The Best of
THE MORNING NEWS

Selected articles from out of print issues 1988 - 1998

Winter 1999

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Jenison Public Schools, Jenison, MI

THE MORNING NEWS

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Dedicated to individuals with autistic spectrum disorders and those who work alongside them to improve mutual understanding.

Practically a New Century

Spring, Summer, Fall, and Winter 1999

Closing the century that introduced us to autistic spectrum disorders with four issues devoted to the very best creative and practical ideas.

About Our Cover:

On our cover is the ink drawing, *Looking at the World*, by Janet Williams, a 1994 graduate of Jenison High School. *Looking at the World* was first published on the cover of the *Original Social Story Book* in January of 1993, and later became the logo for *THE MORNING NEWS*. Janet graduated from the University of Michigan in 1998, and was married in October of this year. Now Janet Teunis, she is employed by LaFontsee Galleries. The extensive use of green and white? Those are the school colors for Jenison Public Schools, a district that has supported *THE MORNING NEWS* throughout the last decade, and the development of Social Stories and other instructional techniques.

Contents:

In this and every issue of THE MORNING NEWS, it's our turn to "talk with Wilson". Time to meet in the back yard of autism, collectively think things through, listen to other perspectives, and share ideas and information. Time to demonstrate that in the continual search for answers, there's plenty of "Wilson" among us...

Welcome to this issue of THE MORNING NEWS.

- from *Talking with Wilson from ABC's Home Improvement about Autism*, *THE MORNING NEWS*, March 1993

- Carol Gray, Editor

Welcome to this issue of *THE MORNING NEWS*, the last issue of the twentieth century. It has been fun for the staff of *THE MORNING NEWS* to look at past issues; collectively they document the talent of many people, and the development of new ideas. *THE MORNING NEWS* is named after that part of the day that presents the greatest opportunity. In this issue, we've the opportunity to look back at what we've learned before exploring and sharing practical new concepts in the future.

We have selected a representative set of the best articles of *THE MORNING NEWS* from the last decade. Determining "best" was an interesting process. With so many articles to consider, criteria soon emerged to assist in the selection. We considered popularity, availability, content, and author/artist. Some of the most popular articles, for example, *Pictures of Me* (C. Gray, Fall 1996) or *For Autistic Men: My All Time List of Social Blunders and How You Can Avoid Them* (J. Newport, Spring 1999) were considered though ultimately eliminated because they are still in print and available in back issues. Similarly, the article, *Social Skills Groups* (T. Attwood, Winter 1996) was later published as part of his book, *Asperger's Syndrome: A Guide for Parents and Professionals* (Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 1998). Many wonderful articles, for example, *There's A Lot More to Communication than Talking!* (D. Twachtman, Summer 1996), and *Why Can't My Child Sleep? Sleep Disturbances in Autism* (M. Wiznitzer, Spring 1997), regrettably were eliminated simply due to space restrictions. For this reason it's important to regard this issue as *representative* of the efforts of many talented authors and artists; our goal being to select a cross section of the best. (In the coming years, a book containing many more "best" *MORNING NEWS* articles and art will be published by The Gray Center for Social Learning and Understanding.)

Each article in this issue is reprinted as close to it's original printing as possible; some changes in format have been made. For example, in *THE MORNING NEWS* photographs of the authors often accompany their articles; these were eliminated to reserve space for text, and to make possible the inclusion of as many articles as possible. In addition, quote boxes used to break up text and highlight excerpts from an article have also been eliminated, again to preserve space. *THE MORNING NEWS* has not only been known for it's practical articles, but also for it's samples of art by people with autistic spectrum disorders. Originally they appeared in *THE MORNING NEWS* larger than they do in this issue. The intent of the small changes in format is to include as much as possible in this issue, to represent a wide range of articles and artistic achievements.

Rummaging through pages of the past, articles can stir memories of people and times like old songs on a radio. Like songs, they can collectively represent a period of time, an emotion or idea, similar to the songs of World War II or Woodstock. Articles from *THE MORNING NEWS* trigger images of people and discussions, or memories of children who progressed in response to ideas contained in an article. An author may remember where an article was developed, a photo that became the "stared focus" during a period of writer's block, or a series of misadventures surrounding an effort to make a deadline. As the editor, the articles of *THE MORNING NEWS* have individual personalities, purposes, and histories. Over time, they collectively form different routes or types of information - some becoming a part of major expressways from which many valuable ideas ultimately developed, others remaining as interesting individual roads of limited length and relevance. In this issue we have selected what we believe are articles part of a valuable information expressway, reprinted from the past to renew their original purpose as we "check the road map" before heading into the next century. To each of our subscribers, we extend a warm welcome to this and all future issues of *THE MORNING NEWS.*

***Editors note:** The late 1980's brought many changes to educational programming at Jenison Public Schools, among them supported employment and inclusive education (originally referred to in Michigan as supported education). The following articles were written as these efforts were initiated, in response to a series of encounters with a few vocal people resistant to these changes and their implications. Efforts to include people with autistic spectrum disorders in schools and the community led to the need for, and the discovery of, Social Stories in the fall of 1990.*

You Can't Play a Fiddle on Both Sides

Reprinted from *THE MORNING NEWS*, November 1988

- Carol Gray, Consultant to Students with Autism

First, you believe you can maybe play the fiddle. You find others who believe they can play also. Together, you decide to try it First one note, then another. After much practice and effort, you can play a song. One aspect of this effort never falters. You believe you can play, and you need the freedom to practice.

Outside your window are those who can't tolerate the mistakes of practice. In fact, they *listen* for the mistakes. The minute you begin playing well, they decide you are showing off. They claim they don't know *what* song you're playing, while to you it becomes clearer and clearer. Initially, of course, their attention to mistakes is a little distracting. Still, focused on the task at hand, your music becomes better and better, the mistakes dwindle, the song emerges. In opening the window for those who doubted you to hear, you realize they've gone. Maybe to a different window.

If you recognize this story, perhaps it's because you learned once to play a fiddle. The chance is greater, though, that you are among the parents, professionals, and businesses across this state and nation who are working hard to implement their belief in supported employment.

A few hints to fiddlers: Find other potential musicians. Never hand a fiddle to those listening for mistakes, as they are fearful of taking chances. Be wary of whiners, as you can't accompany them with your fiddle. Focus on the music, make sure you practice the right songs. Share the frustration of practice, the excitement of mastery. Hug other fiddlers when you see them. Once the song becomes very, very clear .open the window and play *LOUD*, okay? Hold a concert.

From the Experts: Myths about Reinventing the Wheel

Reprinted from *THE MORNING NEWS*, February 1989

- Carol Gray, Consultant to Students with Autism

There's no sense doing it, they say. It's round, it rolls, it's perfect. A great idea that has stood the test of time.

There's no argument that the wheel was an incredible discovery. But the phrase, "No sense reinventing the wheel" has come to mean to SOME something quite different. To the ambitious, it's reason to find something and make it better, adapt it. To others, it's a phrase used to indicate an intended search which is rarely initiated. For these individuals, wheels not only have to already exist, they are content to wait until they roll to their feet.

Having heard the phrase in that manner one too many times instigated a visit to the experts on wheels: the people of Ronda Tire, Jenison. For something that dares to be reinvented, there certainly is a lot of refinement! So much, in fact, that Mr. Kevin Heinig, manager, estimates it would take four months to count all the possible sizes, models, manufacturers, and varieties of tires and wheels. (Not only that - there's a use for every single one of them!) Add to that the realization that they will come out with entirely new lines next year, and the number of possible wheels becomes infinite.

This should inspire the ambitious and overwhelm the observers of life. To this writer, there is little doubt supported education and supported employment are conceptual "wheels" that are destined to roll far and endure the test of time. No trends (or treads?) here. To those with Michelin and Goodyear attitudes that identify individual need and creatively rewrite and refine a great concept - while initiating programs in their districts - welcome to supported education. To those who wait for the wheel of supported education to roll their way, a gentle reminder that the frightening reality is that the wheel is waiting for you.

