



PERSPECTIVES

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

Gray Center SUN News: A Very Special Teacher

Welcome to SUN News—a weekly update for The Gray Center Social Understanding Network!

I remember the first day of fourth grade as though it was yesterday! At that time, the administration posted class lists on the door of each classroom, so as I entered school, I anxiously approached each of the fourth grade doors looking for my name on one of the lists. I was hoping that I would get any teacher other than Miss Rey. It seemed as though practically all of my older sister's friends had warned me about what a scary teacher she was. Imagine my extreme fear and disappointment as I finally discovered my name on none other than Miss Rey's door!

I quietly received the older students' condolences as I took the long bus ride home, then burst into tears as I walked through the door of my home. By the next morning, I approached that fourth grade door with both trepidation and determination.

I can't recall the exact point when my negative thoughts turned to positive ones. But through the course of that year (to be honest, I don't think it took long), I grew to love Miss Rey! She encouraged me when I struggled with social dilemmas, waited patiently while I worked through academic challenges, comforted me when I had my tonsils removed, and inspired me with her stories and positive attitude. I was in awe as I listened to her describe how she had published a book, and determined right then and there that someday I would publish a book, too! I also decided that I wanted to be a teacher—just like Miss Rey!

I won't tell you how many years it's been since fourth grade, but I will tell you this: My life has been profoundly influenced by my beloved fourth grade teacher! From teaching first grade, to publishing a book, to recognizing that first impressions of people

(mine and others') can sometimes be quite wrong, to learning to value the extreme importance of a good teacher, the pathway of my life has been shaped to a great extent by one very special person.

How about you? Did you have a favorite teacher? Does your child have a favorite teacher? Have you taken time to let that person know about the impact he or she has had on your life or that of your child? (A note from you or your child may be the best gift that teacher will ever receive!)

For all you teachers out there—don't forget that the lives of the children in your classroom will be shaped and molded by YOU. Your attitudes, knowledge, experiences, reactions, etc. are somehow going to play a role in the development of future writers, teachers, political leaders, doctors, lawyers, garbage collectors, landlords, secretaries, scientists, parents, law enforcement professionals, cashiers, and more!

What a responsibility—and what an inspiration!

-Laurel Hoekman, Executive Director

Summer is fading and fall is fast approaching. That means a return to school. As the new school year begins let's all remember that we all like a pat on the back for a job well done. Would we come to work if we weren't paid? Would we want to go somewhere we only heard negative comments? I don't think so! While we may have a thousand things on our minds, still try to notice the efforts that students make and the successes they have. A little praise can go a long way. Have a great year!

Inside this issue:

7 Essential Tips For Calming Children With ASD	2
Look for Autism Signs Early	3
Inside Autism	3
Autism x 6	5
Conferences	7
Support Groups & Websites	8

(Continued from page 1)

7 Essential Tips For Calming Children With Autism Spectrum Disorders

Let's face it, it's difficult to deal with some children with autism spectrum disorders, so that's why we need to have solutions ready at our fingertips.

1. USE ROUTINES, NOT LIP SERVICE!

Set up a crystal clear, daily structure before the day begins and decrease power struggles.. Think structure, structure, structure. Why get caught in crisis at the last minute for yourself and all concerned. People, especially in the autism spectrum need routine and structure. Be pro-active and structure minded even if you're not. Learn to cut down on directing with words as you begin to chose words with careful thought and consideration and sparingly. A little goes a long way.

2. CHANGE ENVIRONMENT RATHER THAN THE CHILD!

Look around you. If you actually make physical, concrete changes in your household, school, or community setting and change what needs to be changed such as location of furniture, color, lighting, clothing, chaos etc. People in the autism spectrum are especially sensitive to sensory conditions such as sound, lighting, physical touch and so on. This way the environment rather than you dictate the rules and your child can enjoy independence this way!

