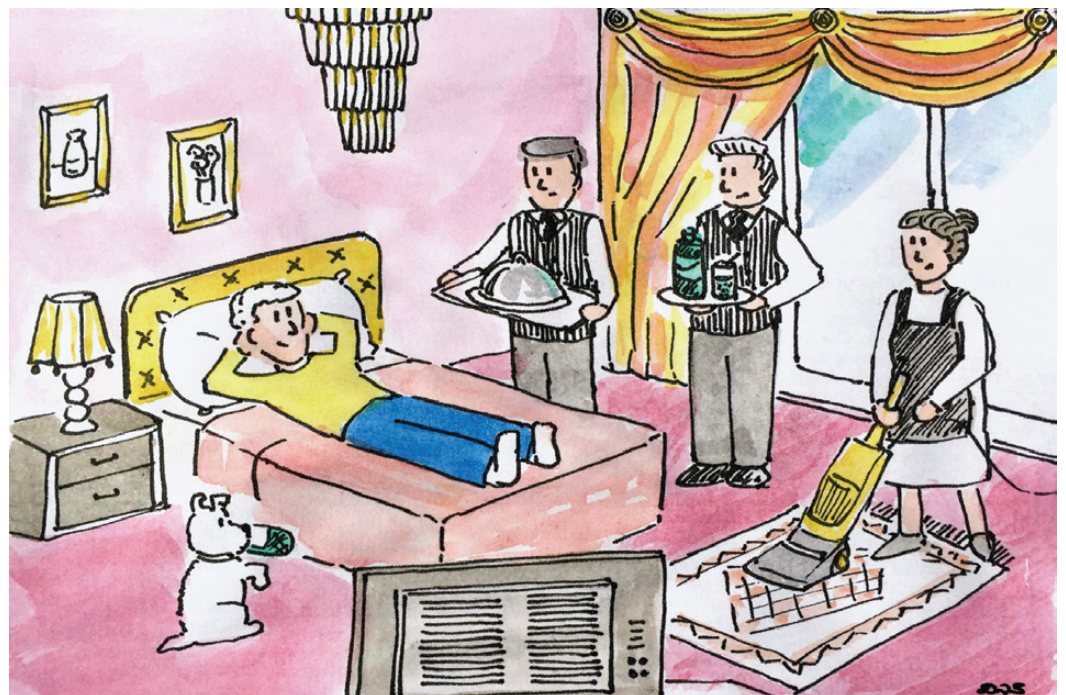
What I've just described is what professionals call 'learned helplessness' or what I prefer to describe as 'The Butler Expectation'. If I stop helping just on the odd occasion, Alec doesn't think 'okay I'll do it myself,' he thinks 'Where's the butler?' It's only when I stop helping on multiple occasions, consistently, that my expectation changes his thinking.

Bobby, on the other hand, has what some might call HFA (High Functioning Autism). In other words he doesn't have learning difficulties and is in a mainstream school. This may lead you to believe that he has more of a clue than Alec when it comes to independence skills. But even folding a pair of pyjamas is problematic. Why?

Executive functioning is affected in people with autism. Our executive functioning enables us to quickly break a task down into visualised smaller steps, then systematically work our way through them. That is why seemingly obvious steps may not be apparent to even the brightest autistic person and some people with Asperger's often appear to be disorganised or scatty.

In addition, focusing on detail rather than the wider picture isn't helpful when you're working to a deadline. Autistic people need structure to help them problem-solve in a linear way.

Now let's add me to the mix. I've got a kid with severe learning



Cartoon by Dan Salmons

difficulties and helping him with practical things is so much easier than working on anything social. I don't like to see him struggle.

So, the danger with both of our autistic twins is that their dad and I will give up teaching them independence skills altogether. But of course that's not the answer. So what is?

Explain the Whole Independence Story

Bobby used to think that if I asked him to do something, it meant he was expected to be an adult. It's helpful to learn that independence is part of a learning curve that never stops. Explain it in terms of a gradual continuum and not a single target, so that it doesn't seem daunting.