Editor's note: *Four years after You Can't Play a Fiddle on Both Sides and From the Experts: Myths about Reinventing the Wheel (page 2 of this issue), the following article appeared in THE MORNING NEWS. This article added detail to the general philosophy taking form in the two earlier articles. Those familiar with Social Stories (developed late in 1990) and Comic Strip Conversations (1994) will see some of the philosophy central to those interventions reflected in Looking for Answers: Talking with Wilson of ABC's Home Improvement about Autism.*

LOOKING FOR ANSWERS: Talking with Wilson of ABC's *Home Improvement* about Autism

Reprinted from *THE MORNING NEWS*, March 1993

- Carol Gray, Consultant to Students with Autism

In my opinion, some of the best moments on television are on *Home Improvement*, when the main character, Tim, has a discussion over his back fence with his neighbor, Wilson. It is Wilson who intrigues me. Imagine having an ever-present person just beyond your "back fence" who, without hesitation, could calm your anxieties, explain your fears, and bring wisdom to confusion. In terms of the field of autism, it wouldn't hurt to have a "Wilson" just beyond the fence of each school and home to shed light on questions now and then. Wilson could answer questions surrounding the causes of autism, or questions which are currently the focus of research studies, or questions regarding facilitated communication, auditory training, and educational interventions. If only we had Wilson in the "back yard" of autism, he would be a valuable resource; fortunately, on closer inspection, I think Wilson may be more accessible than we think.

To introduce Wilson to those of you unfamiliar with *Home Improvement*, consider that Wilson may be better understood as a "what" than a "who". Tim turns to Wilson for advice on a variety of topics, most related to his family. While it isn't uncommon for a character on a television show to give advice, Wilson has interesting characteristics which set him apart. Rarely do you see Wilson's entire face - only his eyes are visible over the back fence. Wilson interacts only with one member of the family, Tim. Wilson never touches anyone. While Wilson patiently responds to problems and crises, he never has a current crisis of his own.

It's as if the back yard fence places Wilson beyond all of those factors that touch and influence every other character on the show. While others make mistakes, Wilson never fumbles. Wilson can always see the bigger picture, the broader implications, the emotional "aerial view" of any situation. He's older (though his attitudes are current and free of the biases which often come with age). He's wiser (though he never takes credit for his wisdom). He's always there, never missing a cue, never over stepping his bounds or offering help when it is not asked for (the guy never even steps out of his *yard!)*

Why doesn't the infallibility of this picture perfect character irritate the American public? I believe the answer lies in the fact that we don't *perceive* Wilson as a person. I believe to the audience "Wilson" is something else which is presented to us through this character.

Wilson is time to think. Tim illustrates this adult version of "time out" when he retreats to his back yard to talk with Wilson each week. For us, time to think is a chance to reassess things on our own, in our own way. It's a personal form of "silence" - whether it's meditation, quilting, running, walking alone, walking with someone, painting, playing *Solitaire*, playing *Monopoly*, or something else. "Time to think" is whatever we do as individuals which helps us respond effectively once again. "Time to think" is often inaccurately referred to as "free time", a term which disguises it's extreme importance. People "talk to Wilson" the best when they are engaged in a hobby or something they just love to do for fun - which, by the way, is often what Wilson himself is doing when he talks to Tim.

Wilson is the power of expanded and accurate observation; *expanded* meaning he often describes the perspectives of other characters, *accurate* meaning his assumptions are minimal. This part of Wilson is nothing new to the field of autism. Current research points out the importance of observation, especially in terms of first regarding the behaviors of individuals with autism as communicative. The best observations are made by stepping back a little, just beyond a "back yard fence". It is from expanded observations, like Wilson's, that Tim returns to the original situation with renewed effectiveness. And so can we.

Wilson is the ability to observe a person simultaneously from two vantage points. While he recognizes what makes each character individual, he also understands what people have in common, regardless of their abilities or challenges. As a result, Wilson's advice has an "aerial view" quality to it - advice which "fits" the current situation while at the same time applies to other people and settings.

Wilson understands that he can never claim to be "Tim", or assume he is capable of having Tim's thoughts or feelings. While Wilson often recounts a past experience of his own in reference to Tim's current situation, he never claims his experience is identical to Tim's. Wilson understands the difference between a similar past experience and claiming to "know" how Tim feels. This part of Wilson is a weekly reminder that time spent listening should exceed time spent claiming to *know* the motivations and feelings of other people.

Wilson is accurate information. While we value accurate information, research is a slow process. It's interesting to note that Wilson on *Home Improvement* is not a fast mover. For the same reason Tim doesn't tell Wilson to "talk faster" or "get to the point", we hesitate to rush a research project as it inches along - there's this feeling that by nature it is already moving as fast as it can. I suppose if we wanted information without accuracy, we could get an encyclopedia full of answers by tomorrow. Sometimes it seems in our field information comes from two sources - those sources we have trusted for years, and those sources we heard about yesterday which we want to trust because their information is so incredibly exciting. The frustration settles in somewhere between our understanding that accurate answers require time, and the urgency and importance of our questions. Still, it would be short-sighted to focus only on answers.

Wilson is *creativewisdom*. That's one word, meaning not just wisdom and not just creativity, but both. Wilson demonstrates that what really makes any answer effective is 1) which process we use to arrive at the answer; 2) how an answer is translated into something useful; and 3) how, and when, it is shared. From the *process* of looking for answers, Wilson has achieved his wisdom, and it is his creativity which guides him in knowing which answers go where - and the best way to share them.

The fact is, Wilson does not have the answers to our questions. What he is, though, is a weekly demonstration of how to seek answers, and just as important, what to do with them once we have them. Wilson isn't a person. Wilson is a process for people in search of answers. Wilson is a process which requires time to think, observe, and listen, and which results in the creative application of accurate information.

In this and every issue of *THE MORNING NEWS*, it's our turn - yours and ours - to "talk with Wilson". Time to meet in the back yard of autism, collectively think things through, listen to other perspectives, and share ideas and information. Time to demonstrate that in the continual search for accurate answers, there's plenty of "Wilson" among us.

Welcome to this issue of *THE MORNING NEWS*.

Characteristics of a Good Professional

Reprinted from *THE MORNING NEWS*, Spring 1996

-Susan J. Moreno, M.A.

Editors note: Susan Moreno is the founder and editor of The Maap, a newsletter for parents of more advanced autistic people, which has reached over 4,200 families and the professionals who care for them. The Maap is circulated in the U.S. and 30 other countries. Mrs. Moreno is the author of High-Functioning Individuals with Autism, a booklet which contains advice and information for parents and professionals. In addition to numerous lectures around the country, Mrs. Moreno is President of Maap Services, Inc.. In this capacity, she gives supportive information and advice to parents, teachers, health-care professionals and others about all aspects of more advanced individuals with autism.

Mrs. Moreno has a Master's degree in Applied Behavioral Science from Valparaiso University. She has also worked as a neurocognitive rehabilitation therapist with head injury survivors. She resides in Crown Point, Indiana with her husband and two daughters. Her older daughter, Beth, is currently working at the University of Chicago and resides in her own apartment in Chicago. She is also pursuing a Master's degree in Liturgical Music. Beth has autism.

For 24 years now, I have been the parent of a lovely daughter with autism. In 1984, I started a newsletter, *The Maap*, for parents of children like my daughter. Through my work at *The Maap*, I have had contact with nearly 4,200 families similar to mine. I now write and lecture individuals and have become a "professional". This combination of parenting an exceptional person and working in the field of autism as a professional, gives me a two-sided view of what makes a good professional.

Teachers, speech therapists, occupational therapists, doctors, psychiatrists, visual trainers, dentists, auditory trainers, social workers, physicians... this is a partial list of the professionals who may become a part of life for parents of challenged individuals. Too often, parents seek the help of a professional and seem to get nowhere, except to the point of total frustration. Another professional in the same field with an amazingly similar set of credentials can be a tremendous help. What makes the difference?

I think that the first and foremost characteristic of a good professional is a ***positive attitude.*** Is there an attitude of respect toward the challenged individual? Are the individual's deficits the only thing the professional sees? Does the professional look for the personality of the individual with autism and appreciate it? An example of positive versus negative attitude is often related by Dr. Temple Grandin, who has autism. She said that during her childhood most of her teachers and therapists tried to stifle her obsessional interests. Then she encountered a teacher who began using those interests to increase her learning in other areas. For instance, he built her interest in cats into further study of biology. Her obsession with cattle holding devices led her to a PhD and a lucrative and successful career in designing cattle loading systems for major meat purveyors around the world.

