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Helping Kids Learn

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Information Sheet 57

Life & Learning with Autism Spectrum Disorder (AS)

by Wendy Lawson BSS. BSW(Hons) GDip(psychStud) GDip(Psych)

In September 2008 we were privileged to welcome Wendy Lawson to our Annual General Meeting. Wendy Lawson has an Autism Spectrum Disorder. She was misdiagnosed with Schizophrenia for over 25 years and was considered intellectually disabled as a child. Wendy is now a mum of four children and has five University degrees. She operates her own business running training programs for those wanting to understand autism better and has written a variety of papers and given a number of interviews on Autism. Her new book is titled 'Concepts of Normality'. Wendy presented a speech on Life & Learning with Autism Spectrum Disorder to our staff, members, parents, teachers and health professionals and with her kind permission, we have reprinted her wonderful talk.

For the first time, as far as I am aware people are actually talking about Autism as a cognitive style or a learning style. How many of you have heard that before?

At a conference in Wales in the UK, every keynote speaker – this included people like Tony Attwood – talked about Autism not as an impairment, which is what it is commonly thought of as, but as a different way of learning. This talk tonight is about learning differently.

I have to keep looking at the screen to see what I am supposed to talk about next. I usually have my computer in front of me so this is all very different. I can cope, even if it is changed! (If you don't know about Autism, then I'll tell you we have lots of problems coping with change.)

I don't believe for a minute that Autism of itself is deviant and dysfunctional.

Neurologically typical is a term usually used for people that are sometimes known as 'normal' – individuals that have a particular way of learning. I want to contradict the idea that Autism is actually a deviation from the norm and is therefore deviant and dysfunctional. I do know some very deviant and dysfunctional people, none of whom have Autism.

You might remember the film called 'Rain Man'.

A new version of that film is currently being shown in London and lots of people have been demonstrating and making sure people understand that 'Rain Man' isn't very representative of Autism. This is because Autism is a very wide spectrum of disability, of being differently-abled.

Dustin Hoffman played somebody on the Autistic Spectrum and is Autistically learning. Tom Cruise played someone who is a neurological typical person and is neurologically learning.

We should be thinking more about how people with Autism learn differently. We learn disorderedly if you like – not proper English, but I hope you know what I mean.

We are human – all of us are human beings and we learn differently.

Maybe some of you remember the times when, if you were left-handed they tied your left hand behind your back and made you write with your right hand!

I remember desks at Uni when I was studying at 40, which was years ago. We had these chairs that had desks that came around, that if you were left-handed, there was a hole where you were supposed to put your calculator.

We didn't have desks for people who were left-handed; we didn't have scissors for people who were left-handed; and as many of you know, Paul McCartney was one of the first people to have a guitar for left-handed people. He could afford it!

Maybe we should be thinking about how people with Autism learn differently.

I would like to read you a poem. It is what my mum says about me. My mum is 88, soon to be 89 years old and I am sure she has a form of Autism known as Asperger's, but it is highly unlikely that she will get a diagnosis.

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Learning Links is a non-profit charity assisting children who have difficulty learning and their families.

We raise funds to help children from birth to 18 years by offering a range of services including the following.

Early Childhood Services for children from birth to six years.

- Early childhood intervention and support for very young children.
- An inclusive preschool for children with and without additional needs.
- An assessment and consultancy service for families who are concerned about their young child's development.
- Specialist early childhood services and therapy.

School Age Services for children from Kindergarten to Year 12 who have low support needs.

- Comprehensive assessments.
- Small group literacy and numeracy support.
- Occupational and speech therapy.
- Outreach programs.
- The Ronald McDonald Learning Program for seriously ill children and Reading and Counting for Life Programs for children falling behind in reading and numeracy at school.

