

Professor Tony Attwood – Autism Spectrum Disorder

What is ASD?

As a clinician we look at several points:

- The person is confused by people. People can be their biggest challenge; how to read a face, how to make friends, how to relate to other people, the social aspects.
- Issues of communication: from those who may not speak to those who speak too much, and then there are those who take a literal interpretation of language.
- Intense emotions, one thing many people with autism are good at is worrying. They tend to be very anxious people.
- Sensory; they may have a sensitivity to noises, aromas, textures. Things that you may not notice and that you may not think are significant may be unbearable for the person with ASD.
- Movements disturbance; from general clumsiness to not being able to get your brain into gear with your mouth to talk.

All of these features are going to need what we call a multi-disciplinary team of people: psychologists, speech pathologists, and occupational therapists to help that child develop a program in each of those areas.

What will the future hold?

One of the things that I have found is that you can't use the depth of the autistic features as a measure of eventual outcome. I have seen those who at three years old have been intense emotion, non-communicating, socially isolating and they have ended up as a professor of mathematics.


This is one of the reasons that I like autism, all bets are off in terms of the future, in terms of the prognosis. Yes that child may remain at that level, perhaps all of their lives, and we now have a better understanding of support, some have a wonderful life and may indeed get successful jobs and may have grandchildren. So I wouldn't rule that out as a possibility if you have a child with autism.

When I look at all of the components of autism, perhaps the very important sixth component is going to be the child's personality; do they fight the autism or do they surrender to it? Is it an engaging personality and the therapist will fall in love with him or her? Do they have the ability to motivate themselves to acquire the different skills? Also, we're looking for motivated parents who are devoted to their child, coordinate the programs, and have the energy to keep things going.

I enjoy the area of autism because the kids are so different and their outcomes are wonderful. So I would say, congratulations, you have an autistic child, they are different, they are odd, they contravene a lot of the established theories of child development. But we have a body of knowledge on autism now that is about 60 years old. And we really do know strategies to help such individuals.

Can therapy help?

When I began in this area all those years ago, around half of those with autism did not acquire speech, they were often not diagnosed until they were five or six years old. By early diagnosis and early intervention, especially speech therapy. 70-80% of those with autism now have functional speech. Some have very fluent speech and go on to become authors. The whole situation, the whole ball game has changed, we



have a better understanding of how early intervention can succeed in a number of areas. I am astounded at the progress that can occur.

However, be careful. Now I am a gardener, or I like gardening. Sometimes when I put a plant in, and I want the flowers, they don't come for a while. I am nurturing and watering, and fertilizing, and yet nothing is happening. But it is happening underground, it's deep in the roots, but you don't see it. And then the plant flowers! So sometimes with early intervention, you don't get immediate results but the brain is changing underneath and will eventually show various skills. In autism, you get good days and bad days, as a parent, you will know when he wakes up 'oh oh, autistic day' and he is going to be socially withdrawn, non-communicative etc. And on other days he is going to be bright and sparkly so there are going to be variations, autism is never totally consistent at the same level for a child day after day.

However, you will get progress, how much we don't know. And early intervention really does work and I am a great advocate for early intervention as I have seen the children change. From that child who is totally frustrated because they can't talk, can't understand people to a child that is running to people, being engaged, and having a conversation. That's where the expertise comes in. It's a team and within that team are the various disciplines, but central to that are the parents and brothers and sisters too.

We talk about all of the therapies and things that will help the development of that child but what is crucial is love, and that comes from parents. Love and acceptance and time, are the greatest gifts. It's important that you love the child and accept who they are. I know you are going to be devoted to the programs to help with development, but have fun together, laugh together, enjoy life, and that acceptance is so important for that child, especially for their self-esteem in the long term.

This does mean that your life is going to change, what you thought it was is maybe not going to be quite so easy, you're needing to devote time to the programs, to observe the professionals, to find out which bits you can absorb into your own interactions with the child.

For example, when the speech pathologist is working with the child, it's about you remembering to use the technique at lunch time, in the evening, or when he goes to bed. When the psychologist may help on social aspects or learning management, remembering what you can absorb. So as the parent you become a mini therapist, absorbing a range of approaches. That also means a different style than you would normally use, perhaps, but also, you're going to have to devote time and what is crucial is you as a parent are there for the long term. You have got to look after yourself, you have got to have down time, you have to have people that you can talk to about the issues.

Some of your new friends are going to be parents of similar children, because they understand, they know your progress and they will metaphorically bring out the champagne when he has acquired a particular skill. Your sense of achievements will be very powerful. You will have a new group of people who will really appreciate those moments.

You will become an expert in autism, you may not know much about it at the moment but you will read about it and you will know about it. You will be an expert on your child. I say that if you know your child well and your child is 7 years old; it takes 7 years to get a PhD so I say you have an honorary PhD in the psychology of your child.



How does ASD change throughout the lifespan??

Early intervention will help develop particular skills to launch that child into the education system. Primary school can be a time of stability with teachers and progress can occur in a number of areas. But as you know during adolescence there is going to be the issue of puberty, hormonal changes, all of those sorts of things and that can be another time of concern for the person with autism. They are often developing who they are going to be, trying to socialise with others, coping with the increasing size with responsibilities and wanting to be independent. So adolescence can be a time when the person needs more support and understanding. But I have also found a golden period of progress for those with autism in their 20's and 30's, where they have often been more accepting of programs. They have had an opportunity to realise that they need to progress and so you can often see major progress in the 20's and 30's so it's not as though early intervention is the only time that we are going to get progress, yes it's important and it needs to be done. But progress continues and we now know neurologically that your brain doesn't really settle down until you are about 25 and so that is a wonderful opportunity to work on programs.

How has society's understanding changed?

My interest in autism started in 1971. At that time it was viewed as 1 in 2500 children, it was rare and if we had a child with autism, all of the professionals wanted to have a look and thought that it was amazing. We now know that it is 1 in 88 children and about 1 in 50 boys so it is much more common (*please contact your state autism association for current statistics*). And there are many reasons as to why this has occurred.

This means that the media have taken on board ASD; Sheldon of the big bang theory is a classic example, people will probably know of Rain Man and other characters. When I am in a taxi, or when I am meeting the general public and they ask me what I do? When I say that I am a specialist in autism nearly everyone now says "oh, autism - my neighbour has an autistic child, my cousin has an autistic child, or I was at school with a child with autism".

The general public have a much better understanding of what it is and this is good news in the sense that what we have to do now is explain why the child is different. This can mean explaining why the child is different to classmates, because the other kids know that child is different in certain ways. It's important to inform them as to why that child is different, and how they can help. In terms of socialising, developing communication and so parents become translators. Autism is a different way of thinking, it's a different way of perceiving the world, a different way of learning and a parent eventually understands this and then translates it to other people. Parents also translate the thinking of typical people to the person with autism.

I describe ASD as almost a different culture, a different way of thinking. So, welcome to that culture; it's different, don't make a value judgment that it is any way defective, if we are into star trek this is Vulcans. We need people with autism, because we strongly suspect that the genes for autism and the genes for genius are the same, that's new research coming out. We need people with ASD because of their different way of thinking. Some of the major advances in arts and science are made by those with autism spectrum disorder, from Mozart to Einstein. We need such people, their difficulty is that they tend to live with social zealots that prioritise socialising more than any other skill and if I have my personal view of what is autism, it describes someone who in life has found something more interesting than socialising, but they live with social zealots.

*** this is an approximate transcription only, minor modifications have been made to assist the reader.*