



Autism: How To Approach The Invisibles

There's two kinds of stuff in this world; the stuff you can see, touch, taste and generally get hold of, then there's the stuff that comes under the heading 'invisibles'. These could also be called secret signs, ideas, concepts, thoughts - the stuff that is really hard to get hold of for people with autism - because you can't 'see' them.

I got to thinking about this when I was getting increasingly miffed with the text on my page. It just wouldn't do what I wanted and the more I typed and 'keystroked', the more I got into a formatting fix! Messing around in the Mac's settings I found an option called 'Show Invisibles'. Once activated it became immediately obvious why my text wouldn't behave. There was a whole bunch of formatting in there that I didn't know was there. It was invisible.

The communication style we need sitting between the neurotypical person and the person with autism is one where 'show invisibles' is the default!

People with autism live in the here and now. They deal well with stuff you can see and experience. They are sensory experts.

As a rule of thumb if you give form and substance to the 'invisibles' it will really help the person you are trying to support.

Make the verbal, 'verbal AND visual', being shown always trumps being told.

Give form and substance to tricky concepts like time - use sand timers, visual timetables, now and next charts.

Help make choice making easier by using photo/video/symbol boards of what's available to the person. In this way the person can express real preferences about, food, activities, who supports me, what I want to wear, how late I'm staying up etc. There are some great android and iOS apps that help with this.

Give more concrete shape to emotions and thoughts so they can be talked about and understood easily. Create colour/symbol/texture charts so the person can give 'voice' to sensations, feelings and thoughts. Again tech can help - I really like the 'Talking Mats' app.

Coach the social toolkit (eye contact, gesture face expression, tone of voice, orientation) the way you'd coach a golf swing or tennis serve!

Most instruction doesn't work until you can 'see' your successes (and misses). This is where video comes in. Thanks to the digital revolution capturing, editing and packaging HD video is literally child's play these days - and free.

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