

The background of the slide is a light gray gradient. It is decorated with several realistic water bubbles of various sizes, some with highlights and shadows, scattered across the top and bottom edges.

Leveraging Autistic Kids' Strengths & Interests

Benefits of a Neurodiversity, Ability-Based Approach

- Enhances self-esteem, confidence, + sense of self
- Fosters communication, self-awareness and self-expression
- Motivates the desire to engage - relationships
- Supports Emotional Regulation
- May lead to hobbies, leisure activities or employment – IMPROVES QUALITY OF LIFE – for child and family

Improving Social Communication in Autistic Clients

Neurodiversity Principles in Action

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A Neurodiversity, Ability-based Approach Changes Perceptions!!

“I highlight the abilities of my autistic students. It levels the playing field”

- Elem. School Music teacher- VA

“Chris gets upset and screams when things get too loud, but he is the best reader in the class.”

- Lisa 2nd grader

“Justin is a beacon of light who inspires everyone who meets him”.

- Randall Rossilli Jr., Media Studio Owner

When Dr. Stephen Shore was a child, his teachers left him to his interests and to reading in class because **(1)** he wasn't a behavior problem, and **(2)** they didn't understand how to draw him out of his own little world. Unfortunately, this **hands-off approach** caused them to overlook his interests instead of leveraging them to reach inside his world and help him to connect with the environment around him. His old interests were:

- Taking things apart and putting them back together again
- Cats

His new interests that developed during his elementary school years were:

- Reading (related to each of the following interests):
 - Geology/geography (cracking rocks open to look inside them)
 - Astronomy
 - Weather
 - Airplanes
 - Dinosaurs
 - Music
 - Volcanoes
 - Computers
 - Bicycles

As a child he learned to play **15 instruments!** This interest motivated him to think about college & a degree in music education. Now, he teaches music to ASD kids because it develops in them both music skills and people/social skills. Then, as they become skilled, music opens up all kinds of opportunities, both personally and often in the larger community. He teaches them notes in the context of what they're doing; he doesn't try to get them to memorize the Treble and Bass clefs independently.

In school, he skipped Jazz Band practice because the trumpets behind him were too loud:

Always do a **full functional behavioral assessment** to find out the **whys** behind "problem" behaviors.

Think about how his teachers could have used these intense interests in teaching him Math, which was a non-preferred area of study!

Is autism a series of deficits, disorder, and disability or a set of abilities?

How will you transform a weakness or challenge into a strength?

CHALLENGE

STRENGTH

	Youth	Adult
Everything must be in exact order.	Following structured, broken-down tasks, keeping desks and materials neat and organized	Assembly line inspector making sure each widget is perfectly formed, positioned, and in the right color.
Extreme need for routine.	Ability to remember and follow specific warm-up routines in physical education	At work on time every day. Never calls in sick.
Hypersensitive to sound.	Able to stay in tune when in musical ensembles	Audio engineer.

Neurodiversity in Action

Do look for areas of interest, strengths, and enjoyment

- 1) What captures the child's or person's attention?
- 2) Are there particular toys, topics, books, or sensory experiences that keep the child engaged?
- 3) When does the child/person demonstrate or express positive emotion, excitement, contentment, or a particular heightened focus of attention? Which activities?
- 4) Does the child/person frequently request particular activities, or ask many questions about a subject of interest?

Some ASD people might benefit from being asked – since they tend to hyper-focus on something to the exclusion of the outside world – “Hey, do you know what might make your interest in ____ even more fun?” ...

5) What is the person drawn toward the most/what do they miss the most in any particular setting or environment?

6) What do they get the most upset about if you take it away?

7) What do they comment on the most when they do make comments?

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... then link their preferred activity to something relational in the outside world!

For example:

- 1) Your child is fixated on their interest in **things that feel squishy in their hands** (like Play Doh, Green Slime, etc.)
- 2) At younger ages, their interest keeps them from noticing other children and other activities going on around them.
- 3) Once they get into 3-5th grade, you get them hooked up with a neighbor that has a garden. While visiting for the first time, your child learns that each type of plant requires soil that exhibits a certain degree – more or less – of squishiness! The neighbor gives your child the official title of **Plant Dirt Squishi-**

ness Guru. During certain times, your child is invited over to check each plant's soil to make sure it's moist enough for that plant's water intake needs, and, along the way, they learn that carrots need soil that is very sandy in nature so that, when there's not enough rain, the carrot isn't trying to grow down into hard soil.

4) Eventually your neighbor wants to build a greenhouse, which requires the use of soft, squishy concrete. Your child, in helping with this project, learns a lot about the consistency of concrete.

Question: How could this knowledge/interest be funneled into an adult job by the age of 18-24?

Here are some **jobs that involve working with squishy materials:**

- **Plant Nursery Worker:** This role involves caring for and maintaining various plants, including squishy ones like cacti. [↪ 1](#)
 - **Mechanical Engineer:** While not directly related to squishy materials, this job often involves working with soft or flexible components in machinery. [↪ 1](#)
 - **Physical Therapist:** This profession involves working with squishy materials like foam rollers and other therapeutic tools. [↪ 1](#)
 - **Laboratory Technician:** In some scientific roles, you may work with squishy substances for experiments and demonstrations. [↪ 1](#)
- These jobs highlight the variety of opportunities available that involve working with squishy materials.

