Unlocking Potential in Autism

6 Inspiring & Thought-Provoking Articles for Understanding and Better Parenting

by Guy Shahar

Unlocking Potential in Autistic Children

by *Guy Shahar*

Contents

About the Author

Guy Shahar is an autism consultant, and Founder & CEO of [The Transforming Autism Project](#).

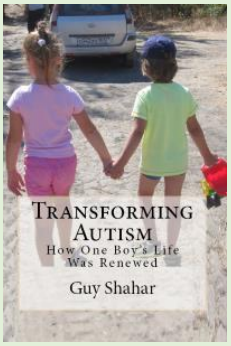
His approach to autism arose from his own family's experience with their son, who was assessed as having severe autism at the age of 2, and who – they were told – would never be able to live an independent life.

Guy and his wife refused to accept this prognosis and immediately took matters into their own hands. They set out on a remarkable journey, where they learnt how to equip their son with the capacity to manage the adversity he faced without becoming overwhelmed. They learnt to establish a safe emotional environment around him that was the key to soothing his anxiety and enabling him to expand his capabilities.

Today, he is a balanced and happy 7-year old, thriving in a mainstream school. The articles in this eBook describe some of the principles that it was necessary to deploy in order to get him to this point.

Guy previously worked as a TEFL English teacher and teacher trainer, a local radio presenter and a project manager. For more than 15 years, he has been practising [Heartfulness](#) meditation, in which he is also a trainer. This is his [personal website](#).

Transforming Autism – The Book



In early 2016, Guy wrote about his family's quest to find a treatment that would dramatically improve his son's life.

Transforming Autism not only tells an inspiring story, but does so in a way that makes much of what they learnt accessible and applicable to others.

[Buy the Book](#)

TED Talk

In November 2016, Guy gave a very well-received TED talk in London, entitled, *The Beautiful Reality of Autism*.

[Watch the Talk](#)

THE ARTICLES

What is Autism, Really?

To many who come across autism in passing, it is considered a disability, through which people are rendered in some way deficient, having the handicap of not being able to function as normal people and (this part is usually unconscious) of being less valuable than those who do not have autism.

I would suggest that the reality is starkly different.

The most obvious difference between autistic and non-autistic people is the degree of sensitivity. For an autistic person, opening the curtains on a moderately sunny morning might feel like having a very bright flashlight shone directly into their eyes at close range; a plate falling onto the kitchen floor might sound as disturbing as standing next to loud drilling on a building site without any earmuffs. The National Autistic Society has produced this very short but powerful film to give us a glimpse of what it must feel like to constantly experience this sort of sensory overload.

But rather than being a deficiency, isn't this a great attribute – an acute ability to perceive the detail of sensory information? Isn't it a more refined way of using our senses for what they are actually for than the rest of us have? The problem isn't with the autistic person, who has been blessed with these great abilities, but with the rest of us who have allowed our sensory processing to be blunted in creating a world for ourselves in which constant extreme sensory stimulation is used as a substitute for excitement. We seek out busy environments with flashing lights and loud noises as a means of having what we call a "good time". We build shopping centres in confined indoor spaces where the sound resonates, and spend hours at a time there. Even the most benign children's films are aired at great volume in cinemas, with loud, sudden, intense emotive music. Over time, our senses have adapted to the increasing prevalence of this sort of thing as the new norm, and we have learnt to withstand it. The already heightened senses of some autistic people have not. In a world in which we didn't feel this compulsion to over-

stimulate ourselves in this way and unintentionally overwhelm our autistic brothers and sisters, their sensitivity wouldn't be problematic; it would be a huge strength, as their refined senses would be a great asset to us all. Instead, we curtail this great potential and class them as disabled.