3. FOLLOW THROUGH WITH FOLLOW UP... FOLLOW UP...FOLLOW UP

Use your routines and rules you set in motion and then make sure they are doing what they are supposed to. By doing so, you are not the bad guy and they will have to deal with the natural consequences of their actions. With those in the autism spectrum, they respond well to follow-up as they thing in concrete terms rather than abstract ones. This can be your salvation and teaches the kids what will happen in the real world. Natural consequences can be difficult for them to comprehend therefore responses and behavior may get worse before it gets better but hang in there.

4. GROUND YOURSELF, NOT THE KIDS WITH GROUND RULES!

Keep your credibility and your word with your kids. Though it's hard at times, stick-to-it-ive-ness is your

key to long term success. Kids in the spectrum disorder can actually enjoy grounding and time-outs due to their egocentric nature so be careful. Use masterful logic and reason and don't let them break you down or it will break you up!

5. NEGOTIATION ISN'T JUST FOR ADULTS

When creating rules for your kids, do so with them, not just for them whenever possible. This way they will buy into the process and will be more likely to cooperate. The rules are great for kids with autism as it helps them stay anchored. They will also surprise you many times with their comprehension of what is actually going on. Even if they are non-verbal, this does not mean they are not understanding or communicating so get the buy in.

6. BREAK TASKS INTO SMALL CHUNKS

If you overwhelm them it's no wonder they fight back. By breaking down the tasks into do-able tasks you are ensuring their feeling of success and even raising their own self-esteem. The more they have mastery over their environment the better they will feel about themselves. This should begin as small as need be with small decisions, small responsibilities etc and work up to larger ones. When deciding on the type of task to complete, try to use the seemingly insignificant activities that fill each child's day.

When working with people in this spectrum, life skills are very important to integrate at an early age. Social stories and visual cues can be quite helpful as a reminder. You can place pictures and/or text on a place they normally see so they can easily access this. Its good to put words next to pictures so they can learn to associate the meaning.

7. GIVE KIDS THE "HEAD OF THE TABLE"

Let them be in charge of their responsibilities though

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its tempting to try and avoid taking over the responsibility. In the short term it may seem easier but that's only if you want to continue doing this for them, in the case of parenting, when they are over 20! They can be rather convincing, none-the-less, hang in there. You can balance your decision to give the responsibility back by maintaining a supportive and caring attitude rather than being the bad guy!

Reprinted from www.autismtoday.com/tips.htm

Parents Should Look for Autism Signs Early

Researchers' Video Documents What to Look for in Babies and Toddlers

March 13, 2007 -- A new effort is being launched to better educate parents and pediatricians about the earliest signs of autism. There are no known causes or cures for this disorder, but the earlier a child is treated the better the prognosis. Doctors at Maryland's Kennedy Krieger Institute, one of the country's leading autism centers, say they can now identify symptoms in children younger than ever before.

Children with autism withdraw into their own private worlds. Most children are not diagnosed until they are 3 to 5 years old, but the signs can appear as early as 6 months. The problem is those signs often go unnoticed or are ignored. "Most people use the rule of thumb that if a child is showing developmental delays before the age of 3 that they'll catch up," said Rebecca Landa, a researcher at the Kennedy Krieger Institute. "But children with autism usually don't," Landa said. Researchers at the institute are documenting in video just what symptoms to look for, even in an infant. In one video, Landa points out how a baby does not look into his mother's face. "He's very unengaged with her," Landa said.

Regressive Autism

In about 30 percent of autism cases, researchers are now documenting what they call "regressive autism." A child appears to develop perfectly normally for about a year, then something happens. One boy documented by the Kennedy Krieger Institute is engaged and smiling at his mother at 6 months, with no signs of a problem. When he reaches one year, he appears a little shy,

but again, there is no reason for concern. But at age 2, Landa says the signs in the boy are more obvious. "Now you can really see autism in its full form. This child is not speaking. He's not paying attention to any social cue. He's totally fixated on the objects," she said.