UPDATED AND EXPANDED EDITION

WINNER OF THE AUTISM SOCIETY OF AMERICA'S
DR. TEMPLE GRANDIN AWARD FOR LITERARY WORK OF THE YEAR

UNIQUELY HUMAN

A DIFFERENT WAY
OF SEEING AUTISM

BARRY M. PRIZANT, PhD
WITH TOM FIELDS-MEYER



Enthusiasms in Action

Xander's Fascination with Dates and Calendars



One day Xander's father, finally tuning-in to what his son was actually writing on a big desktop calendar (vs. assuming he was "just scribbling"), discovers that his son had **memorized** all of the **birthdays** of his classmates and was writing them down!

Question: What kinds of strengths and interests is Xander exhibiting? – and how might these help him to become a productive citizen in the future? Think: "**The Birthday Guy.**" Dr. Prizant notes that, after this discovery, the dad **started collecting calendars** that had information about **flowers, countries, animals**, etc., and began to use these calendars with his son in so many different ways to expand Xander's knowledge base ... to educate him! If it was on a calendar, Xander wanted to look at it and "talk" about it.

Neurodiversity in Action

Don't expect to understand why these interests exist; where they may lead; or how long they will last

- 1) Do not judge interests in terms of conventionality or logic, as they may be unconventional or defy logical thinking.
- 2) Initially, we want to observe patterns of interests and strengths that will enable us to move forward
- 3) Think creatively of possibilities for expanding
- 4) As with all children, some interests may represent phases that pass.

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Since the special interest(s) of an ASD person **can't** be done 24/7/365, help them know if they can't do it NOW, you can **schedule a near-future time and put it on a calendar for them.**

* <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/34766788/>

From Dr. Barry Prizant: "Focusing on an Autistic person's interests isn't just so that we can catalyze more language development, or better communication, or because doing so might lead to a job ten years down the road; rather, it's about **TRUST**. It's human nature that we gain trust in a person who shows interest in who we are as a person and in what we [like to] do. We don't really trust someone who is constantly changing the topic when we talk about what we like to do or a talent that we have. This is about helping the Autistic person to feel, just like we all want to feel, like "This person really gets me"!"

From Greg Handleton MA, LPCC-S, TRCC: Research* has shown that when a child grows up in an environment where validation is chronically lacking and all they get instead is invalidation, then these kids are more likely to develop a Borderline Personality Disorder. When kids are told, "That's not how you feel," "That didn't really happen," "How could you think that? – nobody else does!" etc., then the child begins to feel like they themselves are not real, that they have no value, etc., resulting in them becoming excessively insecure in adulthood.

Neurodiversity in Action

Do be creative and persistent in introducing new ways to enjoy and employ the interest(s)

1) Think creatively about how interests may be used to encourage participation in a broader range of activities

(e.g., a young K-garten child who had an intense interest in Winnie-the-Pooh characters had difficulty paying attention until his teacher used Winnie-the-Pooh stickers (Monday was Tigger day; Tuesday, Pooh day; which greatly enhanced the child's interest and participation.

Christian – Star wars “word wall” to help with reading

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There's no reason why parents can't work on forming **special interest groups**. If their ASD child is super-interested in reptiles (Herpetology), they can put together an in-person or online/Zoom-based group so that their child can talk to their heart's content about lizards! In this context, then, **social skills can be taught**: Turn-taking, how to affirm what others are saying, etc.

Neurodiversity in Action

Don't expect that attempts to relate the interest(s) to other activities will always succeed.

It may be difficult to predict whether such attempts will be successful. At times, it may be confusing or stressful to even make such attempts.

e.g., one child loved to play *Blue's Clues* at home with his family, but it did not work at school with friends. He insisted it was only a "home game"

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Another quick story, A young man I consulted to when he was four, his mom sent in a book that we can give to Joe, Joe is his name. Because we were teaching Joe to request a break. He had a little bit of speech, but we also had break cards. We told him to sign for break as well. And mom sent in a book and said, oh, Joe would probably like to look at this. During his break, we looked at the book, it was **pictures of vacuum cleaners** cut out from oric, vacuum cleaner catalogs. And we're going, oh, that's interesting. Now ORIC is kind of like the Mercedes-Benz of vacuum cleaners, okay?

This is Joe in his mid twenties where he made enough money working at a garden center to buy his own oric vacuum cleaner. And I'll never forget, his mom said, we have the cleanest rugs in town, and Joe is kind of a **low arousal** hypoactive person. He actually **likes the noise of the vacuum cleaner**, where some kids who are more hyperreactive auditorily, it's aversive to them. And mom just loved it. Mom **celebrated** his love of vacuum cleaners from early on. And by the way, the cover of that book was called **Joe's Happy Book**. Talk about unconventional.

What might Joe's love for vacuum cleaners translate into job-wise as he continues to grow and mature?: The most obvious answer is that he can become a vacuum salesman who is intimately familiar with all of the tech and features of all the vacuum cleaners on the market, perhaps even knowing how each model used to be different but now has x, y, and z improvements. **NOTE:** Joe will likely need help with the social aspect of sales – e.g., don't be too pushy, and don't expect every customer to *share* in your intense passion.

