



## INFORMATION SHEET

### "THE CURIOUS INCIDENT OF THE DOG IN THE NIGHT-TIME"

by Mark Haddon, published by Jonathan Cape/Random House, 2004.

Autism Victoria has prepared this information package to assist students studying this book as part of their 2005 VCE English course. The package comprises:

1. Information describing Autism and Asperger Syndrome – their characteristics and the implications for people affected by these conditions.
2. An annotated Reading List, including reference books about Asperger Syndrome, and some autobiographical accounts of living with Asperger Syndrome. Also listed are some film titles that have explored Autism and Asperger Syndrome.
3. Commentary and reviews about the book.

## 1. About Autism Spectrum Disorders

### Terminology

Autism Spectrum Disorder is the term used to describe a group of pervasive developmental disorders with core impairments in *Social Relationships* and *Communication*, with affected people showing a *restricted repertoire* of activity and interests and *impaired imagination* skills.

A diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder is given if, as a result of a comprehensive, multi-disciplinary assessment, the child/adult shows a pattern of behaviour with characteristics from each of these core impairment areas. There are several diagnostic terms used within the spectrum of autistic disorders – these are Autism, Asperger Syndrome, Pervasive Developmental Disorder-Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS), Atypical Autism and High Functioning Autism.

These diagnostic terms can be confusing, but are also very helpful. The following may assist those wishing to distinguish between the terms used and how they may apply to someone they know.

**Autism** – in Autism the impairments in the social and communication areas are severe and sustained and present before the age of three years. The child is often anxious, has poor attention and motivation, responds unusually to many different stimuli and is very 'different' from other children. The child may also be intellectually delayed.

**High Functioning Autism** is a loosely used term to describe a child/adult who meets the criteria for a diagnosis of Autism, but is not as severely affected as the more classically autistic child.

**Asperger Syndrome** – in Asperger Syndrome there are severe and sustained social impairments, but impairments are not as severe in the communication area. The impairments seem more subtle in

the very young child, and become more apparent as the child reaches pre school and school age. The Asperger child/adult is usually in the normal intelligence range.

**PDD-NOS or Atypical Autism** is used for children who show characteristics of autism, but not sufficiently severe to meet the criteria for a diagnosis of Autism or Asperger Syndrome. These children require the same intervention approaches used for children with Autism or Asperger Syndrome, but generally not as intensive or sustained.

## **Autism versus Asperger Syndrome**

There is significant debate among researchers and clinicians about whether Asperger Syndrome is really just a higher functioning form of autism. At a conference in Canberra in 2004, Professor Christopher Gillberg from Sweden made the important point that the term 'high functioning' is misleading, and acts to diminish the level of support and understanding needed by the person diagnosed with Asperger Syndrome or Autism. At this point in time, there are two diagnostic categories, Autism and Asperger Syndrome, and there is little doubt that the character in Haddon's book meets the criteria for a diagnosis of Asperger Syndrome. In the next section of these notes, the characteristics of Autism and Asperger Syndrome are explained more fully.

## **Questions often asked about Autism and Asperger Syndrome**

### **◆ What is the prognosis for a child diagnosed with Autism or Asperger Syndrome?**

Autism and Asperger Syndrome are lifelong disorders. Most people diagnosed with these conditions will require varying degrees of support throughout their lives. With structured support programs sensitive to the needs of each individual, many gains can be made and a meaningful lifestyle can be achieved.

### **◆ Why are there more males than females with Autism and Asperger Syndrome?**

The reason why there are more males than females is not known. However, this high ratio of boys to girls is found in a number of disorders involving language and learning problems.

### **◆ Does Autism occur in conjunction with other disabilities?**

Autism can occur by itself or in association with other disorders such as intellectual disability, learning disability, epilepsy, fragile-x syndrome and others. A person with Asperger Syndrome does not usually have an intellectual disability.

### **◆ How can people with Autism or Asperger Syndrome be helped?**

Intervention methods which involve careful analysis of the person's strengths and weaknesses and their behaviour are helpful in enhancing development in social, language, self-help, co-operation and other basic skills. Special educational approaches which are structured, intensive, consistent and predictable enable most children to make gains in learning.