The best training and experience possible does not culminate in a truly excellent professional unless *creativity* is present. People with disabilities are just that - *people*. They don't all have exactly the same needs or abilities, and each has their own unique personality. Parents are often looking for someone who is willing occasionally to *not* do what they have done for their other clients or students and try something new. This doesn't mean forget what is known and try something irresponsible, but be open to new ideas.

Being *punctual* is very important. Most of us feel that there aren't enough hours in the day. However, we will all still accomplish the same amount of work each day, whether on time or not. When parents are forced to wait, especially when this occurs consistently, the unspoken message they hear is, "I am superior to you. Your time is not as important as mine." This is certainly not an effective basis for collaboration.

In addition, these long waits are particularly distressing to individuals challenged by autism who may have extremely concrete time concepts. Therefore, waiting is not just boring, it is torture

Be reassuring. My husband and I employed the services of many physicians over the last 24 years of our daughter's life. The one who remains dearest in my memory simply hugged me one bleak day when our daughter had come in -- once again ill and unable to tell us what hurt. He said, "You are doing a great job. Don't ever give up." This isn't to suggest that professionals should be "Pollyannas". We need reality, not false hope. This wonderful physician simply encouraged us to continue and was supportive.

Along with reassurance, I would add **warmth**. Most parents of challenged individuals can relate far too many stories of being treated as though they weren't fully human by professionals who appeared distant and cold. Parents sometimes feel as though their son or daughter was treated like a laboratory rat instead of a person who needs help. It is a lot easier to accept tough information or to follow difficult courses of action if we feel the person leading us is compassionate and truly cares about our loved one.

Be **realistic** in what you expect of families and what you guide parents to believe. Don't expect all families to be able to turn their homes into a therapeutic clinic. We may have other children to consider, or our own personalities and needs may make us less than ideal "therapists". All the warmth and reassurance on earth won't undo the harm which can be done by not keeping us realistic in our expectations about the progress of our challenged loved one. This doesn't mean we should be encouraged to give up hope, it means we need to fully realize any risks involved when we try something new and to be fully advised of our options. If we give up our hopes, we will lose our spirit. Our hopes and dreams for our children may not be what they were before we knew they had a life-long disability, but we still have many hopes and dreams for them, just the same. The challenge for the caring professional is to gently guide us toward attainable goals and more realistic hopes and dreams.

Don't be afraid to **admit fallibility**. Nothing always works. Parents begin to distrust people who claim that they have never made a mistake or don't admit to a negative circumstance they might have caused.

Last, communicate clearly and give direct answers. Avoid technical language when communicating with parents. While terms like *PDD, ADD, SMI certified OT's*, etc. are sometimes used when communicating with fellow professionals, these terms can be intimidating, confusing, or misleading to parents. If you're not sure as to whether your language is too technical for the parents with whom you are dealing, you can always encourage them to stop you and ask the meaning of any word you say. Sometimes it is not just the use of what we parents sometimes call "professionalese", it may be that your vocabulary is sufficiently extensive as to include words or phrases that the average person does not comprehend. This must be balanced by not "talking down" to parents. The fact that we have produced a challenged child does not mean we are intellectually inferior.

I have discussed this subject from the parent's perspective. However, as someone who has worked on the professional's side of the fence, I want to end with the point that no one can be all things to all people. For the most part, I've known very few professionals who didn't care about the people they tried to serve. Their personalities, abilities, and approaches vary. But most of them are giving their all to make things better for us and our loved ones with autism. It is up to us as parents to select those professionals who can best meet our children's needs and/or ours.

Three Ways to Cut Fat from Your Diet

Reprinted from *THE MORNING NEWS*, December 1991

Occasionally students with autism display a special wisdom in the things they say or write. This example comes from a science test question: *List three ways to cut fat from your diet*. The student's answer: *1. Cut the fat from your steak. 2. Slide it to the side of your plate. 3. Throw it in the garbage.*

There is No Place Called "Inclusion"

Reprinted from *THE MORNING NEWS*, Winter 1996

-Cathy Pratt, Ph.D.
Director, Indiana Resource Center for Autism, Indiana University

Editor's Note: Cathy Pratt, Ph.D. is the Director of the Indiana Resource Center for Autism at Indiana University's Institute for the Study of Developmental Disabilities. She has a background in special education, with an emphasis on autism. Prior to receiving her doctorate, Dr. Pratt spent ten years teaching students with disabilities of many ages, including students with autism.

It is not unusual to hear professionals discuss inclusion in terms of inclusive students, inclusive classrooms, or inclusive schools. Unfortunately, these terms lend to the confusion surrounding inclusion. Inclusion is not a student, a classroom, or a school. Rather, inclusion is a belief that ALL students, regardless of labels, should be members of the general education community.

As members of the general education community, students with and without disabilities should have access to the full range of curriculum options. This means, for example, that students without disabilities should be able to utilize resource rooms without receiving a label first. It also means that students with disabilities should have access to typical homerooms, general education classrooms and courses, and school clubs. Those who support inclusion acknowledge that students have diverse learning needs and that the traditional model of education increasingly, is not able to accommodate all students. The philosophy of inclusion encourages the elimination of the dual special and general education systems, and the creation of a merged system that is responsive to the realities of the student population.

Today, the controversy over the appropriateness of inclusion for students with autism continues. Much of this controversy is based on diverse interpretations of the law and of current thinking. However, several basic premises behind the concept of inclusion are often over looked in these discussions. First, students with and without disabilities do not fall into neat categories of educational need. Stating that a student has autism does not paint an exact picture of the supports or services needed. It was never the intent of either federal law (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) or state regulations to base curriculum and placement decisions on categorical labels. The law clearly states that programming and placement must be individually determined. Second, the least restrictive environment mandate shows a clear preference for educating students with autism and other disabilities in general education settings. The law articulates that students must receive needed supports and services within the context of the regular classroom. When these accommodations are insufficient to insure educational success, then students can be placed in more restrictive settings. However, the responsibility is placed on the school to show that sufficient and appropriate resources were accessed and were unsuccessful in supporting a student's education in a regular classroom setting. Finally, the law states that students must have the opportunity to interact with non disabled peers. Clearly, segregated settings do not promote these opportunities and place teachers in the position of having to create artificial options.

Unfortunately, the debate about the benefits of inclusion versus segregation misses one critical point. Neither general education nor special education settings are inherently good. Placement in a general education setting does not mean that a student is learning valuable information. And segregation does not equal quality programming. The failure of students with autism in general education settings can be attributed to strategies and classroom structures that make learning difficult for all students. It is clearly time to get past the arguments surrounding inclusion and focus our efforts on teaching students what they need to know and in a manner that is effective. Interestingly, these are the same concerns expressed by the general education community. In reality, inclusion is not a special education issue. For schools to successfully support students with diverse learning needs, special education reform must be viewed within the broader context of school restructuring. Schools which are focused on improving outcomes and on preparing students without disabilities for meaningful and productive lives are in a better position to address the needs of students with disabilities. In other words, good schools are good schools for all. And good teachers are good teachers for any student. It is within the context of global school restructuring activities that educators can better focus their efforts on supporting students with autism in gaining maximum educational benefit from the general education setting. Below are a few recommendations to guide these efforts.

First, educators need training. Too often, teachers are presented with students from whom they are unprepared to teach. Information is important since individuals with autism can seem a paradox of strengths and weaknesses, and many develop false perceptions of these individuals. At a very basic level, teachers will need to know the primary characteristics associated with autism. While it is important to ensure that information is not stigmatizing to the student, teachers need to know about any areas of difficulty, special talents, and other important information. In addition to receiving up-front information, the instructional team needs time to meet to problem solve strategies and to address concerns. When teachers do not receive information and support, both the student and teachers are set up for failure.

Decisions to consider all students as members of the school community must be made by the entire school community with support from key administrators. When administrators are not supportive of students' participation in the school community and the changes this requires, teachers are placed in the position of bargaining for every bit of assistance. In addition, parents must spend time each year working aggressively with the school to ensure continued success. Schools which systematically accept and support all students are better prepared to support students with autism.