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Emile Gouws PhD was very Autistic as a child and didn't start talking until almost age 15:

Throughout his childhood and into high school he was **severely emotionally bullied**. One would think that this chronic exposure to trauma would have done so much damage that he would never have been capable of graduating, going to college, and then earning a PhD. In addition, he also experienced chronic anxiety and distress related to his sensory sensitivities, thereby adding yet another barrier to his ability to learn, retain, and recall information. So, **what mitigated the effects of trauma and anxiety** so that he could still learn, develop, graduate, and achieve other goals along the way?:

- Like with any child, **as long as they have one adult in their life who is both present/available and who is fully committed to doing what's in that child's best interests**, then the sky's the limit.
- Emile said, **"My mother was my rock."** Sadly, she died of complications related to COVID-19 in 2021.



The other thing that helped was when he was moved to a remedial school (around age 14) which, for him, turned out to be less anxiety-producing, and also finally gave him a break from the bullying. After this is when he finally began to talk.

- ***"My parents exposed me to different social situations and motivated me to not display avoidance."***
- Prior to starting to talk, Emile learned to stop using hand-flapping to express his feelings because he was motivated to fit-in better and knew/learned that hand-flapping attracted emotional abuse.

Do nurture the interest(s) and help the person find a place for it in his or her life.

1) Try to understand the specific qualities that underlie the preferred activity or interest (auditory/musical, visual/perceptual, specific topics)

2) Consider how it may relate to and be provided in everyday routines and activities.

- as a solitary activity (e.g., drawing, music) a time to “chill out” and regulate emotionally?
- or, as a social activity involving engagement with others

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“It is estimated that about **15%** of people on the Spectrum have **savant-level** abilities” whether those abilities be with math, music, memorizing things, art, or whatever.

BUT! ... (see next slide)

Do look for practical applications of the person's interest(s) or aptitude

Neurodiversity in Action

Don't allow the interest(s) to be so encompassing or narrow that it interferes with progress in other areas.

- 1) An individual must also learn the skills that will enable successful participation successfully in everyday activities.
- 2) Whenever possible, use interests to motivate and develop the acquisition of important skills, and allow for the interest to be pursued on a regular basis; but also
- 3) Recognize that it is not possible to engage in such activities the majority of the time - "there's a time and as place"

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One Autistic boy in England had an **intense interest in flags** (Note: A negative label would be ‘obsession’). So, while his mother did extol the virtues of this intense interest – noting that his interest has become a “fantastic” vehicle for educating himself (i.e., he memorizes each country’s location, their capital city’s name, the meanings behind the flag’s symbology, some of the country’s history and culture, etc.) – she also called it a form of “**escapism.**” Dr. Prizant reframed the negative into the positive by explaining that this boy’s intense interest is actually how the boy “**regulates himself.**” This boy, at age 13, even said, *“When I don’t have my flag pole [and flags], I would focus more on the stress of the day and I would feel very tense and very anxious. But when I have [these things], I don’t get up thinking, ‘Oh no, it’s a new day,’ [instead] I get up thinking, ‘Good, let’s put the flag up on the flag pole!’”* The mother noted that, “The reaction from the neighbors has been fantastic ... we had one knock on the door to ask about it, and the next thing we know, it’s going viral on [our town’s] Facebook page and everyone wants to know what the flag of the day is!” **Basically, this boy knows every country’s flag in the entire world and, geographically, where each country is located. How many adults still can’t tell you all the country names and where they’re located!?**

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Lesson:

“We can build-in rituals throughout the day around an ASD person’s interests if what it does is it basically puts more gas in their tank, if it refuels them, if it helps them to feel some positive emotion” – i.e., if it helps them to become regulated and causes stress to melt away. Don’t we *all* try to do this in our own lives?

Hip Hop Dance as a Strength



In the text, "echo" is short for "echolalia."

How do we expand strengths, especially when it's a dramatic strength? In a high school, I was consulting to pre covid, I was asked to focus on one young woman. She had just come into the school, so it was her freshman year in high school. And this is the young woman I was focused on. She spoke in a little bit of echo, some single words, used a picture system at a very elementary level and did not initiate much. And I did find out that she did come from a program where she was in a lot of respondent training and people were not so much following her interests; but as I followed her around the school this is an inclusive hip hop dance class. She was unbelievable. She had all of the moves. She had only been in the class two times before. And here's one point where it's okay to be indistinguishable from your peers! I mean, she was in synchrony with all of the other kids. She had this incredible ability to kind of internalize from observing movement and actions, which is not that common in a lot of people. Not that common in me and not that common in a lot of kids on the spectrum. So what did we do? We took photos such as this. We took videos, we brought that back to the classroom. We built language experience stories. We did journaling. And her language really started taking off because not only that, but her affect changed. she wasn't interested in talking about things that she wasn't familiar with and she didn't know about or fictional books yet. Journals of her starting out with the hip hop dance class and the moves. And then we had her teach other kids in the class, some of the moves she was learning in hip hop dance; just another example of how let's use something that lights a fire. And in this case, she really knew she was good at it. There was no doubt about it. I mean, the smiling, the looking in the mirror

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Which is the best way to catch a fly ball?



