



## **An article about autism, social understanding and social skills**

I think for most of my 'career', people with autism I've been trying to help have looked at me waving my arms around, doing stuff with my face and making a whole lot of noise and have said to themselves, "Nope. Not a clue. I can see you are upset about something - but what that thing is... who knows!?"

# Does the person know why we act the way we do?

Which is interesting, because it works exactly the other way around too! I've spent a lot of time trying to understand what people with autism are trying to 'say' with their behaviour and much of it has been beyond me!

Between these two very different people, where there should be great connection and communication there's a gap. This article is going to try to understand and address that gap.

Most of the problem is to do with communication. It's all too easy as parents or professionals to over-rely on words when explaining something or asking a person on the spectrum to do/not do something. To neurotypicals, what our words mean seems so obvious - because surely someone (like us) couldn't get the wrong end of the stick (I'm guessing you can see where this is going).

When trying to help, being shown always trumps being told.

That's not particularly an autism thing. It's true for everyone. But people on the spectrum can be extra visual.

**So,**

- keep language short and sweet
- support with visual aids/materials (signs, photos, symbols, video, sensory cues and clues, pictures, objects...
- show, don't tell

Understanding other people requires tip-top skills with the 'putting-yourself-in-other-peoples-shoes' thing. It requires good ability with reading faces, interpreting tone of voice and using context to make sense of another persons' *aspect*. My dictionary defines 'aspect' as:

*a particular appearance or quality*

*'the air of desertion lent the place a sinister aspect' \[mass noun]:*

*'a man of decidedly foreign aspect'.*

I suppose you could say it's being able to know someones story. Not easy when you are autistic.

***I've spent a lot of time trying to understand what people with autism are trying to 'say' with their behaviour and much of it has been beyond me! labelled.***

When we are trying to teach someone a skill, encourage a certain behaviour (or discourage another) or get someone to participate in an activity, I think sometimes we forget to put the rationale for what we are asking into a form so that a person on the spectrum 'gets it'.

We need to regularly and reliably support the understanding of the rationale behind our actions.

So,

- **show** what the point of it all is
- **present** what's in it for both of us
- **illustrate** how x might lead to y (and how y is just the greatest thing since bread got sliced)

We've got to personalise things. Some things can be described as being important TO a person. They are things, people, activities, behaviours that are to do with happiness, comfort, personality.

Things that are important FOR the person are to do with safety, learning, healthy living, other peoples wants and wishes etc.

If our behaviour as parents or professionals is mostly about getting compliance with things that we think are important FOR the person, the reason for complying can be out of the person's immediate grasp. The 'point' of an activity or behaviour might be so far down the track, round so many corners that the person is just left with our words, face, tone etc. Signifying nothing (thanks Will S.). Or worse - just propagating anger.

Get the balance right - some people will need a lot of 'their agenda' in order to even contemplate accepting something from yours

Communicate the rationale

Use what's important TO the person as a 'hook' for what's important FOR them

We need to have a really good handle on how much demand our behaviour is placing on the person we are trying to help.

I'll admit to mostly thinking about this the other way round! You maybe the same. That's normal.

Everything we say to a person is taxing when they are having to work super-hard to understand what we mean. And if the form of our words comes mostly as an instruction or worse a criticism or correction then the load is multiplied a thousand-fold.

I'm reminded of this each time a particular friend comes to visit. We have a young dog (Poppy) who most of the time is doing something you'd rather she didn't. My friend is always saying how much she loves our dog. But, when she's with her, her every interaction is telling Poppy not to do this, that or the other. It's all "sit still, lie down, don't beg, don't bark, don't breathe..." (you get the picture). But as she says, she loves Poppy (and I know she does). Most times Poppy just goes and finds a quiet spot in the kitchen and tunes out.

I find it helps to categorise our vocalisations four ways:

- a) **questions** eg what colour is the ball?
- b) **directions** e.g. "slide it to me" "throw it over there"
- c) **comment** e.g. "you rolled the ball" "picking it up" "putting it back down" "weeee" etc
- d) **praise** e.g "good job" "great catch"etc

The ideal of course is not too many vocalisations from us. And those we do use should fall mostly into category c) or d). Getting the balance right will take a small amount of practice but will really pay off.

None of this stuff is easy. Mainly because this connection and communication gap between people with and without autism is fundamental to the challenge of supporting people on the spectrum. We can however make a difference. And we do.

Lots more to read at:  
[positiveaboutautism.co.uk/articles](https://positiveaboutautism.co.uk/articles)