Different children will develop autism at different ages. What's critical, say therapists, is to detect it when the first signs appear, because that's when treatments are most effective. Chloe was diagnosed with autism when she was 2 years old. At the time, she could not speak or interact with the children around her, and she did not want to be touched. But after four months of intensive daily therapy, Chloe's behavior improved significantly. "She is talking now," Landa said. "She looks to the teacher and shares enjoyment. She looks to others to know what she should be doing." Chloe will still require many more years of treatment, but Landa's research has shown these early gains do last.

Reprinted from <http://abcnews.go.com/GMA>

Inside Autism

By Miriam Falco, CNN

Autism. It's a word more often heard these days. But what autism actually is is probably less understood by the average person. For someone who may not have met a child with autism, the closest reference to what it is may come from the 1988 movie "Rain Man," where Dustin Hoffman is rocking and counting toothpicks. However, when you meet some of the children who have autism, that's not what you see. Wendy Stone, a longtime autism researcher, says autism is "really the absence of behaviors. It's not the presence of unusual behaviors, like spinning or hand flicking...which a lot of people look for." Moreover, there's no one type of autism. There's no one treatment to help a child with autism -- no pill, no cure. The cause is still a mystery, but one that scientists have been unraveling more in recent years.

What is autism?

So what is autism? Autism falls under an umbrella of disorders called "pervasive developmental disorders" (PDD) or autistic spectrum disorders

(Continued on page 4)

(Continued from page 3)

(ASD). "Autism spans a range of symptoms...a range of degrees of symptoms so that one child with autism, or an autism spectrum disorder can be very different from another child," says Stone from Vanderbilt University's Kennedy Center for Research on Human Development. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1 in 166 children is born with autism. Boys outnumber girls 4 to 1.

Most experts, doctors, therapists and researchers believe children are born with ASD, a brain disorder that leads to difficulties in social interaction, communication and behavior. Parents are experts, too, because they live with autism every day, for the rest of their lives. Chicago speech therapist Sharon Rosenbloom, also the mother of 18-year-old son Joey with autism, puts it this way: "People with autism do not experience the world as others do." If you don't have a child with autism, it may be difficult to imagine.

A 12-minute video, posted on the Web site of organization Autism Speaks will give you a glimpse into that world (www.autismspeaks.org). One mother describes her situation: "I didn't choose this. I was drafted. I have an autistic child." Other mothers describe how people with "typical" children don't understand what families with autism go through. "They have no idea," says another mother in the video. Another says she knows she can't live forever, but fears "what happens when I'm not here?"

Researchers have broken pervasive developmental disorders or autism spectrum disorders into five categories. The most common diagnoses are autism, Asperger syndrome and pervasive disorder-not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS). The two other disorders: Rett syndrome and childhood disintegrative disorder (CDD), are more rare. According to the National Institute of Mental Health "autism spectrum disorders are more common in the pediatric population than are some better known disorders such as diabetes, spina bifida or Down syndrome (<http://www.nimh.nih.gov>)

Getting the diagnosis

Parents of children with autism are experts too because they live with the disorder 24 hours a day. They are also usually the first to notice something's

wrong. Often parents are told to wait. Getting the diagnosis is difficult. Jessica Bates from Prattville, Alabama, has two children with ASD. Her first child's diagnosis, she says, "was probably the most devastating thing I've ever been through in my entire life."

For Cindy Pike of Lawrenceville, Georgia, learning that her child had autism was hard, but getting the diagnosis was almost a relief. "It was so obvious to me for so long that there was something wrong... To have a name for it so that I could help. Then the frustrating part of 'What do you do next?'" Cindy's not alone. When parents learn their child has autism, they have to figure out how to help him or her. Tommy Bates describes trying to find a treatment for his child: "There was so much information -- it was so hard to process all the information, so I was dizzy and I remember being shocked by all that."

What's a parent to do?

