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**MY LIFE WITH AUTISM:  
IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATORS**

Stephen Shore shares his experience of growing up with autism and offers unique insight on what teachers and parents can do to enable autistic children to succeed in school and life.

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**Article**



**MY LIFE WITH AUTISM:  
IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATORS**

By Stephen Shore

*The Autism Bomb and Preschool*

After 18 months of normal development, I was hit with the "autism bomb," became nonverbal, and was diagnosed with "Atypical Development with strong autistic tendencies and psychotic." The diagnosing professionals considered me "too sick" to be treated on an outpatient basis and recommended that I be institutionalized. However, my parents, refuting their suggestions, supplied a crucial, home-based early intervention program emphasizing sensory integration, music, movement, imitation and narration -- all long before such service was formally conceived.

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My mother would try to get me to imitate her, but to no avail. Finally, she imitated me; and in doing so, I became aware of all within my environment. The educational implication of this strategy is the importance of meeting the student (whether on the autism spectrum or not) where they are cognitively and developmentally before new material can be learned. If that means flapping and rocking with the child until they are aware of your presence, then that is what should be done before moving on to other material. My parents had no psychological or educational experience, but just did what good parents needed to do for their child. Although I didn't start to regain verbal skills until age four, with the help from my parents and later from teachers and professionals, I am now completing my doctoral degree in special education at Boston University, with a focus on helping autistic people develop their capacities to the fullest extent possible.

At age four, after my parents finally convinced the school that originally recommended I should be institutionalized to accept me, I spent a year there before transitioning to a nursery school program. Unfortunately, entering public school kindergarten at age six was an academic and social disaster. Although I was in regular education, I probably needed a program splitting my time between a special education resource room and regular classroom with assistance from an aide.

### *Elementary School*

During elementary school I was usually almost a grade behind in math and reading. My first grade teacher told me that I would never be able to learn mathematics -- but somehow, I managed to master the subject well enough to teach statistics at the college level. Another teacher informed my astonished parents that I had trouble reading, despite the fact that I was reading the newspaper at home. Unlike educators of today who focus on autistic students' strengths, my teachers never developed math and reading lessons based on the foot-high stack of astronomy books on my desk that I read and copied diagrams out of at a furious pace.

Socialization was also very difficult due to the teasing and bullying of children that are different that occurs in the public schools. Fortunately, educational professionals now realize that bullying is a behavior not to be tolerated, as opposed to a developmental phase that children need to go through or experience.

Improperly understood, sensory integration dysfunction can severely impede functioning in a classroom. For example, visual sensitivity to fluorescent lights can make them appear like strobe lights to a person with autism, creating an unsuitable environment for learning. An elementary-school child in this situation may very well get out their seat to shut off this source of sensory overload that, in addition to being a distraction, may cause physical pain. I have seen the eyes of people of those with sensory sensitivities vibrate in synchrony with the 60 Hz. cycling of fluorescent lighting. The teacher, unaware of the student's condition may interpret this "out of seat" activity as an avoidance behavior. However, in reality, this behavior is an attempt to eliminate a sensory assault that interferes with functioning in class. Alternatively, a child, more severely affected by autism, who is nonverbal and less aware of the source of her sensory overload, may simply have a tantrum.

Another challenge for many students with high-functioning autism and Asperger Syndrome is literal interpretation of language. For example, in the fourth grade I had a friend who told me that he "felt like a pizza." Unable to understand the idiom, I thought that he meant that he looked like a pizza and I tried to assure him that he didn't smell nor look like this popular American food. Many years later in college, while ruminating about this event, I finally understood that he felt like eating a pizza.

#### *Middle And High School*

Middle and high school often overwhelm children on the autism spectrum due to the increasing complexity of interpersonal relationships, homework, and the act of transitioning between classrooms for different courses. Students begin dating and there is increased emphasis on conformity. Homework requirements from multiple courses demand proper allocation of time. For those with visual-perceptual challenges, getting from one classroom to another can be like walking through a maze. Some accommodations for these children include working with an aide for social interaction skills. Keeping a schedule detailing times and location of classes, as well as due dates, for assignments can help with getting students to classes and completing homework on time. The act of writing as well as converting verbal information into words on paper during a lecture is also a significant challenge. Providing outlines and class notes are especially helpful, as they allow the student to focus on processing the subject matter rather than frantically writing down what is said in the lecture or copying overheads. In fact, to me, accommodations are just extensions of good teaching practice. All students can benefit from having a topical outline and class notes.

Fortunately, for me, middle and high school was actually better than elementary because I was allowed to specialize in my favorite interests of music and bicycles. Middle and high school student organizations can provide a place where a child on the autism spectrum can use their special interests to base their interactions with their classmates. For example, I spent much time in the band room and started a bicycle club with much success. My grades improved dramatically because I finally figured out what teachers wanted from me in terms of schoolwork. In addition, getting along with other students became easier because I realized that socialization using words, rather than sound effects from the environment was more efficient in communicating with other students. However there was still a degree of bullying. For me, a social aide during elementary school would have helped greatly in understanding my teachers' expectations for quality schoolwork and meaningful interactions with my classmates.

### *College*

College, like for many people with high functioning autism and Asperger Syndrome, was a sort of utopia. Gone was the ostracizing from the public school cliches for failing to fit into what they determined as popular. Instead I found people with similar interests. For example, if I wanted to ride my bicycle at midnight, I could usually find another person in this 25,000-student university to ride with me. Students interacted for the pleasure of exchanging ideas and enjoying each other's company rather than how "well" someone fit in.

### *Life Beyond School*

At this time, I teach college-level special education courses where I incorporate my personal experiences to help future teachers of people with autism and other special needs. Finally, I serve on the board of directors for several national organizations pertaining to autism such as the Autism Society of America, Unlocking Autism, Asperger Syndrome Coalition of the United States, and as Board President of the Asperger's Association of New England.

In addition, I work with people on the autism spectrum using music and computers. Depending on the severity of the autism, music may be used to develop skills in socialization and communication, as well as gross and fine motor control. Or, as outlined in detail in my book, *Beyond The Wall*, I may actually teach them how to play an instrument. In addition to working on motor and breath control, the child benefits greatly from having a skill that can serve as an avenue for socialization.

## *Ongoing Educational Challenges*

Some challenges that remain from my childhood diagnosis of autism include accurate reading of nonverbal communication, subtle social situations such as office politics, and facial recognition. It is difficult for me to remember the faces of my students in class so I take attendance at the beginning of every session in order to match the name to the face of the person who answers. Additionally, taking notes in fast-paced lectures remains a significant challenge. Instead of spending a lot of time and energy improving my note-taking with only marginal results, I devise my own accommodations, such as recording the lecture, typing the lecture notes into a laptop, asking to see another student's notes, or even asking the teacher for his or her lecture notes.

In summary, it is important for educators to realize that due to sensory issues, people who are on the autism spectrum often perceive the environment differently than most others. In addition, long-term prognosis of people diagnosed with autism spectrum disorders is difficult at best. While the effects of autism do not disappear, it is possible through proper early intervention, support and education, leading to self-awareness and accommodation to live successful lives. The nonverbal, self-abusive, tantruming toddler may become the child that makes it through public school and high education to become an independent, productive citizen leading a fulfilling life with merely residual outwardly visible effects of the autism spectrum. Finally, as with all humans, the possible achievement of those on the autism spectrum is unlimited. The challenge is finding the key to unlock that potential.

*Editor's Note: To learn more about Stephen Shore's book, [Beyond The Wall](#), [click here!](#)*

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