### **◆ Can medication be useful with individuals with Autism or Asperger Syndrome?**

Medication has no specific role in treating these disorders and is not used in a curative sense. Some people may exhibit severe behaviour patterns or high levels of anxiety, develop epilepsy or become depressed. In such cases medication has a role in the treatment of these specific conditions and should be prescribed by a practitioner familiar with Autism and Asperger Syndrome.

## Characteristics of Autism Spectrum Disorder

These checklists provide general indicators of the behaviours observed in children and older people with an Autism Spectrum Disorder – either Autism or Asperger Syndrome. Each person is different and very few children or adults will exhibit *all* of these characteristics. The three lists show a *typical* progression through childhood into adulthood.

### ◆ Preschool Years

- Feeding problems, such as poor sucking. The child is often resistant to solid foods or to variety in their diet.
- Abnormalities in responsiveness to others; a child can show no desire to be cuddled, a preference for familiar people and appears to treat people as objects rather than a source of comfort.
- The child tends to not look directly at other people in a social or interactive way.
- There is constant crying *or* there is an unusual absence of crying.
- The child has marked repetitive movements, such as hand-shaking or flapping, prolonged rocking or spinning of objects.
- The child takes an obsessive interest in certain toys or objects whilst ignoring other things.
- The child shows extreme resistance to change in routines and/or their environment.
- The child appears to avoid social situations, preferring to be alone.
- There is limited development of usual play activities, particularly imaginative play.
- The child has sleeping problems.
- There is an absence of speech, or unusual speech patterns such as repeating words and phrases (echolalia); failure to use 'I', 'me', and 'you', or reversal of these pronouns.
- There are difficulties with toilet training.
- The child does not point to or share observations or experiences with others.
- The child may be extremely distressed by certain noises and/or busy public places such as shopping centres.
- There is no evidence of disability in the child's appearance – many children with an Autistic Spectrum Disorder are very attractive in appearance.

### ◆ Primary School Years

- Parents may notice that much of the disturbing behaviour of the preschool years decreases.
- There is a period of relative calm and adjustment, but resistance to the demands of others remains.
- There is an increase in social interest; they tolerate playing beside other children and begin to show attachments to certain people (often adults or younger children).
- Echolalia, if present, decreases and spontaneous speech emerges. About half of the children who are non-verbal in the preschool years acquire some speech.
- The difficulty in making social judgements often results in school behaviour problems.
- The rituals and compulsive behaviour frequently continue.

- Hyperactivity and poor attention span, if seen in preschool years, can become less prevalent.
- The child's difficulty in understanding others and interpreting environmental events leads to significant levels of anxiety.
- There is a lack of motivation or desire to please others.
- The child has difficulty in transferring skills learned in one setting to another setting, eg, school to home.

#### ◆ Adolescence to Adulthood

- Behaviour disturbance and imbalance typical in adolescents seems to be exaggerated but eventually there is a resumption of calmer behaviour. A few adolescents show marked improvement in skills, some show serious behaviour regression but all survive adolescence!
- Sexual development and interest varies with physical development but in general is delayed.
- The commencement of menstruation and sexual drive are usually tolerated calmly but exhibitionism and masturbation are sometimes problems. This behaviour can usually be redirected using behaviour modification techniques.
- The presence of a disability seems to become more obvious in the physical appearance of the older person, especially if they also have an intellectual disability.
- Seizures seem to develop in approximately 30% of adolescents with autism.
- Increased levels of anxiety and the development of clinical depression often occur and carers need to be alert to this and seek professional help.
- Adults with an Autistic Disorder, if they have received specialist intervention, are able to partly overcome these difficulties but continue to require sensitive and sustained support, usually from their families.

(Based on "What Is Autism?" by Dr Di Boswell and Helen Baker, and 'Autism: Perceptions and Reality' by The Autism Foundation.)

### Why is the term 'Autistic Spectrum' used?

Dr Lorna Wing, a very well known researcher, writer and clinician in the field of autism, first used the term Autism Spectrum Disorder to describe a 'triad of impairment' with each component depicted along a continuum or spectrum. The following diagrams may help to illustrate this concept and further explain the characteristics of autism and Asperger Syndrome, and how they can vary from person to person.