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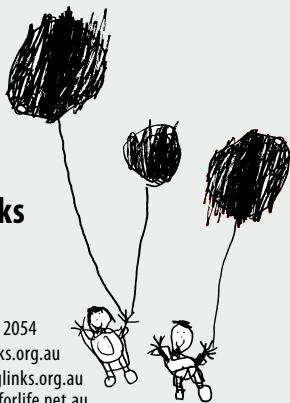
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Learning Links has branches in six Sydney locations at Peakhurst, Penshurst, Fairfield, Miller, Brookvale & Randwick. We also offer some services to children in country NSW, the ACT, and some programs Australia-wide and in New Zealand. A complete list of branch locations and contact numbers is on the back cover.

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I'm suggesting that if you're a neurologically typical individual, your brain is actually configured to work with particular scripts that enable you to divide your attention, multi-task, decide on what you want for lunch and choose things that are different.

If being typical is one way of learning and if that's one way of having a script about how you learn, maybe those of us who are Autistic, are differently-abled and are learning from a different script.

There's lots of evidence to show that our brains are actually configured differently, but does that mean that we are disordered?

I am so excited at these conferences to hear people not use the word disordered once; instead talking about how can we help people who learn differently? This is ground-breaking stuff.

To understand Autism Spectrum Disability – I like to use the term ASD to mean Autism Spectrum Disability rather than Disorder – we must first look at typical development.

Typical development

Typical kids divide their attention to accommodate the changing world around and within themselves – the physical, emotional and social world.

My daughter, because of the way her brain is configured, is the only typical or normal one in our family.

When she was about 18 months old, she would take her nappy off and present it to me and expect that I would know what to do with it. Her brothers never did that.

She became aware (a) her nappy was full, (b) it was uncomfortable and (c) she could take it off and then (d) mum would know what to do with it if she gave it to me.

Having a brain that recognises all that information from all those different senses and puts it together – not just has an understanding but then can actually act on it – is what I think of as being an neurologically typical individual.

Kids with Autism might notice with any luck that their nappies are full, but knowing what to do about it, forget it! I have two boys on the Spectrum who eventually did learn and they are toilet trained – but it did take a lot longer.

THAT'S TYPICAL

*That's typical I heard her say
and I wondered what she meant.*

*You always want it your way,
she echoed without relent.*

*I waited silent as a bird and
pondered on her words.*

She just kept talking, I kept walking.

What was it that I heard?

*I always wanted my way,
for what other way could there be?*

*I only know the proper way,
the way that's there for me.*

*If we do it her way that
wouldn't be right at all.*

*It would be wrong and all along
I'd know it's wrong and not ok.*

*So that's typical, so that's typical,
so why can't she understand?*

What is it she doesn't get?

*I must firmly stand my ground,
I mustn't give in yet.*

*If I give up she'll never learn,
she'll never know the way.*

*She calls it being stubborn,
but I'm scripted for this play.*

Kids with Autism take words very literally, so I have to be a bit careful because there may be some adults here with Autism – you know it is genetic!

I don't want you to take it too literally.

There are milestones that kids go through. When we take typical kids for a walk; we hold their hand and we say, 'look at that plane'. They then look at the plane in the direction that we are pointing.

I'd take my boys and say, "look at that train" or "look at that horse". My boys looked at the end of my finger and so do other kids with Autism. They had no idea that when mum did that, it meant look over where I was pointing to, not my finger.

Strangely enough though, if I'm sharing some kind of interest that they had, and I'd point out something; if it was for example, 'Thomas the Tank Engine' and I point to something to do with Thomas, they would look where I was pointing.

Is it that they don't know how to follow what you're pointing out or is it that they only have single attention associated with what they are interested in? That's what I believe Autism is all about.

Autism, I believe, is a brain configuration that means we only have single focus and that's how our brain is designed. If you've only got single interest, how much attention can you have?

If kids with Autism have a single interest with a single attention, which sense is that attention going to be noted through?

It might be visual sense. You find kids with Autism who look out the side of their eyes.

Kids like me when I was younger, look through their fingers. I put my hands in front of me and would focus on something that I could see and then chunk what I was looking at through my fingers as if they were little windows – one at a time. I would look at the gaps one at a time.

Most of the neurological typical population would actually find that looking at the world through their fingers hinders them.