A less discussed aspect of the sensitivity of autistic people is the emotional part of it. It is often assumed that an apparent lack of understanding of or reaction to emotional expression is indicative that there is no sensitivity to it at all. Again, I would suggest the opposite. Someone raising their voice a little will affect an autistic person not only on the level of the sound itself, but much more so on the level of the intensity of the emotion, which they may feel powerless to stop entering them. While a non-autistic person may be able to laugh off somebody else's annoyance or anger, an autistic person's great emotional sensitivity might mean that it is experienced as enormous pain. I believe that this is related to a natural inclination they have to be supportive, caring, trusting and ready to put the well-being of others above their own. This is the way they are eager and willing to behave. When they are unable to display this – because the prevailing culture of casual cynicism and negative emotional displays would assure them a response more often than not of indifference or even cruelty – they have little choice but to hide away inside. The reactions of others are deeply painful to them. They do not have the option of feeling okay with the negativity that is around them and are not given any positive way to be able to interact with it.

Again, in contrast to our own blunted emotional processing that enables us to give out and to deal with intensely negative emotions while carrying on with daily life, the refined emotional capability of an autistic person – which would otherwise be a great strength as their inherent kindness and good-will was allowed to have full expression and make a massive contribution to our world – is stifled.

In the book, *Transforming Autism*, which explores this perspective at greater length, I use the example of a set of very sensitive kitchen scales which can measure to a hundredth of a gram vs a set of robust industrial scales. If a 5kg rock was dropped onto each of them, the industrial scales would be unaffected and go on working as normal, while the kitchen scales would at best start to malfunction – giving unreliable or incomprehensible readings – and at worst be destroyed. The kitchen scales, being so refined, can give a much better quality of reading than the industrial scales could ever do, but at the cost of their resilience. The analogy is obvious. Think what the growing community of autistic people could bring to this world, how they could improve it – in ways we could never imagine and could never hope to do ourselves – if only we let them; if only we recognised the richness and refinement within each of them that they came here so ready and willing to give; if only we didn't keep piling 5kg rocks on top of them.

Autism is not a disability. It is a condition of enhanced sensitivity which enables those who have it to bring great perception and loving care into the world. In other circumstances, where

calmness and mutual consideration reigned, they could not only be fully integrated into the world, but become pioneering leaders, setting an example for the rest of us. But the condition is fragile. Through our own sensory over-stimulation and competitive adversarial mentality, we prevent the expression of their enormous potential and create a world that is intolerable for them to live in. Being relentlessly bombarded with unnecessary stimuli, excitement and negativity, they are unable to function at what would be their astounding best, and are forced inward and onto a reliance on coping strategies just to be able to withstand it all. And then we give them a label and shove them off into a quiet corner where we don't need to look at them.

Let us consider autism from this perspective, and begin to respect and appreciate for what it is the unique individuality of each autistic person.

Containment: An Introduction

Containment is, without doubt, the single most important concept I have come across for the support of autistic children. We have used it extensively in the transformation of my own son's quality of life, and it is key to how we work with families to bring about similar transformations.

What is Containment?

Essentially, containment is creating an environment around an autistic child (or around anybody, for that matter) to give them a feeling of safety and security. Anxiety is so prevalent in autism and I believe this is the primary cause of the difficulties that autistic children face. When it is consistently soothed by an approach based on containment, this is when the child has the chance to grow and to show what is really inside them.

I have written in several posts about the nature of this anxiety and where is comes from. I have become convinced that, at its root, the autistic condition is not one of inherent difficulties, but one of idealism, softness (in the best possible sense), sensitivity and goodwill. The "difficulties" and "symptoms" that we observe in autistic children result from their acute sensitivity to the harshness of the world around them and the way we automatically behave to each other and to them (which are nothing remarkable to us, but which they experience differently). If *we* had always lived in a world that was similarly intolerable to *us*, we too would resort to such coping strategies.

Containment is a way of providing the autistic child with surroundings that conform to their expectations and deep needs; where they can feel safe and protected from constant sensory overload and, even more importantly, from the constant risk of what they experience to be sudden, arbitrary and unwarranted emotional negativity, which we may not even register, but which can be devastating to them.

Once they are free from these destabilising factors and contained in an environment that feels safe, there is the real opportunity for them to consolidate their strength and press on with their cognitive, social and emotional development, which is impossible when they are constantly assailed by excessive sensory stimulus and less than charitable social influences that can so easily knock them off balance so that they need to channel all their resources into coping with them, rather than into their maturing.

