

Attention – getting it, keeping it and sharing it!

So what's the problem?

As a speech and language therapist it was very difficult to admit that the therapy I was giving to autistic children just wasn't working! It wasn't an easy feeling, after all I was being paid to do it and everyone else involved was hoping that speech and language therapy was going to be the answer. Twenty five years on I realise that nothing in my training really prepared me for working with children with autism spectrum disorders! I was young, enthusiastic and passionate about communication but the therapy I gave this group made very little difference. Yet the parents kept bringing the children to see me at the clinic, teachers kept hoping I had answers and I did keep trying. In many ways I was experiencing what most parents go through every day.

“By the time my son was 4 years old I had said, “red, orange and ...green”, hundreds of times at traffic lights and I had pointed out thousands of aeroplanes overhead. But what my son really found interesting was a tin of pegs and he played with them for hours. I felt so useless, what could I do when he was more interested in pegs than me.” John's Mum

I was lucky, for at the time I started to really change the way I thought about therapy I was working with an experienced specialist teacher who was also the parent of a child with autism. She encouraged me to look at the research from a practical point of view and to risk trying new things. She questioned therapy, practised ideas with me, listened to my tales of failure and supported an experimental approach. Better still she celebrated when things went well and kept the approach we were trying on track. The children we have worked with over the years have been very important in making the therapy what it is, they do after all give very honest feedback...if you are boring or no good they get up and walk away!

So let's think it through.

Children whether autistic or not make sense of the world around them by taking in information through their senses, working out what it means to them and relating it to what they already understand. They build a bank of knowledge and experience that shapes how they interact, develop and grow as individuals. The problems start when you are not sure what a child is taking in. What do you do if they just don't seem interested in what is going on around them and don't share any interests with you? It is very hard to feel a connection with the child, to help them learn, to know how to relate to them and to feel you are a part of the child's world.

“...the result for me was that knot in the stomach. How do you get through to them when they do what they want, when they want and how they want? I felt useless” Tom’s Mum

It was obvious that we needed to start by looking at how to build shared experiences that the child really paid attention to. We also wanted to give this work the number one slot in terms of importance in therapy for if we could achieve this so many other things could follow.

It is very difficult to stay motivated, to keep feeling optimistic on bad days when getting anything done with the child feels such an uphill struggle. We are all human and we rely on getting smiles when things go well, and the shared laughs of delight and fun that come from happy times. Yet children with autism don’t give as many of these signals. For those of us working as therapists it is easier, after all we don’t have the children all the time. Parents are an astonishing group of people, they don’t give up, they keep trying and hoping but it is hard and self doubt creeps in.

“...for most of her life her learning has been something she has had to struggle through, to put up with to get a reward which to be honest was to do her own thing. Learning was something she wanted to escape from. She wanted to get away from doing things she thought were pointless anyway. I wanted my girl to learn through fun like any child and to enjoy it” Rebecca’s Mum.

Creating a form of therapy that was fun became very important. Not only would this help keep everyone motivated but it would put theory into practice. Research supports the common sense knowledge that shared good times are good for everyone’s health and well being. But most of all I wanted the children to enjoy the therapy, to look forward to it and experience all the great feelings that go with being really involved in a joyful experience.

“I used to look through the window of the nursery and see him wandering about. They would say he had had a good morning and I would know they meant he hadn’t been any trouble that day. But he was never really one of the group, he didn’t join in, he just didn’t get the idea of friends.” David’s Mum

We wanted a therapeutic approach that would work 1:1 but more than that we wanted it to work right from the start in small group settings so the learning would be more social.

So let's get started.

The attention autism intervention developed and grew. It developed slowly with trial and error, frequent changes and updates but it is now the approach that acts as the core of the Attention Autism intervention. It is a framework for working directly on developing attention skills.

The approach uses;

- an understanding of how attention develops as a part of growing up
- knowledge of what autism does to a child's learning
- experience in the field
- knowledge for things the children find interesting
- an understanding of the importance of joyful dynamic.

