



PERSPECTIVES

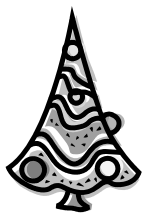
A publication for parents and professionals serving individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders

Holiday Survival Guide for Children With ASD

By Liane Holliday Willey, Ed.D.

Few events appeal to the romantic in me more than the holiday season. With little effort I can set my imagination free to fancy sumptuous dinners shared with old and new friends, guilt-free shopping excursions, and quiet moments reflecting on the reason for the season. Of course I'm only dreaming.

Truth be told, facing the holiday season is a bit analogous to having a root canal! My stomach lurches, my serenity goes on strike, and every one of my senses shriek. And trust me, this is progress! I'm now an adult — & wife and mother, well beyond my most challenging Asperger years. I look at my young Aspie friends and my palms sweat at the thought of what they will face over the coming weeks, unless of course, I come up with a way for us to enjoy and celebrate the season. I think I can, I think I can, I think I can!



After reflecting on the rush and clamor of the holiday season, it occurred to me that there are three basic problem areas that cause the most difficulty for many of us with Asperger Syndrome and other autism spectrum disorders. It seems sensory overload, disruptions to routines, and social demands are the "Big Three" that continually sabotage our holidays. So, putting pen to paper, I designed the following plan which I am confident will help us cope better than we ever have before.

One: Mitigate Sensory Overload

Those seasonal sensory stressors! Among them are classrooms and public areas laden with loud music, busy crowds and long lines, twitching lights and decorations, heavy smells and a myriad of taste

treats. Parents can make a conscious effort to reduce sensory commotion by:

- ✗ Asking restaurant personnel to seat their family in a remote corner.
- ✗ Asking their child's teachers to plan for, and then provide, extra quiet-time opportunities.
- ✗ Finding out when shopping malls are least busy, and shopping during those times.
- ✗ Keeping a sensory overload emergency kit with them at all times (possible contents — sunglasses, ear plugs, squeeze ball, aromatherapy lotion and anything that might help avert sensory overload).



When children with ASD are overwhelmed, they should learn to use an agreed upon "I need help" code word with a responsible adult. The adult will then provide a means of helping the child de-stress by:

- ✗ Going to a quiet room to relax with his/her "security blanket" or favorite stim.
- ✗ Having a deep pressure massage.
- ✗ Listening to a few minutes of his/her favorite music.
- ✗ Watching his/her favorite video.

Don't forget about home stressors too. Parents can do the follow to avoid problems:

- ✗ Shop with their child for holiday clothing, avoiding unnecessary ruffles and lace that scratches, tight waists that bind, or accessories that will drive both of them crazy.
- ✗ Make a joint decision on holiday plans together so there aren't last-minute scheduling surprises.
- ✗ Take your time

Inside this issue:

Inside Asperger's book	3
Choice—The Forgotten Basic Human Right	3-4
Introducing Your Child to his/her Diagnosis	4-5
NewsBrief-Bullying	6
Simple Things	6-7
Conferences	7

(Continued from page 1)

decorating the house so that the change is gradual and things aren't rushed.

- ✗ Given a choice, opt for simplicity whenever possible.
- ✗ Create your own traditions and rituals that your family can look forward to from year to year.

Two: Maintain Routines and Order

Amid the clatter and chaos, children with ASD need their oasis — a sense of order to get them through the madness. The following will help parents AND children maintain their equilibrium:

- ✗ Avoid travel away from home during the holidays, especially extended travel to family members who live far away. Save those trips for less stressful occasions.
- ✗ Maintain as much of your normal household routine and environment as possible.
- ✗ Make a concerted effort to go to bed and get up at the same hour each day.
- ✗ Do not let your child's bedroom (his/her refuge) become the guest bedroom for out-of-town visitors.
- ✗ Avoid cancellation of regularly scheduled activities such as music or sports practices.

Three: Prepare for Seasonal Social Situations

The social demands of the holiday season are like no other! From our AS perspective, you need the social flexibility of a human pretzel to travel the maze of social challenges. Hopefully, the following plan will make our kids feel more comfortable at social gatherings.



- ✗ Write social scripts for how your child will be expected to behave at various holiday related functions, and then role play the behaviors until they run smoothly.
- ✗ Outline how to act while shopping, visiting friends, and receiving gifts, and incorporate "think it, but don't say it" strategies, and the "I need help" code word.
- ✗ Agree on the tasks your child can be in charge of. For example, decide whether he/she wants to be the official disc jockey in charge of selecting and playing special holiday music or be the official holiday mail handler whose job will include posting and organizing the seasonal

mail, or something else that she chooses to do.