#### ◆ Impairment of Social Relationships:

<b>ALOOF</b>	<b>PASSIVE</b>	<b>ACTIVE BUT ODD</b>
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Presentation ranges from almost complete indifference to other people, to those who will respond to interactions but not initiate, to those who will initiate interactions with others but in an odd, repetitive and often inappropriate manner.

◆ Impairment of Communication:

<b>DISORDERED OR ABSENT SPEECH</b>	<b>ECHOLALIC AND REPETITIVE SPEECH</b>	<b>REASONABLE COMMUNICATION WITH A LIMITED RANGE OF TOPICS.</b>
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Speech is sometimes irrelevant to the social context with a general lack of understanding of others' speech.

◆ Impairment of Imaginative Thought:

<b>USING OF OBJECTS FOR SENSATION ONLY</b>	<b>UNIMAGINATIVE USE OF TOYS</b>	<b>UNABLE TO COPY AND PRETEND PLAY</b>	<b>UNABLE TO INVENT AN IMAGINARY WORLD</b>
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Thoughts are rigid and stereotyped

◆ Also observed is a pattern of Repetitive Behaviours:

<b>REPETITIVE BODY MOVEMENTS</b>	<b>FASCINATION WITH SENSORY STIMULI</b>	<b>ROUTINES INVOLVING OBJECTS</b>	<b>VERBAL ROUTINES</b>	<b>ROUTINES RELATED TO A SPECIAL SKILL</b>	<b>TOPICS OF SPECIAL INTEREST</b>
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(Taken from "Autism – Perceptions & Reality" Presentation Kit, The Autism Foundation 1998)

## Helping the person with Asperger Syndrome

These checklists describe behaviours observed in young people and adults diagnosed with Asperger Syndrome. Each person is different and very few will exhibit *all* of these characteristics. The comments in *italics* are some suggestions for assisting the person with Asperger Syndrome.

◆ Social and Emotional Abilities

- The person lacks an understanding of how to participate in games, sports and activities with others.

*This is often because no one has taken the time to teach the skills and rules, which others will just 'pick up' along the way. Plenty of opportunity for practice and reinforcement is needed.*

*Identify specific skills that the person needs to develop in order to join in with others and make sure they are taught these skills.*

*Make sure the person is interested in the particular sport or activity – try and establish special interests and skills and build upon those. We don't all have to be champion sport people – some of us are better at being umpires, referees, statisticians or scorekeepers.*

- The person avoids contact with others when placed in social situations.

*Arrange plenty of opportunities to learn and practice social skills in one on one settings, and then move to small group situations. The schoolyard is not the ideal learning ground.*

- The person lacks an understanding of appropriate social behaviour.

*Teach appropriate social skills. If errors are made, sensitively explain the more appropriate behaviour or response, taking care not to discourage them.*

*Involve the person in social skills groups.*

- The person lacks understanding of other people's feelings.

*Focus on teaching one emotion at a time using a variety of resources eg books, songs, mirror, pictures, known experiences and role-play.*

*Relate the emotion to actual events and/or experiences in the person's life.*

- The person believes that other people think the same way they do.

*Encourage them to stop and think about how the other person will feel before they act or speak.*

*Help them to understand the perspective and thoughts of others using role-play and instruction.*

*In a social situation, gently explain how you feel, don't just assume the person with Asperger will work it out.*

- The person becomes very anxious if things are changed or go wrong.

*Teach stress management and relaxation techniques.*

*For high levels of anxiety or agitation, encourage them to participate in activities which will help to use up excess energy, such as exercise, bike riding, running, swimming etc.*

*Set aside a space where they can be alone and feel more in control.*

- The person uses emotional expressions that are inappropriate to the situation.

*Encourage the person to write down how they are feeling.*

*Use emotion charts to enable the person to choose the face or expression related to their feelings.*

- The person shows little or no interest in participating in games or activities.

*Use the person's preferred interest as an incentive to participate in non-preferred activities.*

#### ◆ **Communication Skills**

- The person interprets other people's comments literally.