Step by Step Guide

You can do this with written instructions or with symbols, but by breaking down a task into stages you take away the problems caused by lack of executive functioning. For one child, this may mean a checklist of things to get ready for the school day the night before. For another, it may mean a step by step guide to drying themselves after a bath. Checklists reduce anxiety, too.

Keep to a Routine

The key to doing things yourself is having a predictable routine. If the socks always go on after the trousers, and then one day mum holds back and waits, they may try and have a go themselves!

Change the Expectation and You Change the Response

Simply by *expecting* them to do something on a regular basis, however small, you change the

interaction from passive to active. Eventually you come to a place where your child doesn't sit there like a limp biscuit but actively predicts the request and goes to put his or her feet in their trouser legs.

Don't Swallow It Whole

The key is not to eat the cake whole, but to swallow it one bite at a time. Begin with the smallest step they could easily master themselves. Start with a lot of support and very gradually remove the support.

We all learn everything by degrees, the only difference is that those degrees may be smaller and take longer with an autistic child.

You may start by pushing an arm through a sleeve, and work towards touching the arm and saying 'arm' and finally prompting with just the word 'arm'.

In a Rush? Don't Sweat It

Autistic kids feel tension as if you actually were a coiled spring sitting in front of them. Choose a time when your own mood is good.

Slow Yourself Down

Whether it's helping with homework or stepping back whilst they wash their face, count to 20 in your head. As with a lot of autism strategies, playing dumb and pretending you don't know how to do something is also a good way of getting them to think for themselves. Small prompts are better than taking over. "Is it your tie or your socks next, what do you think?"

Show Don't Tell

Instead of describing how to fold pyjamas, life became a lot easier when I demonstrated it to Bobby

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and then asked him to copy what I'd just done. Autistic kids are visual thinkers, so don't let language processing get in the way.

Let Them Make Mistakes

Yes it's like watching paint dry when the wrong foot is put into the wrong trouser leg, but you can't learn if you don't have to problem solve.

Let Them Judge Their Own Work

I think about saying "Your tie looks bizarre!" but then I show Bobby in the mirror. Can he spot what's wrong? Have a look in the tie area...

Praise Like Crazy

We've established here that the intrinsic reward of 'I did it myself' and the motivation of being independent isn't necessarily present in our kids. But what they do love is your praise!

Stitch in Time

Yes, you might get a cross child if things aren't done for them! As long as you're not demanding too much at the wrong time and they're praised, that will fade. And this just goes to show that it's even more important to do this whilst they're young.

I've put these tips into practice with Alec and Bobby. In Bobby's case, he is far more independent and that's given him confidence. In Alec's case, it has helped his communication, too. When I did everything for him, he never needed to ask. Now, he has stopped seeing himself as an extension of me and has learnt to ask for help.

So – where to start? With one question – what am I now doing for my child because I have always done it?

Good luck everyone, I look forward to downgrading your Five Star hotel to a lousy B&B!

Breaking News: Bobby just made his own breakfast WITHOUT making any mess...

WITH THANKS TO MY COLLEAGUE TORI HOUGHTON AND DR HEATHER MACKENZIE, WHO BOTH TAUGHT ME HOW TO DOWNGRADE MY OWN HOTEL.



Not A Cereal Offender!

Co-editor Tori, a speech and language therapist, was working with an adult in his 30s whose autism severely affected him and was supporting his parents in increasing communication opportunities. She says: "They ran a Five Star hotel, the breakfast cereal was out on the table before he got up. I asked them what he would do if the Cornflakes weren't out.

"They looked at me and then at each other in horror, as he had been known to be violent in the past. I explained that if it was always there for him, he'd never be able to communicate about it because he wouldn't have an opportunity to request. They took my advice on board and the next morning, left the Cornflakes in the cupboard. They expected him to kick off or get upset, but he just walked over to the cupboard and got the Cornflakes out himself. This was a huge step for both him and his parents!"





The Tooth And Nothing But The Tooth

This is Bobby's response to Debby's column Teething Troubles at the Dentist, from Issue 5. Bobby was 5 when the column was written and he is now 16.

If there's one thing that some children don't like, it's the dentist. And if there's one thing that autistic people don't like; it's going to new places. Combine those together, and you get absolute torture.

.....
"For my parents, I was going for a check-up. But for me, I was going to war."