High interest activity (not used as a reinforcer)

Example of Using an Intense Interest to Develop a New Skill:

- (1) A young teenage boy, Jeff, kept getting in trouble when the teacher would come over to try to help him with Math. He'd throw desks, etc.
- (2) Rob knew that this boy loved **baseball**.
- (3) Rob went to this boy's baseball practice and noticed that Jeff kept trying to catch fly balls by holding his glove to his side, resulting in many dropped balls.
- (4) Rob **asked** Jeff if he could show him a better and easier way to catch fly balls. Rob waited for permission.
- (5) Jeff said yes.
- (6) Rob, with permission, showed him how to hold his glove like the child on the left side of this picture.
- (7) Jeff then caught a few fly balls successfully using the new method.
- (8) Rob praised him for trying a new method and finding success with it.
- (9) Jeff thanked Rob for showing him.
- (10) Rob explained to Jeff that what he just showed Jeff is exactly like what his teacher is trying to do in the classroom.
- (11) Jeff asked how the teacher is trying to do the exact same thing.
- (12) Rob told him that, when she comes over to help him, all she's trying to do is help him to learn a better and easier way to do the math problem.
- (13) Jeff said, "Ok."
- (14) Rob then asked Jeff, "**What do you want the teacher to say when she's walking over to you?**"
- (15) Jeff said he wants her to just tell him that she's **going to show him a better and easier way**. From then on, Jeff handled his teacher's aid **without blowing up nearly as often as he had been**.

Help Autistic Clients Build Strengths, Ease Frustration, & Engage with the World: Techniques to Improve Cognitive Development, Early Language Development, Anxiety, & Behavior

with
Rob Bernstein

Neurodiversity in Action

Don't limit the scope of these contacts to the community of persons with disabilities

When possible, make connections with neurotypical peers around shared interests and talents. When a child is able to demonstrate confidence and competence in areas of interest, it often “levels the playing field.”

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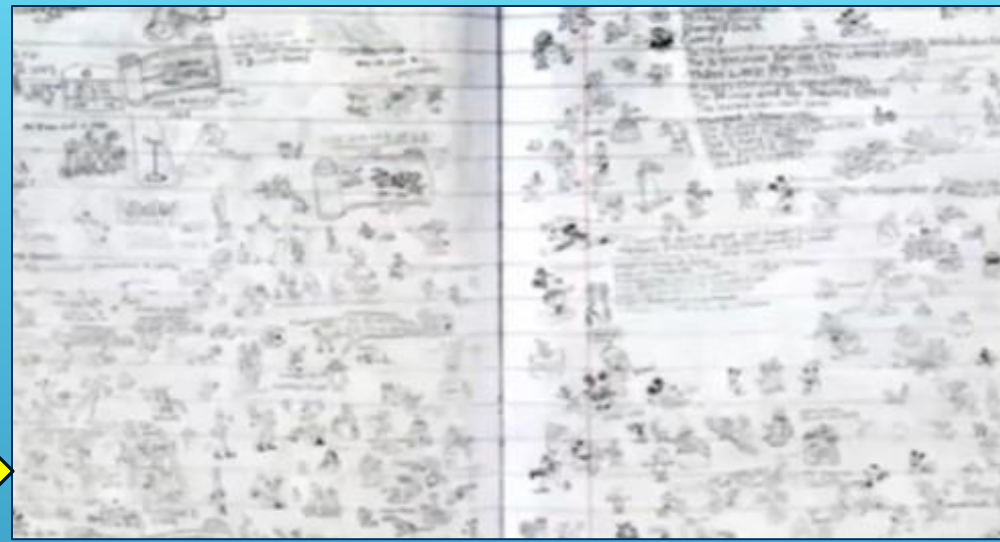
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When suddenly “**the weird kid**” is discovered to be **better** than anyone else in the entire school district at x, y, or z, it often changes things for them in a positive way.

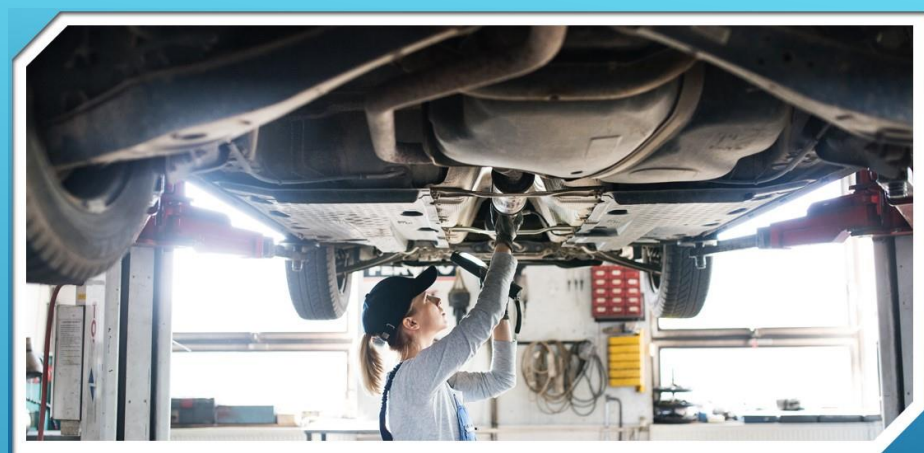


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██████████ This is his composition book That he takes around with him and makes his drawings. Okay, so the prognosis for Justin ██████████ ██████████ was total dependency his whole life on other people. Basically, quality of life: don't expect much at all. This video was from four years ago. There was a plan in place that Justin helped to make to move into his own apartment. Two years ago, he moved into his own apartment in New Jersey. He takes the Path Train and the New York City subways on his own, and he teaches cartooning and drawing to young children in elementary schools. He also works in bakeries and designs children's birthday cakes with cartoon characters. Again, lifelong interest nurtured. And Justin's one of the coolest people you'll ever meet in your life. He's just a very, very nice young man. ██████████



Dr. Temple Grandin: “One big problem I’m seeing with young adults is video game addiction. Let me tell you what you do with video game addiction: **Car mechanics**. At a recent conference I heard of an adult video game addict who discovered that cars are much more interesting ... actually, that *fixing* cars is much more interesting than video games. If we don’t expose ASD and AD/HD kids to these things, how can they know if they like it?”