*Avoid using words or phrases, especially metaphors, which may be confusing or misinterpreted.*

*Explain confusing words or phrases.*

*Mean what you say and say what you mean!*

- The person may have an unusual sounding voice. For example, accent, monotone, or volume.

*A speech therapist may be able to provide advice.*

*Teach how to modify stress, rhythm and pitch to emphasise key words and associated emotions.*

- During conversation, the person does not show any interest in what you are saying.

*Give cues of when to reply, interrupt or change the topic.*

*Model sympathetic comments.*

*Role play an appropriate conversation.*

- The person doesn't look at you during a conversation.

*Eye contact can be very difficult for a person with Asperger Syndrome. This does not necessarily mean that the person is not listening to you.*

*Frequently check that the person understands what you are saying.*

- The person's speech tends to be formal and over precise.

*Is this really a problem – just enjoy!*

- The person may change the topic of conversation if he/she becomes confused.

*Encourage them to use 'safety net' phrases such as "I don't know", "I'm confused", "What do you mean?".*

#### ◆ Cognitive Skills

- The person tends to read in order to gain information rather than for enjoyment.
- The person may have an exceptional memory.

*Provide opportunities for the person to apply their knowledge, eg quizzes, and games.*

- They have difficulty understanding activities that require imaginative and/or creative input.

*Be prepared to explain in detail what is happening and what is required.*

#### ◆ Specific Interests

- The person is fascinated by a particular topic of interest.

*Control this obsession by limiting the duration of the special interest to specific times, or after other activities.*

*Use the topic of interest to improve motivation or become a source of employment or social contact.*

- The person dislikes any change to routine.

*Prepare them for any changes that are likely to occur prior to the event by explaining what will happen. This usually needs to be written down, as verbal explanations are more difficult to take on board.*

- The person follows elaborate routines or rituals.

*Insist on compromise so that the class or group does not become a slave to these rituals.*

*Teach the concept of time and use of visual schedules to indicate the sequence of activities and provide a concrete 'moving on' cue.*

*Ritualistic behaviour is often a strategy used to reduce other stressors. Try to identify these stressors and take action to reduce the person's anxiety levels.*

#### ◆ Movement Skills

- The person tends to have poor motor co-ordination skills.

*Seek advice from a physiotherapist and/or an occupational therapist.*

*Help them practice ball handling and other equipment skills.*

*Encourage the development of keyboard skills if handwriting is very poor.*

- The person may have an odd gait.

*(Reference: ATTWOOD, T., Asperger's Syndrome - A Guide for Parents & Professionals, Jessica Kingsley, UK, 1998.)*

## 2. Resources – find out more about Asperger Syndrome

### Books

These books provide a range of information about Asperger Syndrome – some are reference books, others are personal accounts written by parents and/or people with Autism or Asperger Syndrome.

**BASHE, P.R. & KIRBY, B.L., The OASIS Guide to Asperger Syndrome. Crown Publishers, 2002**

*Written by two parents, this book deals with the social, emotional and cognitive challenges faced by those with Asperger Syndrome, and their parents. It also provides an overview of treatment strategies and options.*

**ATTWOOD, T., Asperger's Syndrome - A Guide for Parents & Professionals, Jessica Kingsley, UK, 1998**

*This book is essential reading for those living or working with a child or adult with Asperger Syndrome. It is written in a clear and concise manner, with plenty of examples, practical suggestions and resource lists. Tony Attwood is a world authority on Asperger Syndrome.*

**BARNHILL, G., Right address.... wrong planet: children with asperger syndrome becoming adults. Autism Asperger Publishing Company, 2002**

*Written by an autism consultant, who has an adult son with Asperger Syndrome, this book covers a much needed area – that of adolescence and adulthood. Ms. Barnhill offers both her family perspective and practical advice for those living with/caring for an adult with Asperger Syndrome.*

**CUMINE, V., LEACH, J. & STEVENSON, G., Asperger Syndrome A Practical Guide for Teachers, David Fulton Publishers, UK, 1998**

