

PFA Tips

Explaining Autism Using Everyday Examples

We've all been there. The glaring stares of others as our children react by melting down from sensory overload, or race to the kitchen to explore the inner workings at a restaurant, or repeatedly jump up with excitement when everyone else is sitting quietly. So how do we explain autism to someone who doesn't understand, has never had close experience with someone with autism, or who hasn't yet learned that autism is a broad spectrum disorder? Here are some everyday examples to help people understand autism using familiar frameworks.

Verbal does not mean smarter

Have you ever had a bad case of laryngitis? It was frustrating not being able to say what you meant or ask for things you needed, wasn't it? But while you couldn't speak, you were still processing information and your intelligence level certainly didn't change. And were you given the benefit of alternative communication by using a pencil and paper, or a computer?

Running out of the classroom

Sensory overload might be difficult for most of us to appreciate. So imagine putting a desk inside the Harbor Tunnel during rush hour. About 40 feet away from the desk stands a teacher who is going to orally give you algebraic word problems to complete. How long would you be able to sit there with the flashing lights and thunderous sounds of the cars racing by? And how well would you do on those algebra problems?

OUCH - that hurts!

Let's continue with more on sensory issues. Have you ever had a tag in your shirt that really bothered you? Yes? Good. Now let's add cactus needles to that tag. Lots of them. We don't know why people with autism have incredibly heightened sensitivities, but they are very real.

Over excitement

Let's pretend you and your child are attending a birthday party where a magician is performing. Your child is jumping up and excitedly running up to the magician or calling out and another parent is noticeably annoyed and asks you to control your child. While we would all agree that this parent perhaps needs his own time out, remind him how it feels when we go to a baseball or football game and our team has just hit a homerun or scored a touchdown. We jump, we yell, we high-five the strangers behind us. If only the rest of us could

experience that level of joy from everyday activities.

Flexible thinking and transitions

We all recently experienced the joy of preparing our taxes. You were in that "tax zone" – your mind fully concentrating on receipts, expenses and wondering what other exemptions you may have forgotten. How would you have reacted if while in this zone, someone came along and turned your computer off? Or how would you react if during the Superbowl in a close game in the 4th quarter your cable suddenly went out? That's how our child who is working on a puzzle feels when you suddenly announce it's time to pack up and go.

Must touch!

We've been in the elevator and have seen "that look" in our children's eyes and we know what they are about to do. Yes – they are going to hit every button. As the other passengers begin to roll their eyes, ask them to take a moment (because you have the time now on this long elevator ride!) and think of freshly baked chocolate chip cookies. But they can't have one. The soft doughy centers, the gooey chocolate, the irresistible smell. And it's a giant plate full, so no one would even notice if one was missing. And the plate is so close it's almost touching their shirts. But, they are not allowed to eat one and really, they need to pretend the cookies aren't there. How easy is that?

That's not what I meant

How often have you gotten an email or sent an email and the intention of the message was completely misunderstood? Without the verbal tones and facial cues most of us rely on for message interpretation, it's not uncommon to misread intent. Now, imagine all of your communication was carried out by tone deaf



emails and you had to guess the intent of each message. Or, travel to a far away country and try to understand metaphors that are cultural specific and make no sense to you. Think how much more comfortable you would be in that country if people just said exactly what they meant.

We're not fooling ourselves. There will always be people who don't understand, or who don't display the tolerance we wish they had. But maybe together we can reach enough people to make a difference and give people that "ah-ha!" moment and make the world a more comfortable place for the people we love with autism.

For more articles on this topic, visit:

"Everyone has Autism" by William Stillman
<https://www.williamstillman.com/archive/everyone-has-autism.php>

"The World Needs Autism" by William Stillman
<https://www.williamstillman.com/archive/the-world-needs-autism.php>

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