The end result is a method for giving autistic children an irresistible invitation to learn using fantastic activities and having a really good time whilst you are doing it. The attention work teaches the children how to enjoy taking part in a shared experience, how to focus and keep their attention, and to share it with the leading adult.

"When I watched a session with a group I was fascinated. I knew it would be the same for him. The activities would interest him and motivate him and we could build on it". Josh's Mum

In planning a session with a group it is important to remember that a lot of autistic children can only think about one thing at a time. The one thing they are attending to is something they have chosen and they don't take interruptions well. This can be seen as the children being autistic and sticking to their own agendas but it is a developmental step too.

As a starting point we want to make it as easy as possible for the children to accept the irresistible invitation we are offering so we are going to make the activity;

- happen in an autism friendly setting
- the only thing available to begin with
- so appealing that they would choose it anyway.
- fun!

If we can do these things we have taken some of the battling out of the situation and reduced the stress for all. We have increased our chances of success! It is a thoughtful specialist plan but that doesn't mean it has to be boring. It is about having the understanding and the confidence to set the scene, deliver the invitation, share the activity and enjoy it.

The result of a child being really involved in something they like is that they remember it, and look forward to the next time. We need to use what the children are good at; we need to use their strengths. We know they can concentrate on things they like so we have to make our activities meet their interests. We know the children really use their eyes; they are visual learners so we need to work hard to make everything good to look at. We have to do things that catch the children's eye and intrigue them.

This doesn't have to be expensive; it is more about how we use things. For example we could add food colouring to water activities or sprinkle things like lentils in fascinating ways. As I walk round supermarkets or DIY shops I look and think...what could I do with that...then I try it out. It is possible to make fantastic activities from the contents of your kitchen cupboard; you just need to understand what appeals to the children and how to set up an attention session. One of the joys of this approach is that we can use each others ideas and we can create our own. I recently watched a wonderful session where children watched old tomatoes being squashed between 2 sheets of see through plastic...it was very visual, colourful and fun!

Once the activity is organised it is about using the framework of the approach to run a session. It does take practise and some training. You need to clear the area of distractions and have a clear structure to the way you work. There are some rules you have to teach which can be hard at first. For example the children only watch to begin with and can only touch the activity or join in when you give them a turn. This can seem so hard at first, especially when the child is keen or if you know they will get upset. However it's an important step in the learning – after all if the child takes over you have to ask how shared the activity really is!

Running a session to begin with is a bit like learning to drive a car, there are so many things to remember all at once it feels impossible. But the more you practice the easier it gets and the planning and strategies get easier to use. Once you have got used to it a session that is going well looks easy and relaxed!

"I use to wake up in the morning and the weight of anxiety just pressed down on me. Tying something new felt like just one more thing that wouldn't work but when I started there were a couple of moments when everything just clicked and it felt magic. Those bits kept me going and It got easier the more I did" Archie's Mum

I expect a group of pre-school or primary aged children to get to the point where they can focus and keep their attention in a group for an attention session for between 10 and 20 minutes within 6 weeks. This is based on the experience of using this approach with the whole range of the autism spectrum and seeing what is possible. In recent years the framework for the attention session has been developed for older children and adults and the results are the same, it usually takes a bit longer as other behaviours have got well practised over the years but it still works.

So what's next?

It is worth thinking about how important it is to teach attention skills. If we don't teach them how to do it how will they get the skills they need? Teaching attention skills in a way that is joyful and dynamic, that uses the creativity of all involved means therapy is fun and a shared experience. Very importantly it also means the children have shared activities with you that are worth communicating about. Those shared experiences can form the foundations of relationships for you and the children have something in common.

Teaching attention skills is a key stage for me in how I work and is part of getting started and keeping going in the complicated but fantastic process of building working communication. The attention framework gives us a means of sharing joyful activities with a real "wow" factor that everyone can enjoy.

This can be done, it takes practice and some courage but it is possible. The future for this technique now lies in sharing the skills and knowledge to make it possible for anyone that wants to have a go, to feel they have the information and training they need. This article is a step on that journey. If you are interested in using the Attention Autism approach contact me and we could travel together!

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