This is because if you're dividing your attention, you don't need to slow everything down that's coming at you all at once and look at it in chunks.

You can cope with it coming at you all at once because all of your senses are all working altogether. Your sensory system is working in an integrated united way.

You can talk, walk, chat, think, drink, notice the phone, notice the stain on your shoe, notice the right moment when to take it out – all sorts of things all at once.

Kids with Autism do one thing at one time in a serial fashion. You interrupt that routine and a lot of them have to go right back to the beginning and start again.

If we don't have (a), can't get to (b), let alone (c) or (d). We only have single focus, single attention and single interest. This is how our brain is configured.

A good book to read is called 'A Friend like Henry'. The film that's been made from that book is called 'Beyond Thomas'. There are things I don't like in the book, but they use this young man's interest in 'Thomas the Tank Engine' and Henry and the Fat Controller and all the rest to widen his window of attention to help him learn about other things.

This young man is now nearly 20 years old and a very capable young man, from the young lad that he was who couldn't talk! I think it is very exciting.

We know about what informs typical development.

In Autism, what you will find is that we'll often have only one sense working, instead of all of our senses working together.

You might have read that if you are visually impaired how much your hearing sense gets heightened. If you're visually impaired and you start touching things to find out about them, do people say 'Oh no, that looks a bit strange, I had better stop that'. The answer is no they don't.

What do they do if you have Autism? That's the kind of thing they say because they don't recognise that Autism has similar disabling features.

Learning in schools if you have Autism

When it comes to learning multi-tasking in school environments, children with autism are very similar to people who are single sense impaired such as being visually impaired.

I looked through my fingers because I couldn't cope with all the world coming at me. These days I have got Irlen lenses which means I very definitely cope a lot better now, a lot better with the visual world. Irlen lenses don't work for everyone, but they certainly worked for me.

Attention and learning go together. Learning requires attention, interest and the interplay between senses and cognition. Cognition is just a word that means what's going on in your head – thinking, reasoning, prioritising and receiving.

With respect to attention and interest, neurological typical people and Autism Spectrum Disability individuals are wired up differently.

This deviation may be too simple because many individuals with Autism have an intellectual disability or epilepsy or dyspraxia. They may have AD/HD – I'm AD/HD, actually – not that you would have noticed! They may have dyslexia. I'm dyslexic as well.

There are a lot of things that can co-occur. Do they sometimes co-occur in the typical population as well? I am not allowed to say 'Can you be typical and blond?' because that gets me into trouble.

You can actually have lots of things happening at the same time. You don't have to just have Autism. You can be intellectually disabled and typical.

By typical I mean – have a brain that's wired up that incorporates all of the senses and enables you to relate socially.

That's the one differing factor in Autism you won't see in any other disability, our social disposition is different.

People that are typical want us to be a lot more sociable because somehow they feel that to be sociable is the norm.

In Autism Spectrum Disorder, I believe monotropism ('mono' means 'single' 'tropism' means 'channels') is an important word. It simply means that one's senses – smelling, touching, tasting, seeing, feeling – work more independently than they do together. In typical development, you get integrated sensory function. If your senses aren't all interconnected, you won't be developing typically.

In Autism you've only got single attention available or a single focus. It gets us into lots of trouble. People call us lazy. People call us talented and we are, there is no doubt about it. But a lot of that is because we are not typical.

If we created a learning environment that encompassed single focus, there would be so many things we could do.

If you've only got single attention and a single interest, if you take that interest away, is the motivation still there? No, it's gone. This is the difference in how we learn.

If you are Autistic, you learn via your interest and it is kind of temping to take it away to make room as you would if you were a typical person, to get us interested in other things.



But actually that doesn't usually work in Autism; we need to use the interest as a stepping stone to getting us interested in other things.

If your young man with Autism is interested in the weather, you talk about the weather, you take him to the weather sections in the newspaper, you look up the weather on the internet, you talk about the weather in different countries – then you've got geography and history covered. You can take the weather into all sorts of situations.

