



The High Functioning Person with an Autism Spectrum Disorder: A "Tourist" in His Native Country

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How can parents explain to relatives, neighbors, teachers, or service agency personnel that their son or daughter with an autism spectrum disorder has a significant communication problem? People often hear the high-functioning individual using good articulation, speaking in sentences, and engaging in turn-taking conversation on selective topics. The parents may be asked, "How can there be a communication problem?" Parents, when explaining their son's or daughter's disability, face a dilemma. Should the parent explain using terms such as "pragmatics," "social communication," and difficulties with the comprehension of the subtleties of daily communication discourse? Probably not. Such descriptions do not explain to people how to interact with a person with autism spectrum disorder. Parents really want people to feel comfortable about communicating with their son or daughter, and want to make the interaction more mutually successful. Parents may find that people will better understand the situation if information is presented within a familiar frame of reference. Thus, an analogy might help someone understand whereas a presentation of facts may not.

Suppose parents describe their son or daughter's problem as very similar to that of a tourist visiting the United States from a foreign country. Upon arrival to the United States, a tourist would find that he does not understand some of the cultural and linguistic aspects of our daily lives. He may not understand the colorful and sometimes questionable slang used by our teenagers. He could be confused, for instance, by slang such as "awesome." He might want to talk about subjects on which he is very knowledgeable. Unfortunately people would talk about topics he did not understand or about which he did not have a point of reference. Conversing about the Presidential Primaries, Baby Boomer's, or the past contestants on "Who Wants to be a Millionaire?" might be difficult for him, and he would probably find these topics somewhat uninteresting. Until he had a better command of the language, he might avoid situations, which required engaging in chitchat or small talk.

In many ways the high-functioning articulate person with autism spectrum disorder is just like this tourist. He does not quite understand the language and is unaware of some of the cultural information implicit in our daily communication. But, unlike the tourist, the person with an autism spectrum disorder may not know that he does not understand or may not realize the extent to which he is missing common information. The tourist may ask questions or develop hypotheses about what he thinks people are talking about. He may check his hunches with a familiar communication partner. In many cases, however, the person with an autism spectrum disorder probably would not engage in these activities.

So what can parents tell people to help them understand their child with an autism spectrum disorder and to help them be more successful in daily interactions with him/her? Parents can simply advise them to do what they would do with tourists:

-  Talk a little slower.
-  Explain things that they think he or she may not understand or find familiar.
-  When possible, use pictures or objects to add clarification to a verbal message.
-  Watch for body language and conversational content that may suggest difficulty with processing a message. (This is not a fail-safe strategy.)
-  Allow the individual with an autism spectrum disorder sufficient time to process the message and respond.

The challenge will be to use these suggestions and at the same time engage in a natural interaction. Parents, through their own interactions with their sons and daughters, may need to discretely model appropriate interactions so that relatives, neighbors, or friends can more easily understand what he or she needs to do.



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