Most everyone will agree that the best way to help a child is through early intervention because it can change the way the brain develops. That means getting a diagnosis as early as possible is essential, so a child can begin therapy early. However, there's still no test for autism. The child will need therapy, but what kind? What works for one child doesn't necessarily work for the next. And, what may be most surprising to outsiders, a child with a behavioral and brain disorder gets the majority of his treatment via the education system, not the medical system.

What does that mean? In most cases, the school system is responsible for providing the necessary behavioral therapy for the child. That's where the parents' search for their child gets more difficult. Some schools don't have the ability to provide many different types of services. Experts say children with autism need to be given proven therapies to serve their needs. Too often, children have to take what they can get.

Susan Smith, who has a son with severe autism, moved from one county in Georgia to another, so her child would get better care. She believes her son "shouldn't be penalized for having a disability." Parents of children with autism often have to look for outside resources to get their child's needs met. In some parts of the country, there just aren't

(Continued on page 5)

(Continued from page 4)

enough therapists to help the growing number of children with autism. When parents do find someone who can help their child, insurance often doesn't cover it, so they have to pay for it themselves.

The search for more information

No two children with autism are the same. Sadly, many parents share common experiences when trying to find the proper services. When ordinary services fail, they find their own ways and their frustration leads to sharing what worked for their child with others, in the event it may help another child. Susan Ellis from Marietta, Georgia, is just one of many such parents. Her son Ryan couldn't learn how to write. Along with his occupational therapist, Marnie Danielson, Ryan's mom created a video using chants and it worked for him. Like many parents, she shares her success because it may work for another child with autism. She's made her videos commercially available via her Web site (<http://www.tvteachervideos.com/>)

Robert and Suzanne Wright are the grandparents of a boy with autism. They, like many other families coping with autism, were frustrated with the options for their grandson and the many other children with ASD. Not everyone has the resources and clout to reach a lot of people. But Robert Wright is the chairman and CEO of NBC Universal. He and his wife founded Autism Speaks in 2005 for the purpose of finding a cure for autism, according to the Web site. The video on the Web site provides a unique perspective of the difficulties families face when coping with autism. The site also provides a lot of information for those eager to learn more about autism.

What's next?

The U.S. Senate passed the "Combating Autism Act" late Thursday. The House is expected to take up the measure in the fall, and if signed into law could provide \$900 million over five years to fund more research and provide state grants to help families with children with autism. Researchers are studying children with autism as well as their siblings to learn more about the genetic component. They are learning more about what parts of the brain are not communicating as well as they do in "typical" children.

More needs to be learned about what

environmental factors may influence or trigger autism. And if children are born with autism, how can they be tested for it? Many questions are still unanswered. More funding is needed for the research and new therapies to help these children.

Reprinted from <http://www.cnn.com/>

Autism x 6: Family's kids all have the disorder

One minute they're sitting, the next they're gone. Off the couch and onto the rocking chair, into the corner of the room, anywhere but where they were. The children move quickly, often too fast for their parents - or even the camera's lens - to catch them. This speed, this constant flash of children, is why the Kirton house looks like it does: a veritable maze of locked doors and makeshift barricades that are designed to keep kids in, or out, of certain areas. It is why the Kirton parents can keep talking through just about anything, hardly raising their voices while 8-year-old Nephi has yet another "meltdown" as 5-year-old Sarah, aka "Tigger," bounces madly on the couch beside them.

After all, if John and Robin Kirton focused too much on these incidents, who would catch 3-year-old Ammon, lovingly referred to as "The Destroyer," before his little hand finds its way into his dirty diaper? And where, during all of this, are the older children, Bobby and Emma, or the baby, Mary? Life with six children is tough. Life with six children with autism practically defies description.

The stress has landed the family in juvenile court, following an offhand comment from a frustrated mother, and cost John Kirton his job and the family's medical insurance. But it has also helped the Kirtons - who now market their own "Autism Bites" T-shirts - recognize the healing power of laughter. "We use sarcastic humor to diffuse our stress," Robin Kirton said with a smile. Added husband John: "If we didn't laugh, we'd cry."