We learnt to do this with our son when we visited the Mifne Centre for the treatment that turned out to be the turning point in our family's life. Part of the creation of this environment was in a dedicated room, where he could play one-on-one with a therapist for around 6 hours each day. It was set up to be a wholly positive experience for him, and to give him the space to develop his natural interest in exploring his surroundings – including, eventually, his social surroundings – and allowing his readiness to engage with the world to grow.

Eventually, this built up his inner-resources and strength, so that he was able to venture outside this protected environment for increasing periods of time, returning to it regularly to be recharged, until there is no need for such a formal protected environment apart from in times of difficulty.

However, this can only happen if the parents/carers bring as much as possible of the sense of safety that the child feels in the room, permanently into the rest of life as well – as a constant soothing factor. At its heart, the message that containment gives to an autistic child is, "Everything's okay." They are reassured that they are understood and that the adult knows how to look after them and their needs will be safeguarded. They can trust us. Of course, this can only happen if the adult can manage themselves and actually carry within them this conviction that there is nothing to worry about and everything can be coped with. The child will effortlessly imbibe this conviction and be reassured by it.

Who is it for?

While containment is particularly important when working with our autistic children, it is actually a basic and central need that we all have. None of us can function at our best if we feel overwhelmed by bright lights or loud noises, or if we feel that we are not valued or if we fear we could be treated arbitrarily or if we feel surrounded by what feels to us to be negativity and aggression and injustice. Anybody in such a situation will be functioning at a level far from their best, and will eventually develop unusual behaviours as a means of trying to cope. If that person is lucky enough to be somehow convincingly reassured that everything will be fine, and the anxiety is given the chance to recede, then they can begin to draw on their inner resources to

eventually contain themselves and start to realise their true potential, free from the debilitating worry about what will happen next.

Because of the anxiety inherent in autism, containing an autistic person is the most valuable and the most empowering thing we can do for them.

But the person containing them also needs to be contained – else we will not be able to manage the task.

When we first arrived at the Mifne Centre, the 2 most senior therapists immediately came to visit us in the house where we were being put up, and offered us the warmest welcome we could have imagined. Right through our stay there, they bent over backwards to make sure we were comfortable, we each had opportunities to take time out alone and together, and they even arranged a day out for us in the middle of the programme, while they treated our son without us. I'm sure the thinking was that if we didn't feel relaxed and looked after, we were not going to be able to project a feeling of calm and reassurance to our son.

It is impossible to project and promote a sense of calm and reassurance if we are ourselves depleted, run down, exhausted and full of stress and unhealthy emotions. This is a challenge. We don't have anyone looking after us like that in everyday life, and the demands of that life are huge. Additionally, most of us have had the experience of further (and intensively) increased anxiety when dealing with the medical establishment and other services. For whatever reason, the "system" is not set up with containment in mind, and certainly not as a priority. It is a goal of the Transforming Autism Project to change that, but at the moment, this is what we have.

Therefore, we need to provide containment for each other – respect and value each other when we meet in groups, share what we have learnt and find ways to reassure each other and give each other hope and positive inspiration. If we have partners, the temptation is to offload all of our accumulated stress onto them in the absence of any other outlet. That is understandable. However, it also has consequences, and is likely to lead to much more stress in the short, medium and long terms, as we contribute to each other's sense of unfairness and injustice, and then see that reflected back to us in an endless and self-fulfilling downwards spiral of negativity, which we will automatically and unconsciously then pass on to our children. It can happen so easily when life is so demanding, and it is not surprising that the divorce rate amongst parents of autistic children is so high. It would be a much better investment, if we can manage it, to see each other as real partners in this process – make an effort to show appreciation for each other and make a decision for ourselves that behaviour that could come across as unfair or attacking the other person is not acceptable *to us* (it's not who we want to be, whatever our frustrations) and we will always refrain from them, choosing instead to consciously bolster them so that they can do the same for us. If we can actually make an agreement to do this in both directions and to offer

and to accept support and tolerance in putting it into practice, and especially when we (inevitably) deviate from it, that would be the most powerful thing of all. It could make our own lives unimaginably lighter and more positive, and would give us the additional energy, strength and inner-resources to remain positive and less anxiety-ridden when we are with our children.