The principle here is that as enthralled as kids get with the high-end graphics of video games these days, there’s still hope ... *IF* parents are willing to keep trying to hook them into something **MORE** interesting; and in order to do that, it’s a trial-and-error process. The key is to keep trying to expose them to other, pro-social, life-skill-based, intriguing activities that they’ve never tried before.



A Neurodiverse Theatre Company

██████████ focusing in on bringing the interests and in some cases the talents of the actors into writing the plays, into writing the music and bringing it all together. I'm a huge endorser, because I'm a musician myself, of bringing the arts in, and there are clearly therapeutic benefits without it being labeled as therapies. And even more so than that, it creates communities of support, which is just absolutely wonderful. ██████████



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THE
AUTISM
JOB CLUB

"Michael Bernick and Richard Holden shed light on an important issue and offer valuable strategies to improve employment for adults with autism in the modern workforce." —Senator Dianne Feinstein

THE NEURODIVERSE
WORKFORCE IN THE
NEW NORMAL OF EMPLOYMENT

MICHAEL S. BERNICK
AND RICHARD HOLDEN
FOREWORD BY STEVE SILBERMAN



The Autism Job Club: The Neurodiverse Workforce in the New Normal of Employment

Paperback – February 6, 2018

by [Michael Bernick](#) (Author), [Richard Holden](#) (Author), [Steve Silberman](#) (Foreword)

4.2 ★★★★★ (57) 3.4 on Goodreads 51 ratings

[See all formats and editions](#)

The Autism Job Club is a groundbreaking book for bringing adults with autism and other neuro-diverse conditions into the work world.

This second edition of *The Autism Job Club* includes a new Foreword by Steve Silberman, author of the best-selling *NeuroTribes*, along with an Afterword by the authors. **The Afterword covers the many employment initiatives for adults on the autism spectrum launched just in the three years since the book was originally published.**

The book has its basis in the autism job club that the authors have been part of in the San Francisco Bay Area, the job-creation and job-placement efforts the club has undertaken, and similar efforts throughout the United States.

The authors review the high unemployment rates among adults with autism and other neuro-diverse conditions more than two decades after the ADA. Bernick and Holden also outline and explain six strategies that, taken together, will reshape employment for adults with autism: the art of the autism job coach; the autism advantage in technology employment; autism employment and the internet economy; autism employment and the practical/craft economy; autism and extra-governmental job networks; autism and public service employment.

The Autism Job Club is a vital resource for adults with autism, their families, and advocates who are committed to neuro-diverse employment, not unemployment. But it also speaks to a far broader audience interested in how to carve out a place for themselves or others in an increasingly competitive job world.

[^ Read less](#)



“If you think you can, or think you can't, you're right.”

