



Thoughts on Autism

By Pam Morris, Early Learning Center director

Did you know that 1 in 36 children in the United States are diagnosed with an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) according to 2020 data; that is a 300% increase since 2000? This statistic is courtesy of sesameworkshop.org. This number astounded me. With numbers like that, it is safe to say that, that everyone of us knows someone or knows someone who knows someone who is on the spectrum.

Spectrum

Have you ever heard of that term, “on the spectrum”? “*On the spectrum*” usually refers to the specific set of behavioral and developmental problems and the challenges associated with autism spectrum disorder.” advancingmilestones.com The image it elicits for me is a long bridge, think the Verrazzano Narrows Bridge in New York, connecting Staten Island and Brooklyn that was the longest bridge in the world until 1981. This bridge metaphor allows for a person to be on it at any point but still be a part of the definition and in this case, the diagnosis.

Diagnosis of Autism

According to Advancing Milestones, a person who has this diagnosis has some challenges related to their communication skills, their social skills or their play skills to some degree (or any combination of these). Autism needs to be diagnosed by a medical professional who can then work with a family to help navigate the resources needed.

Flexibility

One area that can be challenging for someone with Autism, is flexibility. Now you may be thinking, as Leslie Kimmelman says, “Flexibility is not, and has never been, (her) strong suit.” However, routine can be very important to a child with Autism. Kimmelman, the author of *A Little Bit Different, A Little Bit the Same*, a book you can find at Sesameworkshop.org, suggests presenting the new plan as an adventure.



“I reframe the new plans as an adventure,” says Kimmelman. “You can’t go to the school picnic because you feel sick today, but we’ll have an inside picnic instead, with no ants to bug us.” She also suggests writing down the plan, anytime, using words like, “first we’ll, then we’ll.”

Social Stories

This is a very helpful tool, again not just for use with a child or adult with Autism. It uses pictures and descriptions to introduce new concepts, new activities so that the individual feels comfortable before the new thing takes place. Often we feel anxious in a new environment or in a new situation and being able to practice or read about (pictures are extremely helpful, especially if you can include the child) the unknown allays some of those fears or anxieties.

What Else

My thoughts are only the tip of the iceberg. As with any health diagnosis, there are many components and all symptoms don’t pertain to each individual. Nor are they observed at the same level. And doctors and researchers are still learning more, adapting the guidance of how to help someone with Autism, be successful. My perspective is to get to know each individual, whether there is a diagnosis or not, learn what works for them and then navigate your relationship.

Because, ultimately, as Abby Cadabby from Sesame Street says, “I have all sorts of friends, some are kids, some are monsters, some are grouches and some have Autism. Even though we are different in some ways, we also have things in common. We all want love, we all want friendship and we all want to have fun. Every kid is amazing in their own way.”