If the child becomes overwhelmed by the task, he/she can opt to relinquish it at any time.

- ✗ Write social stories that include such things as the realities of holiday stress, how busy the shopping malls will be, the funny holiday characters they might see in public, and the most likely changes in the normal school routine.

This year, I have vowed that I will join our whole family in embracing the festivities with peace and joy and awe-inspiring wonder. I know that there are no absolutes, and that what works one day, may have little effect the next, but I've taken that first and most important step. This year, I have a plan!

Other Holiday Hints

- ✗ Keep your child's needs in mind — they may need to be protected from the busiest part of the holidays.
- ✗ For gift exchanges, provide a list of presents your child will be most likely to accept with gracious appreciation. To avoid disaster, you might elect to have a substitute toy with you, just in case!
- ✗ Be prepared to answer countless questions. Use this time as an opportunity to guide your child to a deeper understanding of your faith.
- ✗ Collect a list of all the possible symbols of the traditions you will celebrate and directly discuss each and every one.
- ✗ Consider adopting a philosophy of ones -- attend only one special event, purchase only one new outfit, entertain only one time in the home, and shop only once. If nothing else, you'll save a bundle of money.

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A publication of GISD's Special Education Services Center

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- ✦ Be creative! Use every means at your disposal, every scheme you have ever found successful, and every trick you can invent to help both your family and your child celebrate the season.

A version of this article first appeared in "The Source", a publication of ASPEN of America, Inc. Winter, 1999. Special thanks to Naina Narayana Chernoff for her editorial assistance.

Reprinted from www.aspie.com

Inside Asperger's: One Man's Tale LOOK ME IN THE EYE

by John Elder Robison

Reviewed by Michelle Green

As a boy in Amherst, Mass., the author was pegged as a freak: Clumsy and withdrawn, he fidgeted, walked like a robot and almost never smiled. As he puts it in this incisive memoir, "'Sociopath' and 'psycho' were two of the most common field diagnoses for my look and expression." In some ways, it's astonishing that Robison's eccentricities—diagnosed in adulthood as Asperger's syndrome—drew notice in his fractured family, immortalized by brother Augusten Burroughs in 2002's *Running with Scissors*. In his own story, Robison recalls an alcoholic father and a mother racked by delusions. Proficient with electronics, Robison left home at 15, becoming part of the '80s rock scene, designing flaming guitars for KISS and eventually founding a lucrative vintage-car-repair business. But his biggest success, writes Robison—now married and a father—has been in using Asperger's traits like logic and hyperfocus to train himself socially. "I have observed that a drawled 'Wow!' accompanied by a smile can be an acceptable response to almost anything," he confides. Deeply felt and often darkly funny, *Look Me in the Eye* is a delight.

Reprinted from PEOPLE September 24, 2007

Choice – The Forgotten Basic Human Right

Dr. Kathie F. Nunley

My son came home from school yesterday with a small styrofoam cup, with a lid, and a worm. The worm, presumably, was inside the cup. Honestly, I didn't verify it.

He spent the entire time of our drive home regaling

me with the story of the worm. A man had come to their school that afternoon and gave them a wonderful informative lesson on worms and passed out pet worms. To a 6 year old, this is just about as good as a school day gets.

"So," I said, "all your classmates took home worms today?"

"No, not everyone," said my son, "Some students didn't take worms."

"Oh," I said, thinking about the age group "you mean some of the kids thought the worms were too icky to take home?"

"No". He said nonchalantly, "Some of the kids didn't choose to do that work."

For parents whose children attend a student-centered school, like my son's Montessori school, statements like these are an everyday event. But this statement struck a chord with me yesterday in the car, with my son, and his worm, Fred.

Not all students are so lucky in their education. Not all children get to go to a school where the afternoon presentation is viewed as an option. Where some children who may find working the geography puzzle more appealing than worms can live out their desire without reprimand. Not all children have this opportunity to develop responsibility, creativity and a positive view of learning.

Choice. It's a basic human need. Not only is it a basic human need, it is a basic human right. Because with choice comes a sense of control. A sense that I have some input in my life and in what I do and in what happens to me. And because of that, I must also take responsibility for myself and my state in life. If I'm not learning, if this is not helping me meet my goals, I have the power to change my behavior and my course. The absence of this right is slavery.

I don't believe very many people (myself included) would advocate total freedom of choice for children and their education. Obviously they don't always have the ability to make good decisions and their long term planning skills are less than mature. But I do believe we need to look for more ways to add it

(Continued on page 4)

(Continued from page 3)

into any traditional "teacher-centered" classroom.

