



**An article about autism and the 'Social Why' OR
'Make Your Social Stories Social'!**

When you need to know you need to know!

Every kid goes through the "but why?" phase. I did, you did, pretty much everybody did. But why? Let's try to figure it out.

Things happen for a reason. The human mind loves this. When young we are like little scientists trying to figure out what caused what - sometimes called 'cause and effect'. It's pleasing and reassuring to us when we understand process and mechanism. We need this.

Being autistic has the effect of taking this ordinary need to understand 'why' and amplifies it. Autism acts like a great big magnifier that makes the ordinary level of need a whole lot bigger. Youngsters (and adults) on the spectrum really need to know. And

know good. Early behaviour in autism is often full of checking, analysing, repeating, rechecking, observing small alterations and changes...What drives these behaviours - the need to KNOW AND KNOW ABSOLUTELY.

Now, checking and analysing the physical world is one thing, but understanding the invisible contents of people's brains is a whole different ball game.

At a startlingly young age, most kids figure out that inside other people is some weird invisible stuff like feelings, ideas, motivations and thoughts. Kids grasp that these things exist, and through some amazing processes begin to understand the link between what a person is thinking and how they behave (speak, move, act, react etc.) It works the other way round too i.e. how a person behaves reveals what they might be thinking and feeling. This ability is one of the things affected in autism.

Let's get this straight, it's not that autistic folk can't do this but it is not a specialist strength. As with most things to do with autism, each autistic individual will have their own, unique ability profile. The degree to which autistic youngsters have difficulties with unraveling what people are thinking and how that relates to what they are doing will vary a lot.

NB Just a side-note but autistic people DO have lots of specialist strengths. And that's ALL autistic people no matter how they are labelled.

Human beings have a bit of an allergy to randomness!

So when we are trying to unravel the why do youngsters need to know 'why' the whole time question we need to frame that question in the context of connectedness.

Human beings have a bit of an allergy to randomness. Patterns are what we like and they are also what we do. Things (including people) behave the way they do for a reason. The patterns are hard-wired into the existence of things. If you have trouble seeing the pattern the explanation, the rationale for the way things are it will make you nervous. It will make you anxious. We don't like to live that way. It's not in our nature.

Being autistic means that you are more vulnerable to these feelings because you have a harder time recognising, processing and understanding the inner world of other people and linking it to why they say and do what they say and do. I call this the 'Social Why'. Knowing the Social Why is harder when you are autistic.

I see lots of good practice in the course of my work with schools, settings, colleges and centres that work with autistic kids. I see more good practice than bad that's for sure. I do see a lot of visual timetables, social stories, visual clues, cues and prompts, 'now and next' boards/cards etc. This is good stuff.

However, what is often missing is the use of similar 'technologies' to explain the 'why'. I was given a booklet recently that a teaching assistant had put together for a student which described itself as a Social Story. The booklet used pictures and words to explain to the student that she would be visiting the school nurse for some checks. It broke that process down into clear steps, and each step was accompanied by a few simple words of description and very helpful pictures.

The idea of the booklet is to make an event in the future more real, concrete, and understandable and therefore less anxiety provoking. Making the unknown, known is key for autistic youngsters.

But if we are not careful, interventions like this can end up being a catalogue of the things I have to do and the things that will happen to

Make 'The Social Why' more understandable to youngsters

me. We need to be mindful of the fact that, for real insightfulness, students on the spectrum will also need details of why it's important for me to go, what's in it for me, how will I feel before and after, how do other people feel about it etc. The booklet previously described was not a true social story because it just told the child what was going to happen or what she was required to do. Social stories explain the social.

That's the world of feelings, emotions, motivations, actions and reactions (your own and other peoples). We also need to pay particular attention to including helpful pictures and simple words that also show what's in it for the person (and others). Make the usefulness and relevance of the activity super-clear. Explain the 'Social Why'.

An example. Why be kind? I have a huge bag of delicious Monster Chips. I want to eat them all. Then someone else suggests that I should actually give quite a few of the Chips away to other kids. Get outta here! Why would I want to do that? I LIKE Monster Chips. If they were DISGUSTING I'd happily give them all away! I want more Chips not less. So reducing the number of Chips in my possession makes no logical sense.

There are three reasons why it's actually a good idea to share those Chips around.

It's a rule. This gets drummed into us at a tender age. If you have and others don't have it's the rule that you put that situation right.

If you share Chips with others then next time, when you don't have any, they are more likely to share with you. (This is a bit tricky because there is no legally binding contract with massive penalties written in to guarantee that the recipient of your Chips will reciprocate, within an acceptable time frame, and with an equal or greater quantity of Chips)

It's a great way to make friends because giving someone Chips makes them feel good. Feel good about the Chips AND the Giver Of Chips.

So, get started with making the Social Why more understandable to autistic youngsters. Make your explanations visual. Show rather than tell. And remember to have fun doing it!

Chris Barson, Director, Positive About Autism™

Lots more to read at:
positiveaboutautism.co.uk/articles