And then how do we use that new condition to help our child?

We have been so fortunate to have had the opportunity to learn to make the principles of effective containment central in how we live our lives, and especially in our interactions with our son.

Essentially, this means holding within ourselves the conviction that whatever is going on, everything will be fine. However difficult any situation is, we will be able to cope with it, and he will come out of it fine. It means trusting in ourselves, trusting in him, and trusting in life generally. Clearly, this cannot be faked. It needs to be genuine.

But it is simple, and deepens with each successful implementation of it. It is often just a reminder to ourselves to revert to what we actually already know deep inside, and what we have decided. We just need to return to the state we were in during that moment of clarity when we made that decision. Pretty soon, he imbibes our confidence and it soothes him. There is no longer any need for him to worry, as he sees that his parents know what they are doing and are not themselves worried, whereas previously, when we were lost in our own uncertainty and fear about what was going to happen and how it would affect him, it was this that he imbibed.

How to learn to implement this?

It is a key goal of the Transforming Autism Project to raise awareness of the principle of containment so that it becomes recognised as a primary strategy in supporting autistic children and enhancing their quality of life. And a key part of this goal is to support parents and carers to be able to understand and use it.

As a starting point, the book, *Transforming Autism*, contains a very extensive discussion of containment and how it can be implemented to dramatically improve the lives of autistic children. It describes in detail how we learnt to implement it and gives many real examples of how we used it and how we dealt with the initial difficulties we had in applying it and in retaining confidence in it when we were so used to things going wrong. Several people have commented

on how much difference a simple reading of this book has made to their ability to support their autistic children.

Beyond this, we are planning to open a UK Mifne Clinic in the next couple of years to give families an immersive experience of how this can be applied, and to kick start them on a journey that will utterly transform their families' lives well beyond what they are likely to have been told is possible.

And once we have learnt the principles of containment and how to transform our children's lives with them, why stop there? The more we can practice containment on as many people as possible who we come into contact with, the more we will be creating a world in which we can all live to our full potential and have much happier and more fulfilled lives. And that can only be a good thing!

Managing Meltdowns

This is not one of those articles where you find a long list of techniques you can use to achieve something. As anyone who has dealt with them will know from experience, once a meltdown has started, there is little that can be done to bring it under control. In short, it cannot be managed. The child is overwhelmed by an intense build-up of stress and is powerless to curtail its expression, or even to be aware of and respond to outside influences during the meltdown. It can only run its course. The most patient and supportive parent or carer can only hope not to make it worse or unnecessarily prolong it. Once it has started, the steam has built up and needs to be let out however long that takes and however distressing it is for all involved.

Some wiser people may advise looking out for the warning signs before a meltdown begins: observe what the triggers are and learn to identify the signs before they develop into a meltdown so that it can be averted. But nobody can be so vigilant at all times, and even if they could, once the signs are apparent, the tension has already built up and its culmination is all but inevitable. The fuse has been lit. At best, the meltdown might be postponed for a short time, but is likely to be more easily triggered later.

So what can be done?

We have learnt through our journey that there is only one way to avoid meltdowns. This way can, at the same time, help with many other difficulties that autistic children face, such as sensitivities, self-regulation and the child's general happiness and quality of life. But it is all-encompassing and requires real commitment. It is about creating an environment around the child where they feel consistently loved, understood, protected and safe.

If you have read much of this blog or my other writings, you will know that this is a theme I continually return to. It's a simple concept, and actually, despite how it sounds, is not dramatically difficult to achieve, but in our case it still meant a radical rethinking of our perspective on family life. Before we paid our visit to the Mifne Center, where we first

experienced the power of this sort of approach, we were faced with frequent, dramatic and very prolonged meltdowns from our son, and we had no idea how to help him. It was heart-crushing to see him in such an inconsolable state for so long and to feel powerless to do anything to help him.