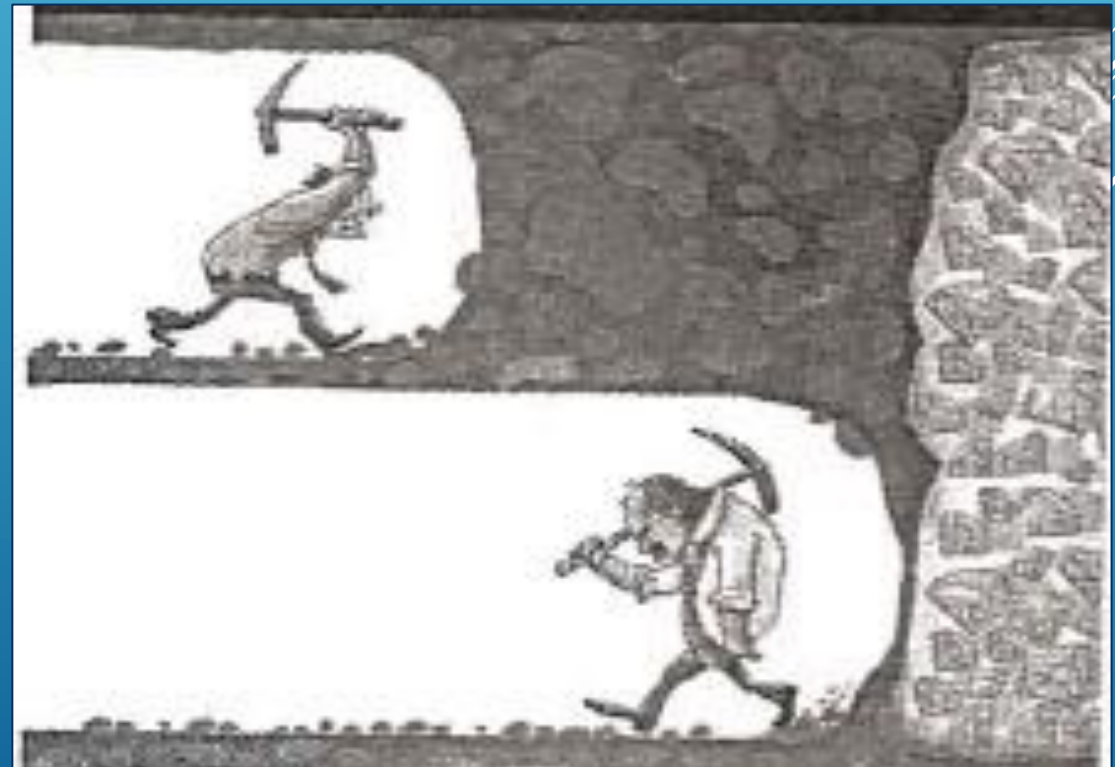
Henry Ford

Consider just how true this quote might be both for neurotypical people *as well as* for people with ASD, people who also want to do well and succeed at anything they're trying to do or accomplish. Obviously, an ASD child's initial goals might be extremely simplistic, childish, and even meaningless to others, but as they get older, many will begin to experience increasing levels of frustration if they are not helped to believe that they can accomplish meaningful goals.



... and ...

“Don’t Quit 5
Minutes Before
Your Miracle!”





In this image the skier represents the parent of an Autistic child.

The many trees represent all of the many barriers, challenges, and seemingly insurmountable problems. Our human tendency, of course, is to get so focused on the trees that we (1) fail to see the gaps between them, and (2) we tend to crash into them and get stuck in a place of hopelessness and even despair.

But the better way to tackle challenges and problems is to:

- (1) Focus on them long enough to get a proper understanding of them,
- (2) While at the same time looking for options, solutions, partial solutions, baby-steps, resources, information we haven't had before, wisdom from others, etc.

The keys are to (A) **slow down** when you're skiing through a forest so that you don't crash into the trees and, of course, to (B) **FIND THE GAPS** and ski around the trees so that they do not stop you in your tracks.

Chances of Success:

by Greg Handleton MA, LPCC-S, TRCC

Which kids have the best chances?	Kid #1	Kid #2	Kid #3	Kid #4	Kid #5
Feeling loved/supported at home					
No abuse/neglect at home					
No bullying at school (peers)					
No mistreatment by other adults (teachers, others)					
Feels understood					

Remember: A neurotypical kid can grow up in a perfect home and still turn out to be an unhealthy adult with an unhealthy lifestyle who hangs around with unhealthy friends. At the same time, this chart simply helps to convey the idea that stacking-up positives in a kid's life can only **INCREASE** their **CHANCES** of "being successful" – i.e., becoming a healthy adult.

Autism - How My Unstoppable Mother Proved the Experts Wrong: Chris Varney at TEDxMelbourne – YouTube

(<https://youtube.com/watch?v=T1HQKB2txgY>)

Companies are now looking to hire qualified ASD workers because of their remarkable gifts, their overall need to do things “right,” and because of how outcome- and quality-driven they are (some would say ‘perfectionistic’).

One ASD-savvy employer noted that, *“Because James has Autism, he outperforms his neurotypical coworkers.”*

YouTube

mom autism revers

We all have a role in a child's "I can" network.

Autism - How My Unstoppable Mother Proved the Experts Wrong: Chris Varney at TEDxMelbourne

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<https://beccalory.com/autism-saved-life/>

Autism Saved My Life

by [Becca](#) / February 7, 2018

For 36 of my 40 years, I was disabled. I was cut off from the world but for the tiny bubble that was my bedroom. Barely able to care for myself, angry, scared and lonely, I felt hopeless and broken. Suicidal thoughts were a daily reminder of my inadequacies and failures. I was certain there had been a mistake. I was clearly not meant for this existence. That is until autism entered my world and saved my life.

I'm certain you must be wondering how a deeply depressed and suicidal, disabled person could have been saved by an autism diagnosis. I'm sure it sounds even more strange to say I was disabled until my autism diagnosis. But that is the truth. I was living a paralyzed life of misery, mistakes, inevitable failures and disappointments. Forget succeeding, I was desperately trying to just survive. And just when I was certain it was time to give up, autism turned on the light, handed me a pair of glasses, and said "Here. Can you see now?".

Read the rest of this short but powerful article at the webpage listed above.

Turning Lead into Gold -

by Dr. Thomas Armstrong:

A child who is negatively judged to be ...

- 1) Learning disabled
- 2) Hyperactive
- 3) Dyslexic
- 4) Aggressive
- 5) Plodding
- 6) Lazy
- 7) Immature
- 8) Phobic
- 9) Scattered
- 10) Daydreaming
- 11) Irritable
- 12) Preservative



... can alternatively be considered to be ...

- 1) Learning different
- 2) Kinesthetic learner
- 3) Spatial learner
- 4) Assertive
- 5) Thorough
- 6) Relaxed
- 7) Late-blooming
- 8) Cautious
- 9) Having many interests
- 10) Imaginative
- 11) Sensitive
- 12) Persistent

These lists are not meant to minimize the pain people go through in dealing with ASD, rather, they're meant to help caregivers find **positive labels** for "negative" traits which, in reality, are not ALL bad.