When choosing courses in which to involve students, consider areas of interest and situational demands (e.g., open spaces, lighting). When building a schedule, it may be helpful to intersperse easy and difficult course work, or allow students to spend certain parts of the school day in a smaller classroom area. In all cases, make sure students experience some successes during the school day. If the demands of the school day become too intense, it may be necessary to provide the student with a safe area in which to escape. Some may learn best when exercise or physical activity are available throughout the day.

The trend toward educating students with autism in local neighborhood schools requires the adoption of innovative and flexible instructional strategies to ensure that educational objectives are met and that students are supported across a diverse array of educational settings. Innovative strategies such as multi-age grouping, cooperative learning, authentic assessment, instruction which acknowledges the concept of multiple intelligences, thematic approaches, whole language instruction, and other innovations found in the general education community present a positive framework for teaching students with autism.

Peer support programs are another innovation used to ensure that students get the maximum benefit from their school day. Peers are a natural and readily available resource for supporting students with learning difficulties in general education settings. Research and practical experience indicate that students learn best from each other. Students will often get together in a study group. Students who are doing well in a subject area often help friends who are struggling to prepare for an exam. Some schools have building-wide programs in which tutoring and cooperative learning is established practice, and students change roles between tutor and tutee as the situations demands. Clearly peer support programs can serve as a critical resource for any student who is challenged by some aspect of the school curriculum.

Students must receive an adequate level of support during the school day. While peer support programs provide one mechanism for support, instructional assistants provide another. Assigned assistants will need information on providing instructions in a manner that is easily understood by students. It is helpful if instructional assistants are not always closely positioned next to the student. Rotating assistants and positioning assistants away from the student are important strategies for avoiding cue dependency. While different assistants can be used, adopted strategies must be consistent. Allow instructional assistants time with the team to discuss approaches that work and those that do not.

The general education setting can be less stressful if students are provided with information about expectations and rules. In most cases, this information should be presented in a written format so that the student can rehearse at his or her own pace, and refer to it as needed or when under added stress. Provide students with visual supports to assist with following a daily schedule, identifying classmates, completing homework assignments, getting to class prepared, and using self-control.

Many voice a concern about whether inclusion can work. Success stories from around the country provide testimony that students with autism can learn in general education settings if students' time is wisely used, sufficient support is provided, all are informed, and proven methods of instruction are used. If all these factors are addressed, implementing an educational program which reflects the philosophy of inclusion can prepare young people with autism to be members of a place called "community".

The Best "Quotes" from *THE MORNING NEWS*

Sometimes an author will select a few words that are exceptionally proficient at making a point. At other times, a phrase takes on additional meaning as time passes. These phrases become "quotable". Here, selected quotes from articles appearing in *THE MORNING NEWS* over the last decade.

"Hello, America! We are a national publication. Please join us in welcoming twenty new subscribers in the following states: Ohio; South Carolina; New Mexico; Georgia; Missouri; Maryland; and Iowa."
- Opening comments from the editor, September-October 1989

"These are not my children and I cannot be with them in the future."
- Carol Gray, *All Together Now*, September-October 1990

"It's a joy to think that a child who couldn't speak until she was 11 and had severe behavior problems has developed to a semi-independent life. I walked in here with all these people who have been involved with her life coming together, it got me crying tears of joy."
- Jane Delhaye, *The People Behind Transition*, Spring, 1992

"Our work is deadlines and production. Then you get the opportunity to work with Steve and others and there is more than deadlines and productivity. You see the person." (Mark Style, Grandville Printing)
- Sue Jonker, *Vocational Training in the Community*, Spring 1994

"'One size fits all' may work for the garment industry, but human beings are far too complex for such a generic approach." - Diane Twachtman, PhD. CCC/SLP, *What's a Parent to Do?* Fall 1995

"Dear Morning News, I would like to have a Pen Pal. Could you please give me the name of one?"
- Joshua Paul, from the first pen pal registry, Winter 1995

"...always look for the simplest answers first."
- Cindy Nykamp, Jenison High School student, *A Care Package for Individuals with Autism*, Winter 1995

"Hog the stage and you will end up in an empty theater." - Jerry Newport, *For Autistic Men: My All Time List of Social Blunders and How You Can Avoid Them*, Spring, 1999

"This MAY be the last issue of *THE MORNING NEWS*, but, we hope not."
- Opening comments from the editor, September, 1991

Autistic Spectrum Disorders in Down's Syndrome

Reprinted from *THE MORNING NEWS*, Summer 1997

-Lorna Wing MD FRCPsych, Psychiatrist
Bromley, Kent, UK

Editor's note: *Lorna Wing is a psychiatrist who has been involved in the area of autistic spectrum disorders for over 30 years. She was a member of the scientific staff of the British Medical Research Council's Social Psychiatry Unit from 1964-1990, researching in autistic disorders and learning disabilities. Her particular interests were diagnostic methods and epidemiology. The idea of a wide autistic spectrum was developed as a result of these studies. She retired from full-time work in 1990 and is now part-time psychiatric consultant to the Centre for Social and Communication Disorders. This is the diagnostic and assessment unit set up by the British National Autistic Society. She is a founding member of this Society and one of its vice-presidents. She is also a member of the committee of her local Sussex Autistic Society. She has published various papers on autistic spectrum disorders in scientific journals and wrote her first book, Autistic Children: A Guide for Parents, in 1971. This has now been rewritten and published in 1996, entitled the Autistic Spectrum: A Guide for Parents and Professionals. Lorna Wing is the parent of a daughter with autism, Susan, who was born in 1956.*

Down's syndrome is due to the presence of an extra chromosome. This causes a number of abnormalities of physical development associated with mental retardation. The degree of retardation varies widely between different individuals

Characteristics of people with Down's syndrome

Like everyone else, people with Down's syndrome have their own individual personalities and temperaments. However, some characteristics are particularly common, though certainly not universal, and these appear to be the polar opposite of the features found in autism. Many children and adults with Down's syndrome are friendly, sociable and derive much pleasure from social contact. They have a great sense of humour and enjoy mimicking other people. Although their articulation is often poor, making their speech difficult to understand, they communicate very well through lively use of gesture and mime. They tend to do poorly on formal tests of intelligence but have better scores on tests of social and practical ability. Development of pretend play is up to their general level of ability.

Those with Down's syndrome are often described as very stubborn. This sounds in theory like the uncooperativeness of someone with autism. In practice, there is a completely different quality. The stubborn response in typical Down's syndrome is made with full social awareness, whereas the negative reaction of autism is the result of lack of understanding of the social situation or the social consequences.

Memories come to my mind to illustrate these points. A little girl with Down's syndrome, about 10 years old, was asked to do an intelligence test. She sat at the table, frowning, with lips grimly pursed, refusing to answer questions or perform tasks. Sensing defeat, my colleague and I gave up the attempt and the little girl stamped out of the room with an expression of triumph on her face. We later watched her in the playground at school, laughing, talking and organising her circle of friends into a game of mothers and fathers. In the classroom she was very proud to have the job of giving out pencils and crayons, which she did without prompting.

In contrast, a boy of the same age who was autistic, whizzed through the visuo-spatial tasks in the same intelligence tests with no trouble at all but, in the playground, wandered alone, on tip toe, round and round the perimeter, flapping his hands and ignoring everyone else. In the classroom, he could be engaged in schoolwork only if he had one-to-one attention.

The picture of Down's syndrome I have described is, of course, the accepted stereotype from which there are many deviations. Nevertheless, it is a fair approximation for the majority of people with this condition. This makes it very surprising that Down's syndrome and an autistic spectrum disorder can both occur together, even though this happens in only a small proportion, perhaps 10%, of those with Down's syndrome. Some have autism in typical form while others have disorders well within the autistic spectrum. When the two problems are associated, the autistic social impairment dominates the picture and the usual sociability and communication skills are not seen.

Why do Down's syndrome and autism sometimes occur together?