Dubious distinction

In Utah, 1 in every 133 children has autism, according to a recent study that placed Utah's rate about 12 percent higher than the national average. University of Utah researchers found that the rate is even higher for boys, at 1 in 79. Even with such

(Continued on page 6)

(Continued from page 5)

high state rates, having six children from the same family on the autism spectrum is extremely rare, said Judith Pinborough Zimmerman, Ph.D., assistant professor in the department of psychiatry at the U. "What tends to happen is sometimes families, if they have one child with autism, they tend to stop having other children," she said. "Geneticists refer to it as stoppage."

Autism is characterized by impaired social, communicative and behavioral development. It is a spectrum disorder, with symptoms and characteristics ranging from mild to severe. Common characteristics include resistance to change, a difficulty expressing needs, tantrums, difficulty socializing with others, an obsessive attachment to objects, over- or under-sensitivity to pain and a preference for being alone. There is no medical cure for autism.

Autism cannot be detected by medical tests; diagnoses are based primarily on observation. Its causes are unknown, though research indicates that genetics can be a factor, while many believe that environmental factors and even childhood vaccines may be to blame. The Kirtons note all of these factors when questioned about the cause of their children's autism. They also point to John's age as a possible factor, as he was over 40 when all of his children were born. (Bobby, the oldest boy, is Robin Kirton's son from her first marriage.)

The Kirton's own research, through Internet searches, online discussion groups and local autism conferences, has led the family to believe it may lead the nation in the number of children with autism. It's a dubious distinction to John and Robin Kirton, but they also see it as an opportunity to educate others about the disorder and, maybe one day, start their own nonprofit organization to raise money for other families with autistic children. This week, researchers from the Utah Registry of Autism and Developmental Disabilities, a joint project between the state health department and the U. medical school's department of psychiatry, will visit the family's home to draw blood from each family member as part of an ongoing study into the role of genetics in autism.

'Dangerous thoughts'

John and Robin Kirton bristle when asked the all-too-familiar question about their family: Why didn't

they, as many parents do, stop having children? Depending on their mood, the Kirtons respond with humor, frustration or defensiveness. Regardless, the answer remains the same - all of the Kirton children were already born when Bobby's fifth-grade teacher told John and Robin she suspected the boy suffered from Asperger's syndrome, a mild form of autism.

According to the Utah Registry of Autism and Developmental Disabilities, signs of autism-spectrum disorders are often the most obvious in 3 and 4 year olds, while more mild forms are often not diagnosed until later in childhood. After observation tests confirmed Bobby, now 13, was a high-functioning autistic, the Kirtons began to become concerned about their other children. Sarah's diagnosis came next, then Ammon's. "That's about when my grieving period started," John Kirton said.

The Kirtons sought early intervention services for the two children; each considered "classic autistic." Falling at the severe end of the spectrum, each child is still in diapers and has limited verbal skills. It was one of those early intervention workers, from a local nonprofit organization that contracts with the Utah Department of Health, to whom Robin Kirton made the comment last fall about the family's Murray home being so dirty that some days she was tempted to "burn the whole thing down and start over." The remark was never meant seriously, said Robin Kirton. It was simply one of those "dark and dangerous and scary thoughts that crosses the minds of all parents but you don't do." Still, within an hour, workers from the state Division of Child and Family Services were at the front door. One week later, all six children were at the Christmas Box House, where they lived for two weeks while their mother's mental state was evaluated. "I feel like my character was, at first, so smeared," Robin said. "At the same time, I know they were doing their job. I've just had to prove myself and earn our freedom back.