Now, coming up to 5 years later as he is approaching 7, things are very different. We never have meltdowns anymore. Sometimes he will get upset and cry, but he has become so good at regulating himself and allowing us to support him that it no longer gets anywhere near losing control, and within minutes he can be joyfully playing again.

The key to it has been a fundamental and extremely powerful concept we learnt at the Mifne Center called containment. I write about this at great length in the book, as it really is the key to how our son's life was transformed. In short, it involved our not only modelling the change that we wanted to bring about in our son, but also becoming it. So in relation to meltdowns, we had to become a model of calmness, exuding the certainty that whatever happened, everything would be all right.

This was not only during times when meltdowns were approaching – that would be too late to have any effect – and it was not just following a fixed set of steps designed to give an impression of calm; it was actually ourselves becoming that consistent calmness that we wanted him to imbibe. And he did imbibe it. In fact, through containment, we saw how easily he could tune into our feelings and adopt them as his own.

Through this, we learnt how intuitive he was and how sensitive to the emotions of those around him, which we had never suspected before, and how easily influenced he could be by them.

Therefore, in order to truly contain him, we needed to take a good look at our own attitudes and our own emotions. Even unexpressed, they would be perceived and absorbed by him. If he was distressed and we felt lost and helpless and useless (which we did used to feel), then however much we tried to reassure him, nothing would have any effect, as he would be tuning into our unexpressed underlying state.

Once we managed to create a different state within ourselves – of trusting that all would be well and that the situation was manageable – and maintained that during times when everything was calm – then this is what he perceived from us and it slowly helped him to trust us, to have the confidence that we were *able* to look out for him and keep him safe. He absorbed our beliefs that all would be well, and this reassured him far more than any words or techniques could ever hope to do.

And feeling safer and more understood and able to trust that we knew how to look after him, he began to reduce his reliance on "typical" autistic crutches – the self-regulating behaviours like spinning and flapping, the extreme fussiness about routines and food, and many more things.

Because there was no longer the same degree of uncertainty about how safe he was in daily life, he was able to trust us more, relax more and generally live as a more contented person.

How could this possibly have any effect on sensory issues, though? Surely these are to do with the wiring of the brain. Well, maybe they are to some extent, but perhaps this is a much smaller part of the issue than is commonly assumed. Imagine having to go into an office with uncomfortably bright lights and annoyingly loud sound (a situation I have had at work). I found that my experience of being in such a place was enormously influenced by the state of mind I was in before I entered. When I felt weighed down by life and already stressed that everything was difficult to cope with, the additional adversity of the lights and the noise immediately impacted me and became the predominant feature of my experience there. I became grumpy and resented even being there, and focussed my thoughts on leaving. But on other occasions when everything was fine in everyday life and I was in a generally happy and healthy condition, then although those sensory assaults were still there, they had much less of an impact on me, and I could much more easily navigate life there and retain my positive condition in spite of them.

Why would it be any different for a child with autism? Why wouldn't a greater sense of calm and security at home lead to an increased ability to manage the adversity of daily life? This is exactly what we found with our son. As life felt safer for him and as he was able to trust that not only did we *want* to take care of him, but that we were *able* to take care of him, we saw so many changes in life outside the house.

At first, it was smaller things, like being able to remain connected with us while walking down a busy street, when he would previously have shut down completely, but later, he became far more comfortable in settings outside the house, and is now fully integrated into a mainstream school, which he loves. Even 5 years after beginning this journey, we are seeing continued progress in many areas, which we could never have hoped for previously, and which we can clearly put down to our continued use of containment (though it is not exactly "use" anymore – it has become our way of being).

Containment, what it involves and how to implement it, is far too big a topic to cover in a blog post, but it is the one thing that I would most fully recommend for further investigation. We have been so incredibly fortunate to have been so exposed to it, and I hope that through our experience it can be made more widely available to others who can benefit from it.

Pushing the Boundaries of Autism

We often hear how children with autism have certain needs, like the need for routine or certainty or quietness around them or literal language so that they are not confused by figurative expressions, etc.