*This is a resource book for teachers and parents. It provides a clear, non-technical explanation of the autistic spectrum, Asperger Syndrome, diagnostic issues and the educational implications of current theories. The bulk of the book provides information about educational and behavioural interventions in a school setting, in a dot point format.*

**WINTER, M., Asperger Syndrome: what teachers need to know. Jessica Kingsley, 2003.**

*Written by a teacher, this book is very easy to read and full of strategies that will assist teachers, both in understanding Asperger Syndrome and also in providing a positive classroom experience for students.*

**SMITH MYLES, B & ADREON, D., Asperger Syndrome and Adolescence: Practical solutions for school success. Autism Asperger Publishing Co. 2002**

*An excellent overview of the challenges faced by teenagers with Asperger Syndrome at school. The book provides teachers and parents with practical solutions to assist in the transition to, and survival in, secondary school.*

**WILLEY, L.H., Asperger Syndrome in Adolescence: living with the ups, downs and things in between. Jessica Kingsley, 2003**

*This book tackles issues pertinent to all teenagers with Asperger Syndrome, including friendship, depression and sexuality. Each chapter is written by a different author, including Tony Attwood, Liane Holliday Willey and Rebecca Moyes.*

**HALL, K., Asperger Syndrome, the Universe and Everything. Jessica Kingsley, 2002**

*An amazing book written by an 11 year old boy with Asperger Syndrome. It gives a fantastic insight into his world, and provides an understanding of life with Asperger Syndrome. Highly recommended for siblings, parents, teachers and young people with Asperger Syndrome.*

**JACKSON, L., Freaks, Geeks and Asperger Syndrome. Jessica Kingsley, 2002**

*Written by a 13 year old boy with Asperger Syndrome, this book is a must read for parents, teachers, and young adults with Asperger Syndrome. It is funny, sad, insightful and full of great tips for parents and teachers. Highly recommended.*

**FLEISHER, M., Making Sense of the Unfeasible, Jessica Kingsley, 2003**

Diagnosed with Asperger Syndrome when he was 11 years old, Marc has gone on to complete degrees in mathematics. This book is an enjoyable account of his life and his strategies for success, complete with appendices on astronomy, parallel universes and the mathematics of unfeasibly large numbers!

The autobiographical books by Hall, Jackson and Fleisher are highly recommended for those asking the question “*How realistic is the character of Christopher in the Curious Incident story?*”

**LAWSON, W., Life Behind Glass (1998); Understanding and Working with the Spectrum of Autism (2001); Build Your Own Life (2003) Jessica Kingsley.**

*For 25 years Wendy was incorrectly diagnosed with schizophrenia. When her son was diagnosed with Asperger Syndrome she realised that this explained her own difficulties. With this unique insight, ‘Life Behind Glass’ is a readable and very moving personal account. Her more recent books provide practical day-day strategies for living with an Autism Spectrum Disorder.*

**GRANDIN, T. & SCARIANO, M., Emergence: Labelled Autistic, Arena Press, Navato California, 1986**

*An excellent autobiographical account of autism by an amazing lady diagnosed with autism as a child.*

**GRANDIN, T., Thinking in Pictures, Vintage Books, 1995**

*Since writing her first book Temple Grandin has toured and lectured extensively, and in so doing gained an even greater perspective of the experience of autism.*

**Videos****PRIOR, M. et al, Understanding Asperger Syndrome, Royal Children’s Hospital, 2000**

*28 minute video explaining the nature of Asperger Syndrome, how it impacts on the affected child and their families, and practical advice for teachers. Copies are available for loan or can be purchased from Autism Victoria.*

**ATTWOOD, T., Asperger Syndrome: a video guide for parents and professionals, Future Horizons 1999**

*A three hour presentation by Tony Attwood, this video covers the major characteristics of Asperger Syndrome, the diagnostic process and is a fantastic introduction for anyone interested in learning about Asperger Syndrome.*

**MICHAEL THOMSON PRODUCTIONS, Ask Me about Asperger's Syndrome, 2000**

*A fantastic, 30 min video aimed at teaching staff. This video is very comprehensive and will give teachers a thorough introduction to Aspergers Syndrome and several classroom strategies which will assist students and teachers. Would also be helpful for parents. Highly recommended.*