"It really helped humble us. It made us appreciate the children more." It also led to an official diagnosis for the other three Kirton children after the juvenile court judge ordered that they be tested for autism, as well. Last November, the news finally came: Emma, 9, and Nephi also have Asperger's syndrome and 2-year-old Mary has PDD-

(Continued on page 7)

Conferences

Date	Title & Location	Speakers	Fee	Contact Info
Oct. 5, 2007	Paraprofessional Training GISD-Davis	Becky Finkle, Laura Gualdoni, Caroline Truss	\$40	www.geneseeisd.org to register, Patti Dombrowski 591-4877 or pdombrow@geneseeisd.org
Oct. 11, 2007	Reception with Dr. Temple Grandin Lansing	Dr. Temple Grandin	Varies	julie.whipple@autism-mi.org 517-882-2800
Oct. 12, 2007	"A Day in the Life" with Dr. Temple Grandin	Dr. Temple Grandin	Varies	julie.whipple@autism-mi.org 517-882-2800
Oct. 15-16, 2007	2 Day PECS Training Detroit	Not known	\$395	www.pecs.com
Oct. 29, 2007 in Novi Oct. 30, 2007 Sterling Heights in Oct. 31, 2007 in Lansing	Play Therapy & Other Creative Interventions for Working with Children, Adolescents, & Families	Mistie Barnes, RPT, LPC	Varies	www.pecs.com 800-843-7763
Oct. 31-Nov. 1, 2007	Asperger Syndrome: Beyond the Basics Detroit	Teresa Bolick, Ph.D.	Varies	Phone 920-749-0332 Fax 920-882-0736
Nov. 5, 2007	Educational Strategies GISD-Davis	Maureen Newman, Carly Adams, Michelle Grifka, Amy Chorley	\$30	www.geneseeisd.org to register, Patti Dombrowski 591-4877 or pdombrow@geneseeisd.org
Nov. 9, 2007	Positive Approaches to Diagnosis, Services & Life Planning Lansing	Multiple	Varies	aspergersmichigan.org
Nov. 16, 2007	Behavior Strategies GISD-Davis	Laura Gualdoni, Colleen Brown, Toyanna Robbins	\$30	www.geneseeisd.org to register, Patti Dombrowski 591-4877 or pdombrow@geneseeisd.org
Nov. 19-20, 2007	2 Day PECS Training Grand Rapids	Not known	\$395	www.pecs.com

(Continued from page 6)

NOS, which stands for "pervasive developmental disorder - not otherwise specified." The news, Robin said, "was hard to take." However, the diagnoses also helped the family in certain ways, she said. "For one, it helped make sense of all the stress."

'Armageddon level'

The Kirtons will be back in court late next month for what they hope will be their final court hearing. "The thing with the thing," as John Kirton refers to the state intervention, is finally winding down. The pair has made necessary changes to their home, and John Kirton has found work driving a truck for a local excavation company. The owner is sympathetic to the family's situation and the fact that John

misses at least one day of work every couple of weeks to tend to his family - the reason he lost his previous job. And although John and Robin are without health insurance, three of the children receive Medicaid and the other three are on federal SSI (supplemental security income) through Social Security.

Meantime, the couple, who celebrated their 11th wedding anniversary in late May, will continue to cope with their situation in their own ways. John blogs on their website autismbitestheblog.blogspot.com/ about his family and rents World War II movies because, "even though I know how it ends, I like to see the fighting and how they got there." Robin, on the other hand,

(Continued on page 8)

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(Continued from page 7)

steals whatever free time she can to play her favorite computer game, Snood. Recently, while reaching the highest level in the puzzle game, Robin reached an important conclusion about her life. "I realized that the lower levels aren't fun now, because I'm good at it," Robin Kirton said. "If I had, say, six normal kids or less kids that were normal, that would be easy for me. God knew I was up for the challenge, so he made it. "Six autistic kids is my Armageddon level."

Reprinted from www.autismtoday.com

DVD Workshops

In an effort to accommodate schedules, the DVD workshops will be held on the 2nd Wednesday of every month. There will be no workshops in May or June. Thanks for you attendance!

Support Groups

- × **Autism Support Group of Genesee County:**
www.geneseeautism.org
- × **Autism Support Group in Flushing:** Christina Franklin (810) 732-1776

- × **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