

Understanding People with Autism: One Parent's Perspective

By Carolyn Leckrone*

You did not have to be taught to talk. Humans are "pre-programmed" to respond to language and sounds, to babble and mimic around 6 months, and to learn language and grammar and put words together into sentences shortly after 1 year of age. As you got older, you learned to recognize facial expressions and body language. You can often tell what mood your friend is in because of how they are acting – you learned a long time ago that looking someone in the eye when you are talking to them can help you judge what they are thinking and whether they are paying attention to you!

Imagine what it would be like if you did not have those in-born communication skills. For a person with autism, that is exactly what their disability is! Some people with autism never learn to talk, and communicate with great difficulty. Others have learned to talk, and may even have big vocabularies – but they have no clue how to read facial expressions or body language or to judge what mood you are in. They may keep talking about a topic, and not realize when it is time to end a conversation. They also may bring up a topic totally unrelated to the current conversation topic – if something is on their mind, they assume that it is on *your* mind, too.

For a person with autism, learning the multiplication tables or algebra is easier than figuring out how to interact with a friend. They take things very literally, and can be offended if you use sarcasm, or misunderstand teasing or a joke. Even though they can't figure out what you may be feeling, they have strong feelings, just like you.

For a person with autism, looking at the person they are talking to does NOT come naturally. They are probably listening to what you have to say, even if they are not looking at you. They are interested in what you are saying – but it usually does not occur to them to ask you a conversational question.

For a person with autism, loud sounds can be very painful. The sense of touch is magnified, and even an accidental touch can feel threatening. It bothers them when you invade their personal space – but they may not notice that they have invaded yours.

A person with autism who is in a regular classroom, at a church or community activity, or working at a job, has already overcome a great number of obstacles. Sometimes, they have to concentrate very hard just to stay focused and in control. If you talk to them in a friendly way, they may not respond, or ask you not to bother them. This is not because they don't want to be friends, but because they are trying to focus on their work, or what they think they should be doing. They will not pick up cues from people around them as to what they should be doing – they can use some gentle direction and more direct cues. Please continue to reach out in friendship.

Your example of how to be a friend is very important. For them learning to be a friend is harder than any of the class material you had to learn in school.

In your life, you will meet many people with many talents. You will meet many people with a variety of disabilities. Learning to accept and work with people who have different life experiences than you do will enrich your life, as well as the lives that you touch.

* Carolyn Leckrone is twice past chair of the Washtenaw County Intermediate School District Parent Advisory Committee: <http://www.wash.k12.mi.us/ssupport/pac/>. Carolyn and her husband, George, are the parents of Sam, a sophomore in college. Sam has autism and has been included in regular classrooms since the age of 4. This piece was written for classmates of Sam when he was in middle school. Carolyn is involved with the Washtenaw County Autism Society and advocates for students with disabilities around the county. Carolyn firmly believes "disabilities should not be limiting, we should set high goals and have high expectations for our children and believe anything is possible."