It is widely assumed that such needs are hard-wired into the autistic brain – that they are integral elements of the autistic condition. It can sometimes be judged that to question this is akin to a refusal to accept that the child has autism, and is thus a rejection of the child. Any attempt to support an autistic child to step through such needs risks being seen as a crude attempt to condition the child – against their fundamental nature – to conform to a selfish parental conception of what the child "should" be.

However, my own experience suggests something fundamentally different. I do not see these sorts of needs as a part of autism. Why then are they so common amongst autistic children? Because they are a manifestation of anxiety, to which the autistic child is naturally highly prone due to their overwhelming sensitivity (see the final article in this eBook for more on this).

If autistic children are treated first and foremost by establishing a relationship of trust with them and providing a safe environment for them in which they can grow without being constantly knocked off course by emotional stress (as introduced in the Containment article), then that anxiety subsides. When it subsides, the manifestations of it subside.

I have drawn the comparison many times with the effects of stress on a non-autistic adult. If, for example, we find ourselves in demanding and cut-throat environment at work and an unstable relationship at home and have financial and other worries, there is not much scope for

happiness. We are likely to flare up at the slightest provocation that we might have laughed off in other circumstances. If we then find a better job which also pays much more, and the relationship stabilises (and perhaps spring arrives), we can feel rejuvenated and recapture the lightness and happiness that we once knew.

The only difference between this and someone on the autistic spectrum is that the latter has such heightened sensitivity, that the slightest adversity overwhelms them – especially when it relates to less than kind behaviour between people – and they are unable to close off the pain it causes, not having the ability to shut down their connection to their hearts that most people have.

So, when their environment is regulated – when they get loving attention from those who look after them and really feel loved, understood, cared for and safe that an eruption of negative emotion is not around the next corner – then the needs and behaviours that seem to be a part of autism subside.

They may continue by default, but this is likely to be out of habit and out of not having learnt an alternative way of being more than out of the anxiety that had previously driven them. What is different is that change is now possible where it wasn't before.

And that is when we can step in and lovingly show them (with lightness and a sense of adventure, without any pressure whatsoever) that it is not scary to take a different route to school now and again – it might even be a delightful new experience; that it is not confusing or worrying to hear a figurative description of something – it can actually be quite fun to try to understand what the person was trying to say in this funny way; that it can be interesting to explore a different combination of foods sometimes, and so on.

The motive for this is not in any way to impose an external measure of acceptable behaviour on the child. Rather, it is to empower them to live a life less constrained by unnecessary limitations, and to explore flexibility in a positive and fulfilling way. It is giving them the possibility of living a happier and richer life, which is the best we can offer them.

Discussing Autism with a Child

Done in the right way at the right time, the initial conversation with a child about their autism can set a healthy foundation and even enhance a child's sense of self-esteem. It can aid their understanding of how they fit into their surroundings and why some aspects of life seem to be more difficult for them, while appreciating the positives that their condition brings.

Done clumsily, it can similarly shape a child's self-perception, but in the opposite direction.

When to bring it up

Leave it too late, and you could leave the child with lingering unexpressed confusion, self-doubt and despair about why some things are so difficult for them while those same things are so simple for others. But bring it in too early and it could be equally confusing for them – knowing that there is this thing about them called "autism" that makes them somehow different from others, and needing to identify with that, but not really understanding what it means and perhaps wondering whether it makes them something less than other people.

It is a delicate balancing act.

My own feeling it to assess when the child may be just on the verge of starting to notice differences between themselves and others. They may not display any signs of this awareness until much later, so it is a question of really connecting with the child and trying to get a sense of what they may be going through.

And then to do it in stages, very lightly introducing the concept at first, so the foundations are there to build on later. So *how* to do this becomes very important.

How to tell them

This is the most critical part, far more important than the timing, as the impression an autistic child gets from their parents about their condition – especially the first time it is discussed – will probably remain with them for life.

It is important to take an overview of this that takes in its many factors. If, for example, we decide that we will just talk openly and "naturally" about autism in front of the child from a very early age in order to give them a sense that there is nothing unusual or sinister about it, are we also being continuously very mindful about our subtle thinking and language relating to autism, which could easily deeply condition the child?