I once had a passion for piston engines, which is reasonable isn't it?

Well I can take piston engines into Australian history. I did the Victorian Certificate of Education at the age of 38 and I took piston engines into Australian History.

The title of my paper was 'The 1930s Women and Cross-dressing'. Any hint? It was about women pilots in planes that ran with piston engines. You'd be surprised to know that you can take all sorts of interests right across the school curriculum.

Last year, I presented to a conference with psychiatrists and there were nine young people in an institution because their special interest was sexual abuse. A psychiatrist said to me 'Wendy, how could we use that special interest?' I am trusting that you are all very sensible people and that you would realise some interests are not OK. There is never a way to use a special interest that involves hurting people.

My home is full of 'Aspies' and 'Auties' (that's short for people with Autism and Aspergers) and has lots of structure and lots of timetables. Trying to fit everybody's very different timetable and interests into one household is not easy. Every parent knows that.

Is that right? Absolutely. If we don't use our kids' interests, we will lose them and they will end up in the Mental Health System, so it's really, really important to make sure that we do.

I didn't talk until I was four years old and the diagnosis was and still is an intellectual disability. I believe they got it wrong, but they don't.

I went to ordinary schools; I ran freely everywhere because nobody told me that you weren't supposed to. When they did tell me, they didn't explain it in ways that made sense to me.

If I was on my way to other people and I wanted something and you were in the way, tough! You got bowled over in the process. I don't do that anymore. But the thing that I was interested in was the only thing that I was attending to.

I had to learn to widen my attention span and that took a long time. I wasn't catering to the world going on within me or around me. I didn't know when my belly was full. I didn't know if I was hungry, I didn't know if I was cold. I didn't know if I was hot. I didn't know if I was sick. There were lots of things I couldn't tell, if my attention was somewhere else.

There was no available attention for me to connect to those other things.

If you have kids with Autism, you'll probably understand what I mean. I was scared of sudden noise unless it happened to be something I was interested in like – trains. I was scared of trains, but I was really interested in them. Strange that!

I loved to play in the garden and my very special interest when I was really small was water. I loved the ocean. I would walk down there and watch the waves for a very long time. You can read in my autobiography about my being cut off from the shore, because the water had come in and I hadn't noticed. Why would you? Was I worried about it? No, not at all.

School was very confusing. I didn't understand the rules and didn't relate to other kids.

We had this game at school where you would all stand in a line and they would pass the ball over your head if you were the first kid, the next kid would go between your legs, the next kid go over the head, then between the legs, then over the head, then between the legs, then it would all come back to the front and start again. What is the point?

I remember arguing with the teacher, which didn't help. I was constantly in trouble.

There is a school report of me that says things like 'Wendy is incapable of doing as she is told'.

Well I am not incapable, I didn't have the concept. If you only have single attention, single interest, how do you build concepts? Concepts like up, down, over and through, your's, mine. Kids that are typical with divided attention learn these things very quickly because they have a brain that's configured to do so. We can teach kids with Autism how to do this, but we need to use their interest.

Being a teenager

As a teenager, things got really bad for me.

I tried really hard to form friends. I remember my dad saying to me, "make friends". I thought to myself that I knew how to make rice pudding. I made rice pudding for everyone in my street.

How do you make friends? There is no recipe – I looked it up. Not on the computer, I didn't have one. Didn't know how to use one then.

I didn't find any books, except for one that said 'The art of making friends and influencing people' and there is no recipe in that book either. So my parents did what they thought was the best thing – they sent me to Guides, Youth Group etc. I certainly earned lots of badges – it became a very keen obsession – but it didn't help make friends.

Just being amongst typicals doesn't help you. Does being amongst right-handed people if you're a left-handed, help? No! You have got to devise how to make learning accessible for how that person's wired up. You really have.

What I am suggesting is we have different design for different jobs.

There are typical design bits with the ability to divide attention and accommodate multiple interests in the chaotic world we all live in. Autism Spectrum Disability design fits with focussed attention, single interest.