In a strictly teacher-centered classroom the teacher makes all decisions -from where the students sit to what they learn, when they eat and even when they can go to the bathroom. Imagine a child spending 7 hours a day in an environment where all decisions are made by others. Now imagine this happening for 12 years, at which time we turn this person loose in society and wonder why he or she can make good decisions, has no self control and doesn't want to take responsibility for their actions.

The most immediate benefit to running student-centered classrooms is in the reduction of management problems. People want some control. If you don't give it to them, they will take it. This power struggle for control leads to 99% of classroom management problems. The easiest way to lessen the power struggle is to allow the students to feel they have some control somewhere.

Imagine as an adult if you were living in a world where all decisions were made by entities outside yourself. What if someone told you what subject you would teach, where you would teach it, what grade level, what text book, which pages you would cover on which days, what assignments you would give students, how you were to grade them, which projects you could assign, when you could use the faculty bathroom or worse yet, who you needed to ask to get permission to use the bathroom.

No doubt some of you look at that list and find some or many items that are in fact, controlled for you. Maybe you are assigned a school or a text. Maybe you do give department designed tests. Maybe you are told when you can leave your classroom. But I'll bet none of us have ALL those things assigned.

My point here is that we can live with some things being "mandated". My district can mandate the curriculum I teach. They can tell me what text to use, when I have to turn in grades, what days we have school, when to show up and when to attend faculty meetings. But they don't dictate everything. I can teach the curriculum in the order I see fit. I

can use the text and supplement it as I see fit. I can create my own projects, assignments and lectures. There is choice somewhere.

Students are no different. Students don't mind you telling them what they have to learn and when it is due and how it is to be graded and what days and times they need to be at school. But could they also have a little freedom within that structure to be the most creative learner they can be?

Look for small areas where choice could easily be added. Could they have some choice in the order in which they complete assignments, the seat they sit in for certain things, the problem sets to work?

Choice is a wonderful thing. Suddenly the student is in control. And with that comes responsibility, creativity and feelings of self-worth. When you offer choices you may find students doing what you would have had them do anyway, but now you have their interest and attention because THEY decided to do it.

Fred the worm slept in his styrofoam cup in my son's bookcase last night.

"He likes the dark" I was told.

"Did you ask him if he likes the dark?" I asked.

"Maybe he's not one of those worms that likes the dark. Did you ever think of that? Why don't you give him a choice about where to sleep?"

"Mom, he's just a worm".

Reprinted from help4teachers.com

Getting Started: Introducing Your Child to His or Her Diagnosis of Autism or Asperger Syndrome

by Marci Wheeler, Social Worker, Indiana Resource Center for Autism.

Who, what, when, where, how, and why are all important questions parents ask themselves when problem solving and making decisions about issues in the lives of their children. Discussing an autism or Asperger Syndrome diagnosis with your child is a very important issue and one for which many parents seek advice. This brief article will focus on aspects of explaining your child's diagnosis to him

(Continued on page 5)

(Continued from page 4)

or her, and about resources that can assist and guide you.

Why Tell?

"Why tell my child about their diagnosis of an autism spectrum disorder?" will probably be the first question parents ask themselves.

Parents go through a range of emotions when given their child's diagnosis and hopefully find support as they begin their journey with this new information about their child.



Sometimes siblings, grandparents, and other family members go through a variety of emotions and stages of dealing with the autism spectrum diagnosis of a family member. Isn't it reasonable to consider that the child themselves should also be given information about their diagnosis and support for understanding and coping with this new information? All children need to be understood and respected. At some point, people who are successful have learned who they are, and accept and use that information to help themselves become the best they can be in life. Shouldn't children with an autism spectrum diagnosis have the chance to understand and accept themselves by being given information about their disability?

Parents may fear a number of things if they tell their children (and sometimes others) about their child's disability. For example, they may fear that their child will not understand, that their child may lose some of his/her options in life, that their child will become angry or depressed because they have a disability, that the child (or others) will use the disability as an excuse for why they can not do something, or even that the child will think of themselves (or others will think of the child) as a complete failure with no hope for a positive future. These problems may or may not happen, but can be dealt with if needed. Most of these problems and others may also surface whether or not the child and others are told of the diagnosis. Shouldn't all involved, the child included, have important information about autism or Asperger Syndrome since the diagnosis will affect various aspects of the child's life?