Dr. Stephen Shore:

A good place to start when trying to figure out what your child's strengths are is to ask this question:

- **“How does my child spend most of their time?”**
 - **Abilities?** – what are they naturally skilled at doing?
 - **Interests?** – once identified, work on translating these into skills that society supports and which can possibly help your child to support themselves financially as an adult.
 - **Kind of Mind?** – many ASD folks are highly visual information processors, but some are so non-visual that they can't even read a basic map (you're likely to see extremes in this area with ASD).
 - **Characteristics?** – the ASD population has widely varying skillsets; if an ASD person is good at something, they tend to be very good at it, but if they need support in a particular area, they tend to need a lot of support.
- **... Then work on matching these positive assets to Vocational possibilities.**
- **e.g.**, one man with Asperger's Syndrome (mild to moderate ASD) who was always hyper-focused on trains got a job at a local train station. His job was to stand out on the platform and answer people's questions about where things are, where to go to catch train x, y, or z at a particular time. Since he had all of that information memorized, even though he lacked the normal people skills, he was able to be extremely helpful to everyone seeking precise and accurate information. His communication style was detail-oriented, fact/data-driven, truthful, and very repetitive. He didn't need a lot of diverse social skills at his job because his interactions with people were limited to quick exchanges of factual information.
- **TV shows featuring protagonists who are, or are likely, on the ASD spectrum:** Monk, The Mentalist, Psych, Sherlock Holmes, Bones, etc.

What is your
Autistic child's
"Super Power"?

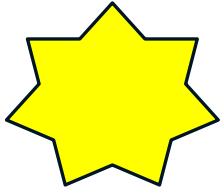
Sam got a job as a stock room manager at a Walgreens:

- **Communication:** He was non-speaking but, even on the job, was able to use the PECS (Picture Exchange Communication System). He would point at pictures that he could access on a tablet.
- **Social Interaction:** He enjoys being with people who understand him and he enjoys interacting with people when interactions are (mostly) predictable.
- **Restricted Interests:** Sam is hyper-focused on things being organized and being in the right place. His mottos could be said to be:
 - *“Everything has a place, and everything in it's place.”*
 - *“Get the job done, and get it done right.”*

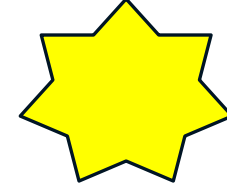
Because of his Autism, Sam outperforms his neurotypical co-workers when it comes to the details of the job he's paid to do.

An ASD person's specific interests at age 6 should begin to help inform interventions that will allow that interest to be developed so that, by age 16, vocational options that make sense for that person are able to be pursued.

Dr. Stephen Shore's first paying job was cleaning tables at a large cafeteria-style restaurant, but it was too noisy, had fluorescent lighting, and put him into too many unpredictable social interactions. He then talked to **12 bike shop owners** (bikes were one of his passionate interests), landing a job fixing bikes at the 12th shop. This was ideal because he could work alone in the back, he was an expert on bikes, and “sales” was easy because he'd just talk about the details of bike repairs with the customers. He earned \$\$ doing repairs later on in college, and he even ran a bike shop of his own for a period of time.



Strengths in ASD Thinking



- Perseverance-ability to focus intensely on one task
- Nonjudgmental listening
- Honesty
- Excellent memory
- Rationality
- Ability to see unique solutions
- Accuracy
- Realism-orientation and memory for details
- Direct communication
- Loyalty
- Visual learning
- Integrity
- Passionate about intense Interests
- Interest in people

From: A lecture entitled, *Not Just Surviving, But Thriving With Autism*, by Kimberly Clairy O.T. (autistic adult) and her husband, William Miller.

An ASD child's "I Can Network" of supportive adults MUST first establish an authentic, trusting relationship BEFORE trying to implement techniques with/on/at/near the ASD child!

In the 1950s/1960s, Dr. Stephen Shore's parents didn't have access to any real ASD treatments, so, the "experts" recommended institutionalization – i.e., Stephen started LOSING functional communication starting at age 18 months. But instead, his parents *started their own intensive, early intervention program at home, involving:*

- Music
- Movement
- Sensory integration
- Imitation – when they had trouble getting Stephen to imitate *their* behaviors, they started imitating *his*, which helped Stephen become aware of the behavior of other people in his environment. By age 4 he began to speak again due to the many hours his parents spent with him in these areas of home-based intervention. Today Dr. Shore is a college-level professor.

As Stephen's parents **praised** him for his mechanical abilities, this helped him to become aware that **he himself** possessed a positive ability which, in turn, led to him beginning to make choices in developing that ability. ←

Stephen's parents refused to see his Autism as a closed door, rather, they played to his strengths, starting with taking apart and reassembling watches at age 4.

https://drstephenshore.com

Join our mailing list to be the first to hear about Dr. Stephen's upcoming events!



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Case Example from a lecture by Dr. Stephen Shore:

If there is a ball anywhere in the room, Greg – an elementary school preverbal child with Autism – will find and throw it. Attempts to remove the ball or attempts at keeping it away from him results in catastrophic meltdowns lasting at least ½ hour. Curiously, this behavior happens only with balls. Although written in Greg's educational plan that all balls be kept out of sight/out of reach, his teachers are not always successful at doing so. As a result of Greg's behavior around balls, he is considered to be one of the school's most difficult students. **Please do the following:**

1. **Indicate** how you would go about determining the functions/meaning behind these behaviors.
2. **Suggest** a plan that allows Greg to successfully be in the same room as a ball.
3. **Describe** what you might do as Greg's teacher to implement this plan.
4. **Consider** how Greg's fascination with balls can be used to increase social interaction.