In a study of all children in one area of London who had mental retardation or an autistic disorder, or both (Wing & Gould, 1979), we found four children with Down's syndrome and an autistic spectrum disorder. Three of these were profoundly mentally retarded and one was very severely retarded. In a later paper describing another four children with Down's syndrome and autism seen at clinics (Howlin, Wing & Gould, 1995), three were profoundly mentally retarded and one was very severely retarded. In both studies, the children concerned all had additional physical problems, such as a history of maternal rubella, visual and/or hearing impairments, or severe heart defects. From these two studies with very small numbers it could be suggested that autistic disorders occur in Down's syndrome only when some extra physical condition causes additional brain damage. However, I know a young man with Down's syndrome and autism who is fascinated by numbers. He also loves traveling on trains, which he is adept at doing without paying the fare. I also know of another who can play any tune he hears on the piano. Both are only mildly retarded and neither has any history of medical problems that might have caused the autism.

Another possibility is that, when Down's syndrome and autism occur together, there is a family history of autistic disorder, but no study to examine this idea has been published.

What are the implications for the family?

Parents of children with Down's syndrome already know of their child's disability from the early weeks or months of life. They have to come to terms with the knowledge that he or she will have a different pattern of development and a different life path from children who are not disabled. If they talk to other parents and read the available literature, they will look forward to their child becoming sociable and loving. But, if he or she also has an autistic spectrum disorder, nothing they read about typical Down's syndrome will prepare them for their child's behaviour.

One of the sources of support and help for parents of children with Down's syndrome is the local parents' association. The parents I know of children with the double disability have told me of their puzzlement and distress on finding that their child is very different from others in the group. The parties and social outings that are such fun for most children with Down's syndrome are of no interest for those who are also autistic and may be a source of distress. The behaviour that is typical of autistic disorders can make other parents critical if they assume that the family of the child with the double disability is somehow responsible because of the way they are bringing up their child.

Unhappily, it is often the case that the presence of Down's syndrome draws attention away from the autistic disorder and professional workers may fail to diagnose the latter. This leaves parents is a state of confusion without any acceptable explanation for their child's difficulties or without proper guidance on how to help him or her. If the dual diagnosis is still not made by the time the child goes to school, the problems are compounded by an inappropriate programme of education. Teachers' expectations are not met, and parents may again be the target for blame. The family of one child, described in the paper by Howlin, Wing & Gould (1995), became increasingly dejected as they saw their son falling further and further behind the other children. They went for help to a private language therapist and a clinical psychologist but the boy still did not make the expected progress. The parents became convinced that their child's 'failure' was their fault, until the correct diagnostic formulation was made when he was 8 years old.

What can be done to help?

The first priority is for the dual diagnosis to be made as early as possible. Professional workers and those involved in Down's syndrome associations need to be aware that this condition can be associated with an autistic spectrum disorder, albeit in only a small proportion of cases. The training or relevant professionals should include information on this subject.

Once the diagnosis is made, parents require full information on the implications for the child's future development and detailed explanation of ways they can help in developing their child's skills, minimising routines, obsessions and rituals and reducing socially inappropriate behaviour. They should be encouraged to contact organisations for helping people with autistic disorders, because the presence of any form of autism is of primary importance in determining needs, regardless of any other condition that may be present.

The educational programme provided should be along the lines appropriate for children with autistic disorders, with an emphasis on a structured organised environment and timetable. The social group activities that are right for most children with Down's syndrome take a much lesser place and need to be carefully modified for those who also have an autistic disorder. Services for day and residential care, occupation and leisure activities also have to take the autism into account.

As noted by Howlin, Wing & Gould (1995), for the majority of parents of children in the group described here, the correct dual diagnosis comes as a relief and helps to lift the burden of guilt imposed by the belief that they caused their child's difficulties.

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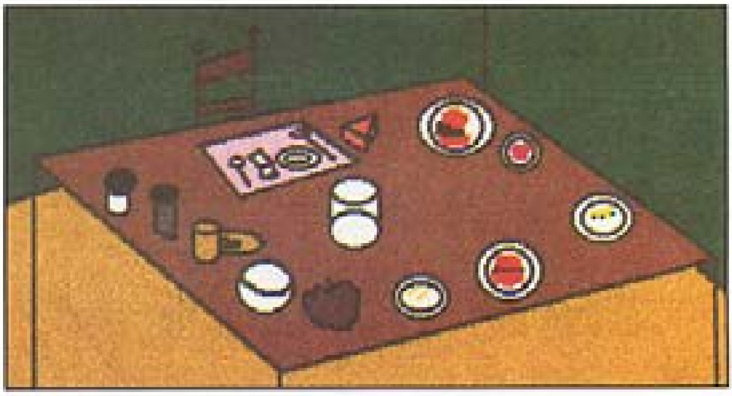
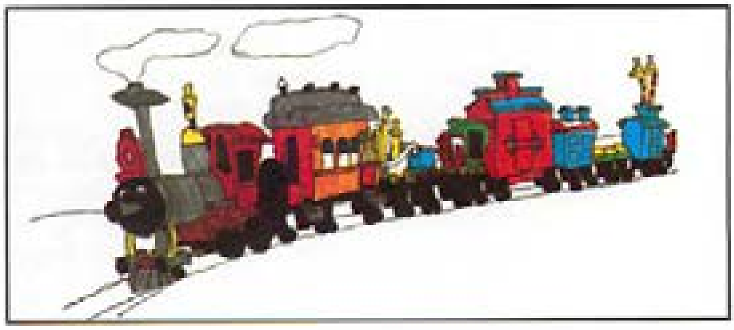
THE MORNING NEWS December 1997: A Celebration of Shared Experience, Creativity, and Talent

The December 1997 issue displayed the work of many talented children with autistic spectrum disorders, including drawings (left) by John Overton-Burns (11 years old at the time), computer graphics (top right) by Cody Duduman (7 years old at the time), and the drawings (bottom right) of Paul Hoyt (11 years old at the time). The issue also contained the creative writing of Kyle Brandt, Mark Barriger, Nick VanZanten, Jaime Allen, and Jessica Drahos. (Samples of work by adults from *THE MORNING NEWS*, fall 1997, appear on page 19.)





Careers and Jobs for Individuals with High Functioning Autism or Asperger Syndrome

Reprinted from *THE MORNING NEWS*, Summer 1996

-Temple Grandin, Ph.D.

Editors Note: Dr. Temple Grandin is Assistant Professor for the Department of Animal Science at Colorado State University, Fort Collins, Colorado. She has designed one third of all the livestock handling facilities in the United States. As a person with autism, she has shared her remarkable story and insights with people around the world. She is the author of Emergence: Labeled Autistic and Thinking in Pictures, as well as many articles and chapters. Her first hand accounts of autism have helped others to improve their understanding of this puzzling disorder. She is well respected and admired for her valuable contributions to both the fields of autism and animal sciences.

There are six steps which will help high school and college students with autism or Asperger syndrome make a successful transition from the world of school to the world of work. People with autism thrive in the structured environment of the classroom, but they often have difficulty finding a job.

1. Autistic and Asperger syndrome high school students need a dedicated teacher or other individual who can serve as a mentor and help develop interests and skills which will make the student employable. When I was in high school my science teacher, Mr. Carlock, stimulated my interest in science and taught me how to use scientific research indexes. When I got my first full time job, Emil, my boss, helped me to improve my dress and grooming. Teachers and parents need to look for helpful employers who will work with people with autism.

2. The autistic or Asperger student must develop a skill in an area which will make him or her employable. Many high functioning people with autism have excellent skills in fields such as art, engineering, drawing, computer programming, and repairing cars, motors or electronic devices. These skills need to be developed and encouraged while the child is in school. Young autistic children should be encouraged to become skilled in things they are interested in. If a child is fixated on cars, then teach reading by reading about cars. Most people with autism are visual thinkers and will excel at the above skills but there are some people with Asperger syndrome who are not visual and they are very good with numbers. These people would be able to catalog books in the library.

3. When looking for a job a person with autism has to sell their talents instead of their personality. When I started my livestock design business, I made a portfolio of photographs and drawings of finished projects. People respect talent. Many people thought I was weird but they paid attention to me after I showed them the portfolio. A computer programmer can make a demonstration disc and an artist can show his or her drawings. The portfolio needs to be shown to the computing or art department. I recommend bypassing the normal channels through the personnel department.