For us, it was very important to get the right tone from the very beginning, but also for it to be very light and neutral. Together with our Davis Method therapist, we decided to introduce the subject to our son – aged 6 and a half – in a light and matter-of-fact way, which left no possibility for his autism to be considered as anything remarkable.

She was speaking in passing with him about the different types of thinking people have. One of the types of brain that it was possible to have – and which he happened to have – was an autistic brain.

And that was it. He didn't need to know more in that first instance. It wouldn't have been meaningful or helpful to him at that stage – prior to becoming conscious of and worried about his differences from others – and it simply laid the foundation for an easier deeper discussion when that becomes useful.

That was its purpose. It means that when it does become appropriate, it won't be a bolt from the blue that there is something about him that differentiates him from others and that he had no idea about. Rather, it will be a case of referring back to what he already knows and developing on that.

It also allows us to give him positive exposure to the concept when there is the opportunity. Shortly after his conversation with the therapist, he became fascinated by Albert Einstein, and so was delighted when we found online discussions about whether he may have had autism. At that moment, he was just happy to have something in common with Einstein. That was enough, and he didn't need to find out more about what that meant.

Once he does start asking about what it means to have autism when it is mentioned, that will indicate that he is identifying something about himself that is different and that he needs more clarity on. When that happens, we can move onto the next stage, which will be to discuss the positives of autism along with the difficulties and how they can best be managed for a happier life with greater focus on his strengths.

The Language

There is a debate between talking of somebody either being an "autistic person" on the one hand and of them "having autism" or "being autistic" on the other. Some people feel that to "have" autism makes it sound like some sort of illness or burden that they are forced to carry, while other (perhaps more) people feel that talking about an "autistic person" makes it sound like that is the defining characteristic of them, when there is actually so much more to each person.

Speaking personally (and this is a very person perspective), I am happy for these phrases to be used interchangeably. It is not the language that is important, but the intention behind it. We need to use *some* words to talk about autism, and if we talk about "having autism" or "being autistic" in a loving way, it will not carry the negative connotations of either. If it is done with prejudice and judgement, or even sadness and heaviness, the negative connotations will blaze through regardless of which terminology is chosen.

Having said that, our Davis Method therapist managed to avoid both these phrases in a really positive and very brief conversation with our son about having an "autistic brain".

What if I've already done it "wrong"?

We all do things that we would prefer to have done differently if we had had the choice much later (after we had already learnt more). But the fact is, we need to live our lives and deal with the situations that face us with whatever we have at that time. There is no manual to life, and there is certainly no manual to bringing up an autistic child. Even if there was, there would always be some larger or smaller group of people who disputed it.

So, the first point is to recognise that we did our best, and not to be hard on ourselves – rather to congratulate ourselves on doing the best we could, even if we understand now that it isn't how we would ideally like to have done it: that understanding just wasn't available to us at the time. This is very important, because our thinking on this will deeply and unconsciously condition how we proceed. What we do next is the important thing, and this should not be contaminated by subtle underlying anxiety, negativity, self-recrimination, apology or defensiveness, any of which could easily be picked up by the child and could further confuse and disorientate them.

It should also be understood that there is no "*right*" or "*wrong*" way of doing this. I am simply sharing some reflections that have been helpful to me on our family's journey. I am sure that others can make other ways work too.

And the important thing is not what we have done up to this point, it is what happens next. The situation we have at this moment in time is just what we have inherited from the past. We can't

change the past, but we can change what happens from this moment on so that we can have a better inheritance in the future.

Whatever the situation now, the best way to improve it is to take a moment out and be clear about how we see our child. This means being completely open and honest with ourselves about how we have been perceiving our child's autism. Have we been feeling heavy about it, or sad and despairing on their behalf? If so, they will be absorbing that feeling and it will become a part of their own self-perception (see the article on Containment for more on how that works).