Ideas:

1. Come into the room with dozens of balls of different sizes, colors, textures, and bounciness.
2. When handing him a ball, hold it right next to your face so that he starts associating you with his preferred activity, thereby building trust and a therapeutic alliance.
3. Now, use the balls to teach skills in counting, sequencing, color identification, developing coordination (throwing at a target or into a bucket), and also in the area of social skills through reciprocal play.
4. If the reason he “has to” throw every ball he sees is because his curiosity demands that he experience for himself how that ball will behave, could this drive be used productively at a job?

In other words, use this intense interest to shape behavior gradually over time!

Helping ASD People Develop Self-Advocacy Skills:

(Dr. Stephen Shore)

- 1) **Scan** the environment and recognize the need for self-advocacy – e.g., “I’m lost.”
- 2) **Develop** a self-advocacy plan – e.g., “I’ll find someone to ask for directions” (Note: Most ASD people do not have the same hangups about asking for directions that many neurotypical people do).
- 3) **Explain and Ask:**
 - The ASD person explains what they feel comfortable regarding self-disclosure:
 - “Thank you, but (**Explain:**) I can’t remember all the instructions you’re sharing with me right now. (**Ask:**) Would you be willing to wait a minute while I find something to write on?”
 - The reality might be that the ASD person already feels compelled to write down everything that happens to them
 - There’s no automatic need to explain that, “I’m Autistic,” but one’s Autism certainly can be shared on a case-by-case basis:
 - Some people use a **pre-printed business card** that contains some basic things that the ASD person is willing to share about themselves with just about anyone they’re interacting with
 - Sensory sensitivities
 - Use concrete, direct language vs. idioms
 - Explaining specific social/non-verbal challenges & things that will help

Helping ASD People Develop Self-Advocacy Skills:

Dr. Stephen Shore, when interviewing for his current professor job, had to **advocate for himself to the administrators**, explaining to them the nature of his ASD/sensory sensitivities and his need to wear a baseball cap indoors due to the extreme distress caused by fluorescent lighting (by the way, one study found that AD/HD behaviors in classrooms are greatly reduced when fluorescent lighting is taken away and is replaced by sunlight and incandescent bulbs). When Stephen was in Jazz Band in high school, he drew-up a new seating chart that would remove him from being right in front of the trumpets. He then presented the chart to the band director in order to advocate for himself in a polite and forthright manner.

It all starts with helping an ASD person find their strengths, using their strengths to develop self-worth, supporting the productive use of their interests, and helping them to answer the following question for themselves.

- *What does being Autistic mean to me?* – both in terms of deficits/challenges and strengths/skills.

First, they have to accept that they have Autism:

- 1) **Talk** with them and make lists of their abilities/interests/skills and also their challenges.
- 2) **Help** them to identify one strength that can help them to compensate for each (deficit) challenge.
- 3) **Non-judgmentally** compare their lists to the strengths and challenges that others have. Talk about how everyone succeeds based on maximizing their strengths. **THEN** present the Autism label. Acknowledge how acceptance leads to self-advocacy and the maximizing of their strengths.
 - Another “ingredient” is to help them **make friends with other Autistic kids** ... resulting in having meaningful conversations about the diagnosis and about how the diagnosis is not a death sentence. Autistic adults thrive when they have both Autistic and neurotypical supports!

Could a Montessori School Become Part of Your Child's "I Can Network"?

It depends! ...

Some ASD children that are doing poorly in public school might just thrive in a Montessori setting, depending on a number of factors:

- Will staff still have to intervene physically with my child (if that's what has already been happening in public school)?
- What kind of kid-culture does the Montessori school have? Are kids at this school generally more accepting of differences, or is the culture like that of any regular public school?
- Will my child be able to shift focus from one subject to the next, even at their own pace, or are they so fixated on one interest – even while they're at school – that transitions will be difficult?
- Since Montessori schools are rooted in the belief that children can/should be allowed to focus on what they want to learn at any given moment (without being allowed to just sit and play all day long), the question is:
- *"Can my Autistic child do well with self-direction, or, would they feel so lost that the stress of that feeling would set them up for melt-downs and failure?"*

Autistic kids need an adult to intervene to help them to actually make a friend once they are ready/express a desire. This is because they've already been in school for a while but continue to not have any friends! Then, once they connected with a peer (one who shares a common interest), the adult needs to help to facilitate the back-and-forth exchange of conversation. This in-vivo modeling and prompting is vital. Once they actually start to engage on their own in the back-and-forth exchanges of verbal conversations, finer points of communication and relationship-building can be addressed:

Making Genuine Friends

1) Choose a possible partner - just one

2) Kids need to be ready to have a friend

This may mean significant change for those involved

3) Bring the two kids together and facilitate the communication

4) It may take several sessions for the genuine feelings to take hold

- Asking about the other person's feelings, then empathizing
- Apologizing when necessary
- Asking clarifying questions
- Setting boundaries without ending the relationship
- Asking for time, space, support, etc.

Help Autistic Clients Build Strengths, Ease Frustration, & Engage with the World: Techniques to Improve Cognitive Development, Early Language Development, Anxiety, & Behavior

with
Rob Bernstein