4. There needs to be a gradual transition from the world of school to the world of work. A high school or college student could start doing their job for only one afternoon a week. Freelance work often works well. It enables the student to start slowly in their chosen field. Freelance work also avoids many social problems. The person can go into the client's workplace, do the job and then leave before getting involved in the complicated social situations. If the student will be employed in a full time regular job, the employer must understand the person's social limitations. I have heard of two sad cases where a skilled draftsman and a laboratory technician were fired because they got into a social mess which could have been easily avoided. The employer needs to understand that even though he or she may be brilliant in their job they have limitations.

5. My life is my work. If I did not have an interesting career I would have very little life. All my social activities revolve around work interests such as livestock, scientific research and autism. Leo Kanner in one of his early papers wrote that a person with autism will often make their best social contacts with people who have shared interests.

In conclusion: Teachers need to work with autistic students to develop talents which can become the basis of an interesting job.

Ten Keys to Becoming a Better Communicator

Reprinted from THE MORNING NEWS, Fall 1998

-Linda Hodgdon, M.Ed., CCC-SLP

***Editor's note:** Linda Hodgdon, M.Ed., CCC-SLP, is a speech pathologist who has specialized in addressing the communication needs of students with autism. She is a popular national and international presenter who shares her expertise through frequent consultation, conferences and inservice training programs. Linda's book, "Visual Strategies for Improving Communication," is a reader - friendly manual containing practical ideas. (Update: Linda Hodgdon has a new recently released book. Solving Behavior Problems in Autism, QuirkRoberts Publishing, Troy, Michigan.)*

Developing effective communication interaction skills is a critical need for students with autism. It is easy to think of what skills we want the *children* to learn. It can be a greater challenge to observe our own communication style and then modify our techniques as necessary to really connect with them. Little things that *we* do can help *us* become better "communication partners" with our children. This is especially important when working with children who have difficulty with interaction. These keys will enhance your success.

1. Get on the student's level

Think about how frequently children are towered over by adults. Commonly, children are physically smaller than the adults or they are sitting while adults are standing or other combinations that create great distances between faces.

- Sit, bend, squat or whatever you need to do to get your face at the child's eye level. You may need to move your body or the child's body to make this happen.

2. Establish attention

You have to become more interesting than whatever else is in the environment.

- Get physically close to the child. Some children do not respond well until you are just a few inches or a few feet away from them. Be aware, however, that some children react negatively when people get too close to them. Careful observation will help you determine an effective distance.
- Get yourself in the child's line of vision. If the child turns his head it is natural to want to turn him back to face you. It may actually work better to move your own body to place yourself into his visual field.
- Watch for the child to *orient* to you. It is not necessary for a child to stare you down with eye contact. Turning his body or face in your direction or shifting his eye gaze may be enough to demonstrate he is paying attention
- Become animated. This can mean feeling a bit silly. Exaggerated facial expressions, gestures or body movements can help Changes in the volume, speed, and intonation of your voice can help.
- Use visual props. Hold an object or a picture of what you are talking about. Hold that prop in the child's visual field. Move it around until you are sure he sees it. Try holding the prop in front of you or near your face so he can see both.

3. Prepare the student for what you are going to communicate

It can take a moment for children to shift their attention to you. Many times children with autistic spectrum disorders demonstrate a slight delay in this skill. If you begin to communicate too quickly, they may miss important information.

- Use a verbal signal to cue the child to get ready to receive your message. Try saying the child's name or a preparatory utterance such as: "look"; "listen"; "watch"; "oh oh"; "OK"; or "ready".

- Pair a verbal signal with a gesture when you are unsure if you have the child's attention.

- Use a visual prop to help him shift his thinking to the topic you are going to talk about. This is particularly helpful when you are shifting from one topic or activity to another.

4. Use gestures and body language meaningfully

Gestures and body language are very important for clarifying communication. They help a child pay attention and understand what you are saying. *How* they are used can make a huge difference in their effectiveness. Just waving your hands around while you are talking will not improve communication. Fast flitting movements that are not directly related to your communication can actually detract from the message you are trying to convey. *Purposeful* movements can enhance your interactions.

- Exaggerate movements. Making movements larger than normal helps attract attention.

- Use gestures and body movements in a slow, pronounced way. Pause for a dramatic effect. When shaking your head, extend the length of time you shake it. When making a facial grimace, hold that expression for an extended time.

- If you are pointing, hold that point long enough. Remember that a good point can be invaluable in helping the child orient to a *mutual referent*. When you are both looking at the same thing, communication effectiveness increases.

- Remember, communication is not just speech. Your hands, face, and body are important communication tools.

5. Support your communication visually

Visual supports accomplish so many purposes. Ultimately, they help the child participate effectively. When you, as a communication partner, assume the responsibility for using some visual supports you greatly improve your interaction with the child. This makes your social exchanges more enjoyable for both.

- Remember that visual supports are not just pictures. Pictures are wonderful, however, they are only one *form* of visual tool. Your body is a visual tool. Objects, people, TV guides, written messages, calendars and anything else you see can be a visual tool.

6. Speak slowly and clearly.

If you have ever listened to the kinds of messages that people leave on answering machines, you realize the average person does not always communicate clearly. Mumbling, stumbling, starting over, forgetting and interjecting non-sequential information are common. Sometimes people start one sentence, start a second sentence, and then finish the first sentence. Children with communication difficulties cannot follow this clutter. In addition, children with communication challenges frequently process language more slowly than we do. If we speak quickly, our speech can sound like fast forward on the tape recorder. Those of us who are "non-stop-talkers" make it especially difficult for children. Slowing down can improve communication significantly. Talk so slow that it even feels funny. Then you will probably be talking at the right speed.

7. Limit verbalization.

More talk is not better. Many of us were trained in a teaching model that suggested talking more would help students understand better. That is not true. Talking *less* is what helps, particularly for those of us who tend to be real talkers. One word utterances and short phrases can frequently be more effective that long, involved sentences. One way to help judge how much language to use is to match child's verbal output. If a child speaks in short phrases, he will understand one word utterances and short phrases better than longer sentences.

8. Include "wait time" in your interactions.

When you ask a question, wait for a moment before expecting a response. When giving a direction, pause for a moment to give the child time to process the request. Many of these children experience some delay in the amount of time it takes for their brains to process what is requested and then to figure out how to respond. It is a bit like when you turn the computer on; you need to wait for it to "boot up" before typing. It is easy for adults to jump in and make a request again or give the student help without waiting to give him the time he needs to respond.

* Count to five or ten or twenty (to yourself) when you ask a question or make a request. Observe how long it takes the child to respond. Don't be surprised if five or ten seconds feels like an eternity. It will when you are waiting.

* Wait *expectantly*. That means *look* as if you are waiting. The minute you become distracted by other things, you have diminished your opportunity.

* Stay *engaged* with the child while you are waiting. Sustain your eye contact. Do what you need to do to keep the child attending to you during this waiting time. For some children this can be very difficult. It may be necessary to move something for the student to stay engaged. You might have to move your body to get back into his visual field. You might need to hold an object or point to a picture to sustain his attention.

* Try having the child repeat the request or direction. This is not a strategy to be used all the time, however, sometimes the repetition can help a child process the information to begin an action or response.

* Determine when to repeat a request. One of the most common questions is, "How do you know how long to wait?" Your observations will need to tell you. If a child looks as if he is attending, processing or thinking it seems reasonable to wait a bit longer. If he is beginning to look distracted or begins a response that is obviously incorrect, then it is time to repeat

9. Guide or prompt the child to respond *if needed*

After you wait, you may decide he needs some prompting to help him respond. It is a bit like jump starting the battery in a car. Once the battery gets that charge or electricity it will run fine. It just may not have enough energy to get started in the beginning. That is what children can seem like Guides or prompts can be simple and subtle like the following:

* Physical guides:

*move an object (i.e., when you tell him to sit down, push the chair a bit in his direction)

*point to the place he needs to look

*turn his head a bit

*touch his hand or arm to gently move it in the direction of the action he needs to take

*hand him a picture or object to help him to get started

* Prompts to improve the child's ability to respond verbally:

*move your mouth in the same movement the student needs to do

*vocalize the beginning sound of the answer the child needs to give

*begin a sentence and then leave a blank for the child to fill in the blank (i.e., you say, "I want____________" and then pause for him to say the rest)

*show an object or picture or a choice of several to help the student retrieve the word he is trying to use

The challenge is to *wait first*, so you do not guide or prompt too much or too soon. There is a delicate balance between helping enough so the child can participate successfully and holding back enough so he can perform as independently as possible.