**WILLEY, L.H. & ATTWOOD, T., Asperger's Syndrome - Crossing the Bridge, Michael Thomson Productions, 2003.**

*Tony Attwood interviews Liane Holliday Willey about living with Asperger Syndrome - her achievements, her marriage, family and career. Liane is a well-known author who has Asperger Syndrome. One of her daughter's has also been diagnosed with Asperger Syndrome, so Liane is able to provide the viewer with a parent's perspective. A fascinating look into the world of Asperger Syndrome. Approx 30mins.*

**Autism Spectrum Disorder Books - Commercial Suppliers**

<b>Open Leaves Books</b>	79 Cardigan Street CARLTON VIC 3053 Phone (03) 9347 2355	<a href="mailto:openleaves@iprimus.com.au">openleaves@iprimus.com.au</a> <a href="http://www.openleaves.com.au">www.openleaves.com.au</a>
<b>Co-Ordinates</b>	10 Collier Crescent BRUNSWICK VIC 3055 Phone (03) 9380 1127	<a href="mailto:jenny@therapybookshop.com">jenny@therapybookshop.com</a> <a href="http://www.therapytovshop.com">www.therapytovshop.com</a> <a href="http://www.therapybookshop.com">www.therapybookshop.com</a>
<b>Footprint Books</b>	4/92a Mona Vale Road MONA VALE NSW 2103 Phone (02) 9997 3973	<a href="mailto:sales@footprint.com.au">sales@footprint.com.au</a> <a href="http://www.footprint.com.au">www.footprint.com.au</a>
<b>&lt;book in hand&gt;</b>	PO Box 899 REDCLIFFE QLD 4020 Phone 1800 505 221	<a href="mailto:blackman@eis.net.au">blackman@eis.net.au</a> <a href="http://www.bookinhand.com.au">www.bookinhand.com.au</a>

**Films**

'**Rainman**' – story of the growing relationship between a middle aged autistic man with prodigious skills, and his brash younger brother. This Academy Award winning film starred Dustin Hoffman and Tom Cruise.

'**Malcolm**' – an Australian film produced by Nadia Tass who based the character on her brother. Malcolm is described as being socially inept, but no diagnosis was offered. Colin Friels played the lead role.

'**Tim**' – based on the book by Colleen McCulloch, the movie starred a young Mel Gibson. It is the story of a relationship between a young man with a non-defined developmental delay and an older woman.

'**What's Eating Gilbert Grape**' – an exceptionally good movie about a complex family in small town USA. Leonardo Di Caprio plays the autistic younger brother, and Johnny Depp his older brother. Whilst the older brother is the one all family members lean on, the younger brother is the one that holds the family together.

'**Being There**' – arguably one of Peter Seller's best movies, in which he plays the monotone character of Chancey Gardener whose simple wisdom reaches high places.

'**Mercury Rising**' – a Bruce Willis thriller in which a young boy with autism is able to break the code using his extraordinary skills – far-fetched but interesting story.

'**Mozart and the Whale**' - a new movie due for release in mid 2005 starring Josh Hartnett and Rhada Mitchell, it is based on the lives of Jerry and Mary Newport, an American couple who both have Asperger Syndrome.

### 3. Commentary and Reviews

'*The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*' is a multi dimensional book that has resonated with its readers in many different ways. Technically, it is written in the first person, from the perspective of a fifteen year old boy who has Asperger Syndrome. The author, Mark Haddon has captured both the adolescent and Asperger perspective extremely well, and it is an award-winning book that has achieved bestseller status. The book has captured the attention of a diverse range of people.

**Mathematicians** love it. A review by Andrew Strickland and published by the Millennium Mathematics Project, University of Cambridge (<http://plus.maths.org/issue27/reviews/book4/>) lamented the limited readership of popular science books. "It is a simple truth, but fact is less popular than fiction." He goes on to say that "...when a novel comes along which mentions, and clearly explains, the Monty Hall Problem and Occam's razor as well as giving the full solution to an A level maths problem it's worth stopping to take a closer look."