Certainly, the possibility of problems occurring is more likely when someone is not told about their disability and given the support they need. Consider the stories told by many individuals with an autism

spectrum diagnosis who were not told, and/or not diagnosed until they were adults. Not understanding others or social situations for many leads to poor interactions with others and results in ridicule and isolation. Being told, "You should know better" or "stop being so stupid" and not having a clue what they did or how to "fix" or change the situation lead to frustration and confusion. Many adults share how they felt, they were seen as a major disappointment and failure to their families and others, but had no clue why they failed or how to do better. Over time, the end result can be low self esteem and/or self acceptance problems among other issues. Many of these individuals feel that with the correct information about their diagnosis and what their differences are they now have a better chance of being successful.

Your child may know that s/he is different, but like all children at certain developmental stages they come to the wrong conclusion about their perceived differences.



They may even wonder if they have a terminal illness and are going to die. They see doctors and therapists and go for treatments, but are not told why. Even the child or adult who does not ask and/or verbally express concern about being different may still be thinking those thoughts. Even children with autism spectrum disorders, like all children, can sense the frustration and confusion of others and make wrong assumptions about the cause of the turmoil around them.

If the child is under 18 years old, it is the parent's decision whether they share information about the diagnosis with their child. It can seem like an overwhelming task, especially when day-to-day issues consume all the time and energy of a family. It may be helpful to discuss your concerns and possible options for disclosure with others that know your child well, other parents of children on the autism spectrum, and even individuals with an autism spectrum disorder who have been told about their diagnosis. (When to tell, how to tell, & who to tell are also discussed.)

Reprinted from www.bridges4kids.org/articles

(Continued on page 6)

(Continued from page 5)

NewsBrief

Websites in the UK and New Zealand Address Bullying Behavior

Kidscape is a registered charity in the United Kingdom, and the only national one dedicated to the prevention of bullying and child abuse. Though this on-line charity is not specifically geared to individuals on the spectrum the site nonetheless contains useful information on a variety of topics related to child safety, including how to avoid on-line bullying and dangerous situations—both of which are often problematic for individuals with ASD. This site also gives practical advice in direct, easy-to-understand language that can be especially helpful to those who have difficulty with indirect and figurative language. The site has been developed to serve children and young people under the age of sixteen, and their parents and other caregivers. According to information available on the website, “The *Kidscape* staff equips vulnerable children with practical, non-threatening knowledge and skills in how to keep themselves safe and reduce the likelihood of future harm.”

Reference: www.kidscape.org.uk/info/aboutus.shtml

Telecom and the police have teamed up in New Zealand to provide information to parents/caregivers, teachers, and children about bullying. The website contains useful information about the characteristics of bullies and their victims, and provides resource links to other related information. There is a 4 Teachers / Grown-ups section of the website aimed at teachers, parents, and other caregivers. The 4 Kids section contains appealing animal figures that give children sound advice in a child-friendly fashion.

Reference www.nobully.org.nz/advicep.htm

SIMPLE THINGS

Something wonderful happened today. In one moment, one act of kindness from one person did more to lift me up than what could be accomplished in an hour of counseling or a weekend away.

Somebody said hello to my child. Now, that may seem trivial to you, dear reader, and I realize you

may fail to see the broader meaning. Please, let me explain. My daughter is a wonderful, sweet, creative almost-teenager who loves to swim and to sing. She makes up songs and writes about her days and enjoys our weekly cooking sessions, for which she sometimes creates her own recipes. She loves the colors pink and lavender and all things soft; blankets, stuffed animals, pillows. She is quite taken with sea creatures and dreams of scuba diving one day. She also has Autism Spectrum Disorder or ASD, which is the latest term to describe the collection of traits that make it very difficult for her to socialize, to communicate in a typical fashion, to process information, and to maintain an awareness of the world around her in a way that would encourage and enable her independence and safety. She works much harder than you or I ever had to do to learn new things, to care for herself in basic ways such as dressing and grooming, and simply to try to understand what is expected of her in a variety of settings. It is difficult for her to filter noise and “tune in”, which is something the rest of us do every day without thinking about it. She is at once the bravest soul I know and the least aware of herself.