10. Stay with the interaction until you reach a desired response

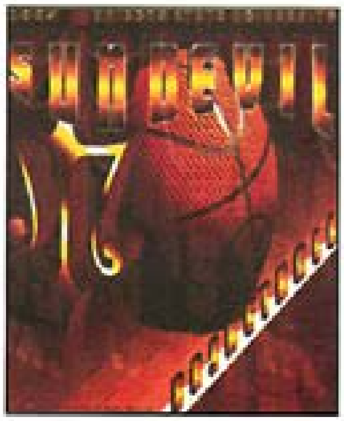
We live in such a fast paced style that it is common to move quickly from one activity to another. Microwaves, drive-thru restaurants, remote controls and fast computers reduce our tolerance for anything that does not happen quickly. Effectively interacting with our communication challenged children requires a change from our speedy approach to the rest of life. Moving on too quickly will eliminate many teachable moments. It is easy to ignore incorrect responses, help children too quickly, or not allow enough time for the whole communication exchange to occur. Pause. Consider each communication interaction a potential teaching opportunity. Then, when you encounter a difficult situation, be ready to slow the pace a bit so you can implement some procedures that can make a difference.

- Immediately correct errors by taking the time to show or tell the child his error.
- Modify *your* communication as needed.
- Enlist the visual supports you need to help the child be successful.
- Give "closure" to the interaction so both you and the child will know it has ended successfully. A smile, a gesture, or verbal encouragement can help a child realize his success.

Modifying our own communication style is not easy. Observe what works with a child. Once you identify some techniques that help a child become a better participator, remember to use them. You will not need to use all these strategies all the time. As you learn to integrate these techniques into your own communication style, you will develop a more effective connection. Be warned. Those things on this list that are most difficult for you to do are probably the strategies that will help your child the most.

THE MORNING NEWS September 1997: A Celebration of Shared Experience, Creativity, and Talent

The September 1997 issue of *THE MORNING NEWS* displayed the work of many talented adults with autistic spectrum disorders. Beginning with an exceptional cover titled *Elijah*, by Sharron Loree (left), the issue included the art of Gavin Simpson (below, left and center),and the stained glass of Michael Ferman (below right). The issue also included wonderful articles by Jerry Newport, Jean-Paul Bovee, John Engle, Marc Segar, and David Miedzianik. The issue sold out faster than any issue of *THE MORNING NEWS* to date. It was followed by a second issue containing the work of children with autistic spectrum disorders (see page 12 of this issue).



The Links Between Social Stories, Comic Strip Conversations and the Cognitive Models of Autism

Reprinted from *THE MORNING NEWS*, Spring 1998

-Dr. Tony Attwood, Clinical Psychologist M.Sc., Ph.D., MAPS., AFBPsS.

Editor's note: Dr. Tony Attwood is a Clinical Psychologist who has specialised in the area of autism for over 20 years. This experience covers the full range of expression along the autistic continuum from those who are profoundly disabled to university professors. His original postgraduate research was conducted with Dr. Uta Frith and examined the social skills of children with autism. He has subsequently conducted research on diagnosis and challenging behaviour and has published several papers, chapters, and two books in this area. He has always been a full time practicing clinician with a special interest in early diagnosis, severe challenging behaviour and Asperger's Syndrome. Dr. Attwood recently completed a practical book titled, Asperger's Syndrome: A Guide for Parents and Professionals (Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London and Philadelphia, 1998). He has been invited to be the keynote speaker at international conferences and currently works in private practice in Brisbane, Australia.

Social Stories and Comic Strip Conversations are an ingenious technique for helping people with autism. They are rapidly becoming a significant component of the school curriculum for such children, but do the theoretical models used to explain autism, also explain why they are successful? As with many innovative and practical ideas, they originated from working directly and collaboratively with children rather than from intellectual consideration and subsequent application of an academic theory of autism. However, when one examines the current theories explaining why children with autism are different, one can recognise how the strategies are consistent with these models. Research on the cognitive abilities of people with autism has produced three distinct theoretical models. Each model will be briefly explained with quotations from autobiographies to illustrate specific points and an explanation of how aspects of Social Stories and Comic Strip Conversations are consistent with each model.

Theory of Mind

One of the most significant advances in our understanding of autism has occurred from the research of Uta Frith, Simon Baron-Cohen and Fransesca Happe' which supports the hypothesis that children with autism have an impairment in the fundamental ability to "mind read" (Baron-Cohen 1995). From the age of around four years, children understand that other people have thoughts, knowledge, beliefs and desires that influence and explain their behaviour. In contrast, children with autism have considerable difficulty conceptualising and appreciating the thoughts and feelings of another person. In other words, they lack the ability to think about thoughts.

This ability is essential in order to understand the behaviour of others. For example, if you saw someone opening a refrigerator door you might assume the person was hungry and looking for something to eat. If they then found an unlabeled container, tasted the contents and made the facial expression we recognise as disgust, you would think they did not like the contents. If they then placed the container with the garbage one would assume they had a personal dislike for the contents or it was bad.

Gunilla Gerland has high functioning autism and recently had her autobiography translated from Swedish to English (Gerland 1996). She writes:

The basic emotional states, sorrow and joy, did of course exist in me, but I didn't take them out into the world and glue them on to other people, so I couldn't recognise those complex emotions shown by others. (page 112)

Mind blindness also means the person has difficulty in distinguishing whether someone's actions are intentional or accidental. For example, the author observed a child with Asperger's Syndrome who was sitting on the classroom floor with the other children in his class and listening to the teacher read a story. The adjacent boy started to tease him by poking his fingers in his back while the teacher wasn't looking. The child became increasingly annoyed and eventually hit the boy to make him stop. The teacher was looking at the children at this point (but did not know the preceding events) and reprimanded the child for being aggressive. Other children would have proclaimed they were provoked and recognise that if the teacher knew the circumstances, the consequences would be less severe and more equitable. Yet he remained silent. The teacher continued with her story and a few moments later another child returned to the classroom from going to the toilet. As he carefully moved past the child with Asperger's Syndrome, he accidentally touched him but the child was not aware that in this situation, the action was accidental. He hit him in the same way as the child who was tormenting him.

Social Stories provide information and tuition on what both parties in a given interaction or situation may be thinking. In particular, the perspective sentences specifically describe a person's thoughts and feelings in a given situation and explain the consequences of actions on the thoughts of others. Comic Strip Conversations include thought bubbles and the use of different colours to visually illustrate a person's thoughts and feelings. It is interesting that recent research has confirmed the value of concrete representation in helping understand mental states. A study by John Swettenham and colleagues found that conceiving the mind as a camera helped children with autism develop an alternative theory of mind (Swettenham et al 1996).

Our codes of social conduct are based on the knowledge of how our behaviour affects the thoughts, opinions and feelings of others. We strive not to offend. If a child does not conceptualise the thoughts of others then they will appear rude and inconsiderate, descriptions often made by strangers when meeting a child with autism. Such children appear to belong to a different social culture. Social Stories provide a "visitors" guide to our social culture, by explaining social conventions, their rationale and what is expected for those exploring "unfamiliar territory".

A new area of research currently being explored by Uta Frith is whether mind blindness also applies to the child's own mind. Does the child have the ability to reflect on their own experiences, thoughts and feelings? Can they relate *their* inner thoughts to those of others?

One aspect of Comic Strip Conversations is that the child can draw themselves with a thought bubble and use colour to represent their own thoughts and reflections. The author has found that children with Asperger's Syndrome are often confused how to accurately define and portray their own thoughts and feelings. They also often assume all participants are experiencing the same feelings.