The central character, Christopher John Francis Boone, "has something of a scattergram approach to the acquisition of knowledge, but it is evident from his actions and from what he tells us that what is of paramount importance to him is logic. There is no intuition, no guesswork, no hunches, in his detection or indeed his life as a whole, only rational reasoning."

**Sociologists** applaud the book's moving, humorous and perceptive exploration of Christopher's view of the world, so different from the so-called normal view. Several reviewers have reflected on the fact that despite the convoluted framework of problem solving used by Christopher, the novel still manages to resolve the murder mystery, sort out the family relationships and Christopher sits his exams.

Parents and other family members have identified strongly with Christopher's mum and dad – their exasperation, puzzlement, and sheer exhaustion from the task of supporting their son's reliance on an 'alien' set of rules. Many parents have also reported that the book has helped them enormously in the task of trying to understand their son or daughter with Asperger Syndrome. Christopher takes them into the mind of their offspring far better than any textbook.

The response of **people with Asperger Syndrome** to the book has been varied. Some are not able to grasp what all the fuss is about, taking a very concrete view of a story about a boy who is obsessed with numbers and how a dog died. Others have been able to identify elements of themselves in Christopher's narrative. Yet others, such as Donna Williams, hope the book will help to inform the community about Asperger Syndrome, and teach the community to value people with Asperger Syndrome.

#### **Donna Williams**

Donna Williams is a woman with autism who has published several books about her experience of the condition. She speaks at major autism conferences around the world, conducts numerous information and training sessions and is an artist, composer and mentor. A secondary teacher recently asked her for some comments about Haddon's book, and her responses provide considerable food for thought.

**Teacher:** *Teenagers seem very quick to discriminate against other teenagers who are different. What is the most important thing you think teenagers should know about people with autism?*

**Donna:** Please consider the following:

- Having receptive language processing problems (which I call being ‘meaning’ deaf) is no more a reflection on intelligence than being ‘hearing’ deaf.
- Living with an acute anxiety disorder takes more guts than most people have.
- Having an impulse control disorder like tics or Obsessive Compulsive Disorder is no reflection on a person’s sanity or how human they are inside.
- Communication is not only about words, we all communicate through what we do more than what we say.
- ‘Normal’ is just a word for ‘common’ and ‘uncommon’ is just another word for ‘interesting’.

**Teacher:** *Your books tell of the enormous obstacles and difficulties you have had to deal with, and here you are – a published author and highly regarded by so many people. If you had the opportunity, what personal message of encouragement would you give to my class?*

**Donna:** Welcome to the adventure of abnormality, the intriguing nature of the uncommon, the colourful diversity of the weird, without which our world would be merely predictable and bland.

Fortunately, we all have at least some dose of abnormality, something uncommon about us and something that's colourfully weird so that we may all be at least a bit interesting. At your age there is a trend to conform, and another trend to be what I call *conformistly-nonconformist* – a state many teenagers think is 'cool'. However, *conformist-nonconformity* is ALL about rules, its a production line thing, and it is often so same, same, same.

The real individuals? Well these are who we are when we let ourselves be the quirky, eccentric, colourful, unique, sometimes uncommon type of person we each really are before we set about hiding that great treasure. And people with Autism? Well, they are sometimes the luckiest of all ... because they are often just so damn good at being themselves that they just can't help it. And sometimes a great logic, clarity and ability to just 'be' comes from that. May you all discover a little of it in yourselves too.

**Donna Williams** is author of the bestselling book “*Nobody Nowhere*” and its three sequels. For more information about and thoughts of this remarkable woman, visit her website at [www.donnawilliams.net](http://www.donnawilliams.net)

Two other well know people with Autism or Asperger Syndrome are Temple Grandin and Wendy Lawson. Their websites contain a wealth of information and ideas as well.

[www.templegrandin.com](http://www.templegrandin.com) - Temple was diagnosed with autism as a young child and has become an author, speaker and Associate Professor, and operates an international consultancy specialising in farm animal management.