Looking back at my dentist appointments, I'm fine with being at the dentist now, probably since mine and many others are autism aware, but I can't say the same when I was five.

I can't remember the situation mum wrote about fully, but I can remember that it was just so new to me. It made me nervous. To my parents, I was going for a check-up. But for me, I was going to war. Seriously, new things for autistic people can be so nerve wracking, especially if you've not been told about it before.

It can be like entering a whole new world. Being in a brand-new environment, or trying a new thing is much more difficult for someone with autism. It's not that we don't want to, it's because we don't know exactly what to expect, how it works, or where to go. Our minds are just filled with so many questions and anxieties.

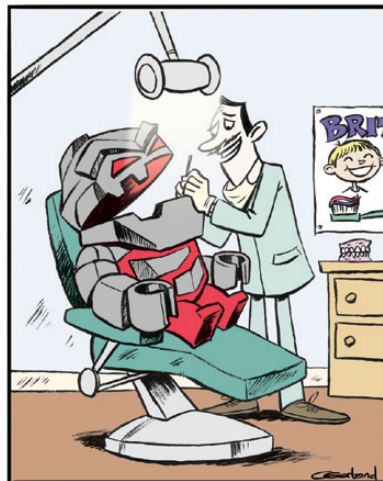
That's why using information like Social Stories can help. While it cannot tell us what to expect exactly, it can show us visually how we will expect this new environment to be. These can be great for a cinema, a theme park, the doctor's, etc.

Some of my first dental appointments I struggled with, because it was so new to me at the time and like I said, new things can make people with autism anxious. If you've ever heard the saying "anger born from fear",

you know that I would have been a bit stressed as well, to the point where I was resisting my dental appointment. But that was because it was new.

So, the dentist used my Lego® 'rock monster' as a demonstration for my check-up. I'm not sure if this made me less anxious or not, but what I do know is that if you show an autistic person visually what you're going to do, they're more likely to go along with it.

If you have some, you can bring ear defenders, especially if the place or the attraction you are seeing is loud, because as we all know, most people with autism, especially kids, have fears of loud, unexpected noises and sounds. You can also show them where you are going with a map, either traditional, or using a modern phone app. Any way works. What matters is that the person with autism knows where they're going, what they're doing, and how they can cope with it. That's all you need to know.



EXAMINING HIS LEGO® CHARACTER FIRST, THE DENTIST GAVE BOBBY CONFIDENCE

To sum it all up, people with autism are nervous about new things and places. That's okay, just tell them what's going to happen beforehand and how it works. That way, they won't be as anxious, maybe even excited.

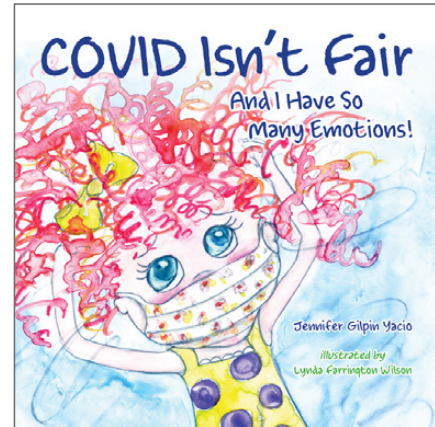
For someone with autism, these warnings can lead to rational thinking and maybe they'll even gain a bit more courage and curiosity over time.

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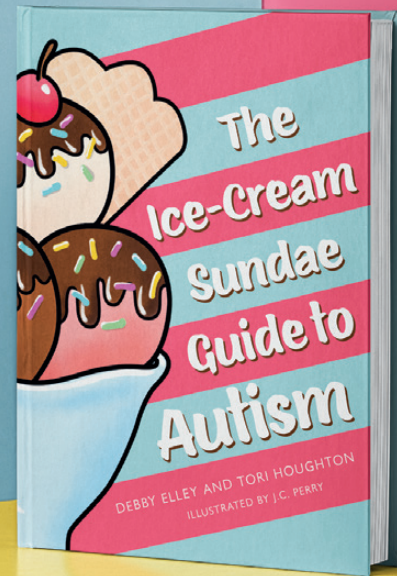
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