Theory of Weak Central Coherence

Uta Frith and Fransesca Happe' (1994) have developed another theoretical model described by the term "Weak Central Coherence". This model is independent of the ability to mind read and describes a reduced ability to draw together diverse information to construct a higher level meaning. In other words, the child with autism overly focuses on detail and fails to grasp the "whole picture". The model is primarily based on three research designs. The first examines the ability to identify a hidden figure or shape within a larger drawing, e.g. a triangle embedded within a picture of a clock. Children with autism are conspicuously quick and competent at this task. Their thinking is not distracted by the overall theme. The second design examines the child's performance on the Block Design sub-test of the Wechsler Intelligence Scale. The child has to copy an abstract pattern using coloured cubes with a time limit. Children with autism are remarkably good at breaking a large geometric pattern into small segments. The third design involves reading aloud a sentence that includes a word that can be pronounced in two ways according to the context. For example, "There was a tear in her eye," might be read aloud such that the word "tear" sounds like the pronunciation used in, "There was a tear in her dress." Another example, "The dog was on a long lead" could be pronounced as the word "lead" which describes the heavy metal. Such errors are rare with ordinary children but significantly more common for those who have autism.

Thus children with autism are good at tasks that require attention to detail but poor at deciphering the overall meaning. They can immediately identify small, obscure items or notice minute changes in the position of objects in a room. Their interests are often confined to aspects of life others consider of limited relevance such as collecting clothes pegs or different types of spark plugs. This unusual perception of the world can also affect the child's drawings. The conventional strategy is to start with the general outline and then fill in the details. Autistic children often start by drawing isolated detail. In the mind of the child with autism, detail is paramount and if this is changed, the whole "picture" changes.

Having weak central coherence means having considerable difficulty identifying which details are important and how they connect to form a consistent pattern or "gestalt". For us, the whole is greater than the sum of the parts, but the child with autism may not know which parts are relevant and how they are related. The autobiographies frequently refer to a problem understanding the meaning behind simple everyday events. This is illustrated by the following quotation of Therese Jolliffe (Jolliffe et al. 1992). She is an adult with autism who is currently conducting research in this area.

Reality to an autistic person is a confusing, interacting mass of events, people, places, sounds and sights. There seems to be no clear boundaries, order or meaning to anything. A large part of my life is spent just trying to work out the pattern behind everything. Set routines, times and rituals all help to get order into an unbearably chaotic life. (page 16)

The person with autism sees the world as consisting of unconnected fragments and is often desperate to create order out of apparent chaos. This can lead to false assumptions as to why specific events occur. For example Gunilla describes how:

I very much wanted to understand and that led me to think up something, a theory about how things worked, that always applied to whatever I saw. Every time my mother came (to collect her from school), one thing was always the same: she always came into the hall. What if that meant I had to be in the hall for her to come at all? That's what it was. That must be it, I thought. If she came in and I wasn't in the hall, if she didn't see me, would she then go home again? And perhaps it also meant that if I wanted to go home, then she would appear if I went out into the hall. I had actually never seen my mother in any other room except the hall, so I associated her appearance with the actual room, as if she just materialised in the doorway. Every thing had to hang together in some logical way and now I had probably found it: as long as I was in the hall, the room to which my mother always came, then she would come. If on the other hand I was in the wrong room, in any of the rooms into which she never came, then she wouldn't come. (page 70)

How do Social Stories help? They use a written medium to identify which details to attend to and what they mean. They provide the code to decipher what is relevant to the situation and explain the "thread" or theme that links specific events. They also correct false assumptions. In other words they provide the logical connections and enable the child to "see" the big picture. The acquisition of this knowledge is recognised by the child as far more important than other aspects of the school curriculum. Gunilla describes how:

What was an offer at school was so totally uninteresting. I needed to learn skills, not about how many stomachs a cow had or what the farmers of Sweden produced. Knowledge of that kind said nothing to me and had nothing to do with my world. I needed to learn how you found your way around school, which lavatories to go to, what you did when you played and how my body worked. (page 126)

Comic Strip Conversations use a visual medium to identify the salience and pattern behind everyday events. They also use colour to portray feelings, a technique already discovered by some children with autism. This is explained by Gunilla as:

Sometimes it was all so incomprehensible, I couldn't even find an end in the tangle to pull at. Then I would turn in on myself, knowing neither the question nor the answer; and I couldn't tell anyone. My state was just colour inside myself. I was the only one who had colours: I had an internal colour system which became a way of connecting information about different worlds, about the nursery world and the garden world. Everything became a colour inside me- people, words, feelings, atmospheres. Not understanding was faintly orange, a pale orange with sunlight coming through it. Tiredness, what I hadn't the *energy to try to understand, came and laid a dark green on top of the orange light and put it out.* (page 21)

Theory of Impaired Executive Function

This theory was developed by Sally Ozonoff and Bruce Pennington (1991) and James Russel (in press). They applied our knowledge of the function of specific structures within the brain and the profile of cognitive abilities associated with autism, in particular, problems with planning, organisation, shifting attention, working memory, impulse control, initiation and perseveration. This pattern suggests a dysfunction of a specific area of the brain, the pre frontal cortex. There is increasing neurological and psychological research evidence to support this theory. These characteristics account for similar and different aspects of autism than are explained by the Theory of Mind and Weak Central Coherence. However, Social Stories are specifically designed to assist the individual in several of these areas. They provide a script of actions and dialogue that reduce the effects of problems with planning and organisation, and strategies and cues to assist with initiation and impulse control. People with autism also describe how they can remember and read text in their mind more efficiently than recalling spoken instructions. Gunilla refers to how:

I had an almost photographic memory for a certain type of text..... and could leaf through to a page in my head for any paragraph I needed. In some ways, I didn't really remember what was there but I had a kind of copy to the page in my head, which I was then able to read off. (page 149)

Comic Strip Conversations also use the person's relative strengths in executive functions, for example, Gunilla describes the following:

But talk about things I couldn't visualise never stuck in my head - it would just fly away and settle somewhere else. The words possibly stuck, but only as words, interesting in their structure or flavor. They might have exciting colours or contain pleasant sounds, but if I couldn't visualise them they meant nothing. (page 24)

The author would add that one of the understandable characteristics of autism is to become very emotional when confused in circumstances that require social reasoning. The specific emotions can be anxiety, sadness and anger. These emotions inhibit rational thought, a process associated with the frontal lobes. Social Stories and Comic Strip Conversations are written or drawn when the child is calm and reasonable. It is in this frame of mind that the child is more able to recognise the thoughts of others, the connections between events and to plan what to do.

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The staff of *THE MORNING NEWS* wish you a wonderful holiday season and a

Happy New Century!

Carol Karen Sue

Carol Gray **Karen Lind** **Sue Jonker**

THE MORNING NEWS
PEN PAL REGISTRY
welcomes all new pen pals

THE MORNING NEWS PEN PAL REGISTRY provides an opportunity for students with autism, Asperger's Syndrome, and other pervasive developmental disorders to write to others who have the same interests and experiences. Placing interactions in writing provides each person with a chance to look at what has been expressed. In addition, ideas expressed in writing "stay put" so they can be referred to when formulating a response. Using this type of format may make it easier for many children and adults with autistic spectrum disorders to establish and maintain a friendship, and having a pen pal registry makes it easier to find a new friend in the first place.

In the winter 1995 issue of *THE MORNING NEWS*, we published our first pen pal registry as a rip-out section. It contained 33 pen pals from across the United States and abroad. On the following pages are our newest pen pals. With each issue of *THE MORNING NEWS*, we will print information from new pen pals that we receive. There is no co lved in registering as a pen pal, although a subscription to THE MORNING NEWS - Students who would like to participate may complete the *Pen Pal Regis* and send it - along with a photo if desired (exchange-size scho

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We'd like to believe the still provides a method of communication, and that writing a letter isn't a lost art. Still, we recognize some pen pals have computers, and may prefer to write via e-mail. In this case, listing an address on the *Pen Pal Registration Form* is not necessary. Either way, please consider whether you know a person who might like to register as a potential pen pal, and encourage them to send in the enclosed registration form.

We have been happy to hear about new pen pal friendships that have formed as a result of *THE MORNING NEWS Pen Pal Registry!* Please feel free to write to us anytime to share your experiences with the pen pal registry.