[www.mugsy.org/wendy](http://www.mugsy.org/wendy) - Wendy is an author, speaker, and academic in the field of psychology and social work. She married and had four children, finally being diagnosed in her 40's with Asperger Syndrome.

## Review

The following review of *The Curious Incident* is by Dr Simon Baron-Cohen of the Autism Research Centre, Cambridge University, England. It was published in the highly regarded journal *Autism*, Vol 8 (4), pp 449-450, by Sage Publications and the National Autistic Society in late 2004.

This is the first novel I have read in which the central character is a person with Asperger syndrome, and I couldn't put the book down. This book could do for Asperger syndrome what *Rain Man* did for autism: convincingly portray a person with this disability, and raise popular awareness of this relatively poorly understood condition.

Christopher is a 15-year-old with Asperger syndrome, who attends a school for pupils with special needs. Although other pupils are in this school because of their epilepsy, learning difficulties, or lack of basic skills such as toileting, Christopher is there because his poor social understanding causes him such confusion that he reacts with major behavioural problems. He makes strange sounds, blocks his ears, hits out at people, and wanders off. His behaviour problems are triggered by things not going according to his plan, or people saying things where the meaning is not black and white, or by crowds and loud noises.

Christopher is supremely logical, and he uses his logic in two different ways. The first is at school, for mathematics. Indeed, he turns out to be the first person from his school ever to take maths A level – and despite it being a special school, he is taking this exam 3 years earlier than is normal. The book is peppered with illustrations of how Christopher sees patterns in numbers, which enable him to solve even complex maths problems. He sees a mathematical dimension to everyday reality, and derives a sense of peace and satisfaction from the beauty of mathematics. As narrator, he even numbers the chapters of this book using the sequence of primes.

But the other way in which he uses his logic is to work out how things happen. To play detective. The book opens with the curious sight of his neighbour's dog, who has been killed with a pitch-fork. Like his hero, Sherlock Holmes, who can 'detach his mind at will' so as to see the facts of reality behind social appearances and so solves the mystery of the Hound of the Baskervilles, so Christopher decides to ignore his father's order not to poke his nose into other people's business, and sets out to find out who killed his neighbour's dog. In the small neighbourhood in Swindon, a boy with Asperger syndrome digging up clues is a powerful literary device for exposing the social relationships of this community.

The idea of the central character of fiction being naïve is of course not new. Voltaire's *Candide*, or the child in *The Tin Drum*, or even the doll-turned-human in *Pinocchio*, are memorable examples of how – through the eyes of an innocent – the stormy, deceit-ridden, emotionally-charged world of adult relationships take on a fresh perspective. Christopher has to struggle not only with his Asperger syndrome, but also with his parents' rows, his father's temper which occasionally spills over into child-abuse, and his mother's stress spilling over into depression. His parents too struggle with the challenge of bringing up a child with such severe behavioural problems, but their human weaknesses also come through, such that they neglect Christopher. This is a portrait of Asperger syndrome in the real world.

Mark Haddon has a rare gift of imagining and communicating what it must be like to have Asperger syndrome, and from my experience of having met many people with this condition, I would also say he is remarkably accurate in his portrait. But Christopher is not being held up as typical of everyone with Asperger syndrome. Not everyone with Asperger syndrome will be able to take maths A level, for example. But he is an individual, powerfully conveyed. The book gives Asperger syndrome a voice, while at the same time providing highly readable, moving, entertaining fiction.

Finally, for this reviewer at least, the picture of Christopher also fits with the psychological theory of autism spectrum conditions outlined in my recent book *The Essential Difference* (Penguin, 2003): impaired empathizing alongside intact or even superior systemizing. In Christopher's case, the two foci of his obsessive systemizing are maths and forensics. Both involve seeing patterns in the data that point to rules governing events. For other individuals the system of interest might be different. Critically, however, Christopher's talent provides little support for the notions of weak central coherence: although he sees the minutiae with exactness, his understanding of maths was not a collection of fragments (as this theory would predict) but was beautifully systematic, leading him

to provide elegant proofs. And the curious incident of the dog in the night time was not forever destined to be an isolated event, but was connected via a series of clues, leading to the systematic proof of the cause of the crime.

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