Do we want to take this opportunity to modify how we see the condition and the possibilities for their future, and more importantly, the human being behind the label and the difficulties? If we do that and start to see their strengths as an individual in a more positive and hopeful light, they will absorb *that* perspective in the same way. Then, with both parent and child on the same page, more of their great positive potential can be naturally brought to the fore.

Then, less than optimal impressions given in the past can be gently, lightly and positively rectified in discussions (and, importantly, behaviour) from now on.

The child takes a cue from the people they most trust and depend on in how they see the world and their place in it, and – although it may take time and patience, depending on the history – it is never too late to redress past mistakes and establish a positive foundation for the child to grow into their best potential.

Sensitivity and Idealism in Autism

Most children are born sensitive and idealistic. It is at the heart of who we are as human beings. That is why we are accustomed to hearing such profound and moving purity from the mouths of the young.

As they grow, and are faced with increasing adversity from the world around them (including, inadvertently, from their parents who have themselves become part of this world), they are faced with a choice – either absorb the pain of the harshness to which they are exposed, or find some way of protecting themselves from it.

At first, the only option that occurs is to absorb it, but when it continues to intensify as they grow, and is even reflected in the behaviour towards them of other children, this becomes too painful a situation in which to remain resilient, and they revert to the second option of protection, and to some extent desensitise themselves to the worst of what they are subjected to.

Of course, it is not really a choice. The instinct of self-preservation guides it, and in case there is still any reservation, it is propelled by the prevailing messages in society that they should "toughen up" and that they "just have to get used to it".

So they do, which has the advantage of enabling them to continue to participate in the world around them and with other children who are undergoing the same process, and of sheltering themselves from the worst of the pain inherent in human social interaction in its current form. These are advantages that meet the urgent needs they face.

However, it also has disadvantages. It separates them from parts of their innate nature and puts the actions that are necessitated by their new choices at odds with it. An inherent contradiction arises which remains, to varying degrees, at the edge of their consciousness, and that is never resolved. They also become less patient with those few who take a different course and retain

something of the connection to the essence with which they were born, as it reminds them of this contradiction within themselves.

This is why we now live in a world where sensitivity is regarded as a weakness, idealism is perceived to be naïve, sincerity is treated as a dispensable luxury, and integrity is almost universally considered a worthy but unattainable ideal, a perception that normalises our own loss of integrity and gives us license to further corrupt ourselves.

In time, these youths grow into adults, who are so assimilated into this culture that they become the parents who inadvertently, but necessarily, give their own children the harsh experiences that ensure that they too embark on this inevitable process.

Where all of this is relevant to autism is that a key difference between autistic children and others, is that those with autism do not go through this process. They are not instinctively disposed to this form of self-protection. The option simply does not occur, and if it did, they wouldn't be inclined to or even know how to take it.

This doesn't mean that they find the harshness any less painful, or are necessarily any stronger than other children in their ability to withstand it. It is simply that the same binary choice is not available to them. And without being able to take that choice, they retain their instinctive idealism and integrity, but at the cost of becoming completely overwhelmed by what they are subjected to and, for that reason, unable to fully participate in society.

Being constantly assailed by the effects of what they experience as the hardness of the world, and without the option to desensitise themselves enough to participate in it, the only course left to them to ensure their survival is to retreat from it and begin to emotionally detach themselves from the reality of what is going on around them.

Could it be that the more superficial presentations of autism – which we regard as "sensory issues", "social difficulties", "co-ordination problems", "poor emotional regulation" and so on – might stem from this underlying situation?

As I have written many times before, if we see autism in this light, the condition is a disadvantage only in the context of the current social reality of this world (outlined above). In the more evolved world to which we mostly aspire (though still widely considered to be a naïve ideal) where there wasn't routinely enough harshness and negativity to overwhelm, the instinct to remain open in the face of adversity would be a great strength. It would ensure the continued cohesion and integrity of the individual even when the going got tough.

If we were able to retain some connection with our origins and to value the autistic person from a very young age for who they are and for what they bring; and if we at least did what we could

to protect them as much as possible from the harshness that we inflict upon one another, we may even find that they have the potential to lead us towards such an ideal.