This can be really good in the creative world of arts and vocations needing focus – things like engineering, but it could also be picking bits of fluff up off the carpet. You know, your vacuum cleaner might break down one day, you might need us!

I am not naughty or stupid, just Autistic. Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disability are often literal – black and white. We appear very stubborn. It is like you've got blinkers on – a single interest and a single attention. You don't know there is any other way to see it.

There is only one way – my way – unless you teach me differently. But I need you to teach me differently by making learning accessible through my interest.

Using visual timetables that explain time and expectation helps us adjust and understand what to expect. Whether you have it written out in words, whether you have it structured through photographs and pictures or whether you use signs. We need some way of knowing.

In today's world, it is fashionable to have a mobile phone. You can program a mobile phone and it can make a noise. And if you look at it, it tells you what the next thing you are supposed to do is. Today kids walking around with a mobile phone is very fashionable – I was never fashionable. But in these days, kids with Autism, even if they have these big head phones – they can be fashionable.

Using our interest and motivating reward it is a great way to create a very positive experience of expectations.

I don't want anyone to change the way I am. There is too much emphasis on 'curing Autism now'. This worries me, because the message that gives kids is – they are not good the way they are and if a kid doesn't feel valued, they will play up. You will get challenging behaviour.

A child that feels valued is much likely to respond with respect. I don't want anyone to change who I am, but just like you, I do want to be heard, understood and tolerated.

Dismissing who I am or trying to see me as part of a tragic disaster is not the way to go. As people with Autism Spectrum Disability, I believe we have much to give back to our communities.

Forget the Diagnosis

By Jene Aviram*

Autism! **Asperger's syndrome!**
ADHD! High functioning!
Low functioning! Delayed!

Hearing these words about your child can be crushing. They can devastate you to your very core. The good news is THEY DON'T HAVE TO!

Let me tell you why ... It doesn't matter. That's right. It simply doesn't matter.

If you want to really help your child then read on. I'm serious.

Don't be like the thousands who wish they had "lived" this concept sooner.

Pretend for a moment you have a newborn. He is simply perfect. By the time he is two years old, his fingers are so long, they look strange.

You go to a renowned physician and ask "What's wrong with my child? Why are his fingers so long?"

The physician smiles and says, "Your child has a condition called spindle fingers. He has a natural gift for playing musical instruments. Many dream of having this talent".

You're absolutely thrilled and can't wait to share the news. You rush home but on the way you stop to buy a toy xylophone, piano, drum set and flute.

You set them out on the floor when you get home and you watch proudly as your toddler strums each one of them. You don't care that everyone else thinks it just sounds like noise. You have a budding musician on your hands and he's practising!

As the months go by you encourage your child to play instruments. He gets a little older and expresses his preference for the piano. You take him to piano lessons, listen to famous piano players and perhaps even go to concerts.

You explain to your son that his fingers are long because he is talented at playing the piano. Your son plays the piano beautifully. He is proud of his fingers and his talent. You are proud of your son.

You run into the physician a few years later. You tell him proudly about your child's piano skills. He smiles broadly and says "I made it all up. There is no condition called spindle fingers". "What?" you shriek "that's impossible. My child is an excellent player".

"Of course he is" says the physician.

"It's called belief. You believed in your child's fingers. You believed in his talent. You encouraged him. It didn't matter how many mistakes he made. You hardly heard them because you knew he was on the path to greatness. Your son felt your belief. He saw it in your eyes. He felt it course through his being. It inspired him. Every time he looked at his long fingers he thought about his talent. He felt proud of himself. He knew he could do it. Your unwavering faith inspired him to be the best he can be".

My advice to you is this.

Forget about the boxes and the labels. Ignore the judgments.

Your child is fascinating. Your child is a unique and wonderful being who is incredibly special.

Give him the tools. Encourage him on his journey. Never lose faith in him. Stand by his side. Teach him as much as you can. Watch in delight as he soars far beyond everyone's expectations. Everyone's except yours and all those who joined your belief along the way!

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