

Voice from the Autism Spectrum: Perspective on Change

Written by Gayle Nobel
Thursday, 29 July 2010 13:05 -

Blog-a-thon: Day 3

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Those of you who read my newsletter each month will be familiar with the writing of Sam. If not, Sam is a friend of mine who has Asperger's. Asperger's is considered to be on the high-functioning end of the autism spectrum. I first became acquainted with Sam when I interviewed him for my blog over a year ago. He had been given a copy of "It's All About Attitude" by a mutual friend and really enjoyed it.

Sam is just a little older than my own son. Unlike my son, he is able to communicate very clearly and share his experiences as a person with autism. I can always depend on Sam to have something insightful to say about a topic.

This month I asked Sam to write about "change". I will be sharing his thoughts in two parts. His discussion of change comes in the second part. The first part is a lead up which provides valuable insights and information on autism.

Before I do, however, I would like to share a little story about Sam. A few months ago, I was doing a book signing at an Arizona Autism Coalition meeting. I was pleasantly surprised to see Sam walk in the room. He greeted me with a big hug. At the end of the meeting, he was extremely helpful in assisting with packing up my large collection of Attitude and Breathe goodies. He made it a point to let me know he would walk me out to the car so I wouldn't have to be in the parking garage alone at night. When we got to the garage, he proceeded to load all the bins into my car. I did not ask him for any of this help. He initiated it.

I share this with you because this experience, these interactions with Sam, are not what I would typically expect of someone with Asperger's. I sheepishly admit this is based purely on stereotype (sorry Sam). Sam is a real "gentleman" and these days, those can be hard to find.

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Sam Speaks from the Spectrum

Q: What is the biggest thing you have to deal with when interacting with others? How does change affect that?

A: Apples and Oranges.

Studies have actually shown that the entire structure of an Autistic person's brain is different from a non-autistic. In essence, the neurology of our brains connects differently. (<http://www.wrongplanet.net/article356.html>)

Many regions of the brain that are thought to be involved with autism appear to be smaller in older autistic brains. Regions such as the hippocampus (involved in spatial learning and memory), amygdala (involved in emotional processing, learning and memory), cerebellum (variety of cognitive and motor functions), and frontal/temporal lobes (social and communicative functioning) all have been reported in various studies as having a decrease in size. In some cases, these structures are deteriorated which may correlate with dysfunction in the processes these structures are involved with.

In essence, this means that an autistic person is not disabled, but different. In other mental disorders, chemical imbalances may be the leading cause of a person's behavior. For example, depression being linked to serotonin levels. However, with autism the differences are caused by the wiring of the brain.

This leads me personally into social issues. In essence, how do two people deal with emotions when they both experience them differently? How would a person who's idea of tact involves brutal honesty deal with someone who's idea of tact leads them to be careful about their responses?

My answer would be communication. Personally, I have a non-autistic friend who comes with me to the support groups that I go to, as well as spending time with the same friends I make in these settings. When she complains that she cannot connect with them, I remind her that that is what I go through when I'm in many social settings. If I cannot find an autistic, I usually fail to make an emotional connection.

In essence, the biggest issue I run across in social settings is advocacy. Some people that I've talked to solve this by carrying around business cards describing them (or their child) as autistic and how that affects their behavior. They can hand them out to strangers who see them in public and make comments to them. This, in turn, appears to help ease potentially embarrassing situations.

Stay tuned for Part 2.

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