My daughter attends a small classroom at the Wellesley Middle School. She is not a Wellesley resident and her class is not solely a Wellesley program, but she is able to attend an education collaborative that has space in the school. She does not go from class to class but rather remains in her classroom for her instruction where she gets both group and individualized teaching. She does go to the cafeteria for lunch and she has a job of sorting mail for the teachers and putting it into their mailboxes. She takes walks around the halls and she goes with her class on weekly trips out into the community. She and her classmates also get a visit from a group of students once a week. These “regular education” students have volunteered to come in to the class and practice social skills with my daughter and her classmates while they eat their lunch. It was one of these student volunteers, a lovely girl named Joanie, who made the simple gesture of saying “Hi” to my child in the hallway this morning as we went in to school. I stepped right into my familiar “facilitator” role, using all the techniques that have become second nature over

(Continued on page 7)




Conferences

Date	Title & Location	Speakers	Fee	Contact Info
Nov. 2, 2007	Autism & AS: Classroom Strategies that Really Make a Difference Lansing	Elisa Gagnon	\$189	800-678-8908 www.sdresources.org
Nov. 9, 2007	Positive Approaches to Diagnosis, Services & Life Planning Lansing	Multiple	\$107	www.aspergersmichigan.org
Jan. 14, 2008	A.S. Assessment & Intervention Strategies Grand Rapids	Timothy Kowalski, MA, CCC	\$197	715-836-9900 www.meds-pdn.com
Feb. 21-22, 2008	Annual ASD Conference- "Putting the Pieces Together"	Not yet available		www.mcesa.k12.mi.us
Feb. 27-29, 2008	Council for Exceptional Children Grand Rapids	Multiple Speakers & Topics	Varies	810-588-6886 www.michigancec.org

(Continued from page 6)

the years, to try to help my daughter respond appropriately and create a round of reciprocal conversation, which is one of the things she works on daily. Even as I went through these motions, though, my heart filled with such appreciation for the girl who took the time to say hello. She didn't see my eyes filling with tears as we continued down the hall, nor did she hear the gratitude in my voice as I relayed this story to my child's teacher and aide, and later to my husband and my mother and a dear friend. You see, in the one and a half years my daughter has been attending school in this location, I have walked her into class each morning. We pass by lines of children, sometimes hordes of children. We pass by teachers, too, and they will often say hello, but this is the FIRST time in a year and a half that I have ever witnessed another child look mine in the eyes and say a simple hello.



I know, I know. Middle School encompasses a difficult time in our kid's lives. They teeter in between childhood and adulthood, there is peer pressure and societal pressure, they don't know where they fit in the world and they are experimenting with this ongoingly. There are challenges on every front. I wouldn't go back and relive those years for ANYTHING. I know, too, my reader friend, that Joanie's hello likely meant far more to me than to my daughter, who can appear nearly oblivious to such friendliness. She does work hard to recognize social cues and respond in a way

that will encourage some kind of interchange, but it just doesn't come naturally to her. She's working on it, though, and she can only progress with the help of those around her. I have learned a few things in my time on this planet, and one of them is that it is essential to acknowledge the good in others, to water the seeds of kindness we are fortunate enough to see planted. We all benefit when they bloom. Another thing I've learned is that we are all capable of doing things to lift each other up, and make a real difference in each others lives.

Sometimes the simplest gestures can create ripples of positive energy that continue far beyond our awareness. Joanie, for a simple hello in a school hallway, this mother thanks you from the bottom of her heart.
Reprinted from The Autism Perspective



DVD Workshops

Please look online at www.geneseeisd.org for the Autism Spectrum Disorders DVD Workshops. Dates have changed and locations have been added. Register online to attend at the location most convenient to you. If you don't have access to a computer, call Patti Dombrowski at 810-591-4877 to register.

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Support Groups

- × Autism Support Group of Genesee County:
www.geneseeautism.org
- × Advocates for Autism (formerly Flushing Support Group) meet the 2nd Tuesday of each month at North Baptist Church, 4004 Lennon Rd. Contact Cris at 810-732-1776 or Valerie at 810-659-7004
- × ASA/Oakland County Chapter Events:
www.asaoakland.org
- × Jack's Place for Autism: www.oakland.edu
(click site map, then centers)
- × Mott Children's Health Center Parent Empowerment Program for parents and caregivers of newly diagnosed or suspected ASD. Karen Shoemaker 767-5750, ext. 5292

Websites

- 🔗 Autism Society of America: www.autism-society.org
 - 🔗 Autism Society of Michigan: www.autism-mi.org
 - 🔗 ASA Oakland County Chapter:
www.asaoakland.org
 - 🔗 Dr. Tony Attwood: www.tonyattwood.com
 - 🔗 On-line Asperger's Information and Support-OASIS: www.aspergersyndrome.org
 - 🔗 The Gray Center: www.TheGrayCenter.org
 - 🔗 Liane Holliday-Willey: www.ASPIE.com
 - 🔗 Free pictures of visual schedules, etc.:
www.usevisualstrategies.com
 - 🔗 Picture Exchange Communication System:
www.pecs.com
 - 🔗 TEACCH: www.teacch.com
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