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Life On the Inside:

School Challenges for people with ASDs

By Joshua Muggleton

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Primary School

- Born Guildford, Surrey
- Home-schooled for 2 years
- Integrated into local well regarded primary school
- Social difficulties
- Early literacy problems
- Left primary school feeling low

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Secondary School

- Secondary school transfer
- Secondary school considered one of the best in the south east
- Asked to meet with SENCO – Denied
  - Sink or swim philosophy
- Depressed after 6 weeks
  - Suicidal by Christmas
    - CAMHS
- Some help
  - Often withdrawn after a few months

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Secondary School

- One meal a day
- Diagnosis!
- Regular Meltdowns
  - Caused by:
    - Bullying
    - Teachers lack of understanding
    - Senior staff focus on league tables, not individuals
- Nervous breakdown – age 15
- School Attendance dropped
  - Phobia

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Secondary School

- EOTAS
  - Adaptation to the curriculum
    - Allowed to drop several subjects
      - Focused on strengths and getting 5 A-Cs incl Maths and English
    - Had experience with people with AS and other conditions
  - Re-integration for 6 months
    - Jan 2005 – Signed off school by Psychiatrist
- Self Study for 4 months before GCSEs
  - Grades improved when working at home

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GCSEs

- Taken at Surrey County Council HQ
- 25% Extra time, Private room, and laptop
- Had to return to school to print off
  - More stressful than exam
- June 2005 – 7Cs and 1B
- Summer 2005 – Scared to leave house
  - Mentally fragile
- Unsure what to do next
- Pick up the story later

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What Can You Do?

- Be aware of our difficulties
  - Communicative
    - 93% of how to communicate our attitudes is though body language/tone of voice
    - We are poor at “reading” and “writing” body language, facial expressions, tone of voice
    - We have problems making eye contact
    - We often take language literally
      - Problems with jokes

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What Can You Do?

- Be aware of our difficulties
  - Social problems
    - Picking up on subtext/body language
    - Picking up on social cues
    - “Do I look fat in this” type questions
    - Appropriate convocations
    - Dealing with criticism
    - Not being able to ask for help
    - Problems with team work
    - Complements

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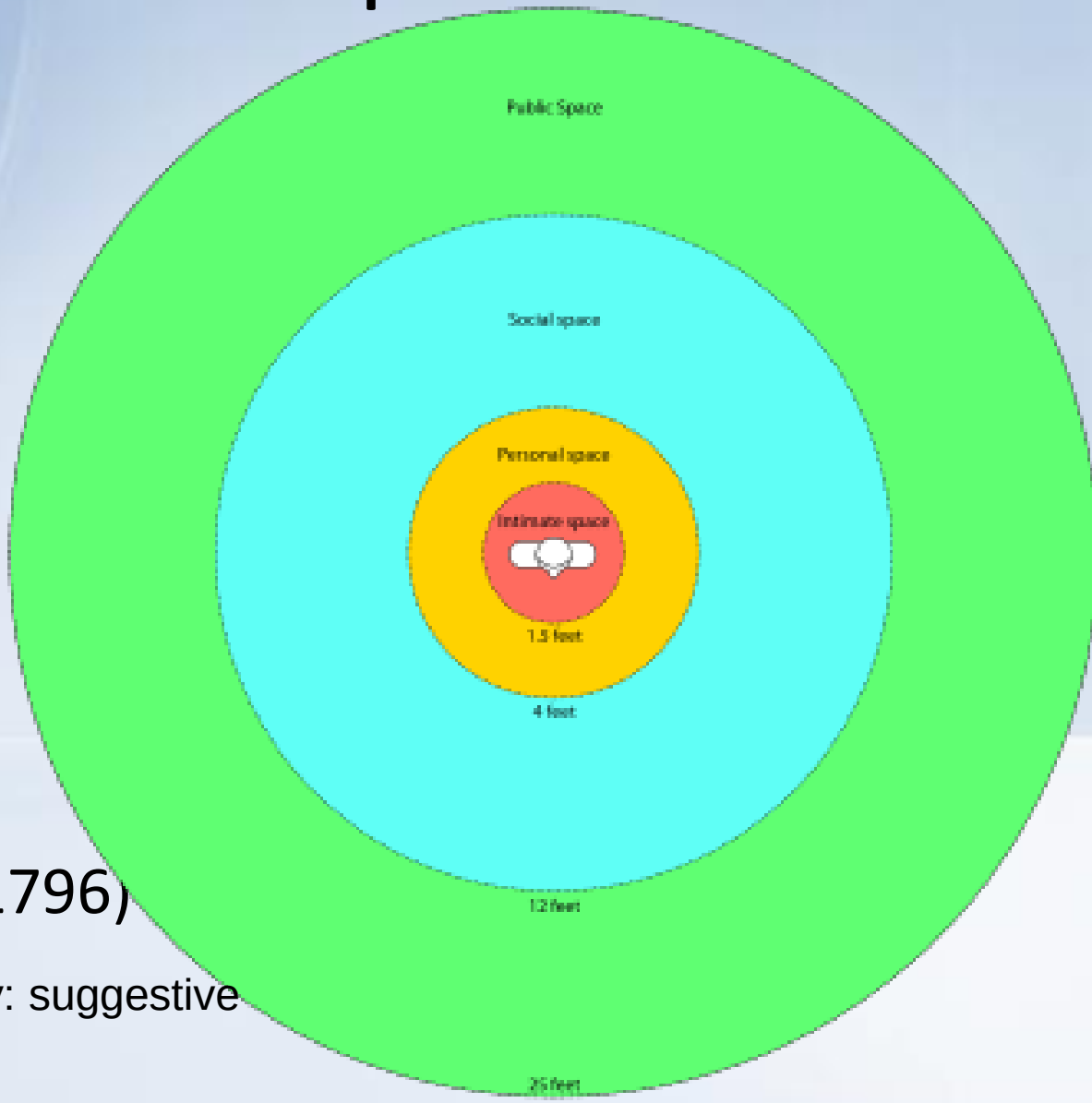
Friendships

- Personal Space
  - by Hall, E.T (1966)
  - Public 12ft – 25 ft
  - Social 4ft – 12 ft
  - Personal 1.5 ft – 4ft
  - Intimate <1.5ft
- Lavatory experiment
  - Middlemist et al (1796)



Personal space in the lavatory: suggestive evidence for arousal

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Friendships

- What is a friend?
  - A lot of people with AS find this definition hard
  - Changes over time
    - Early years – playing with me
    - Later – helping behaviour /reciprocity
    - Tweenager – guys vs girls, shared interests
    - Teenager – personality, talking about feelings (aka self disclosure
  - Increasing levels of complexity
  - Chronological age may not match social maturity

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What Can You Do?

- Get out of Class card
  - Good in theory
  - Hard to use sometimes
    - Draws attention
    - Best when able to leave on desk and walk out
      - Desk close to door
- Locker Placement
- Assembly
  - Can be hard to sit next to so many people
    - Better to sit at the end
    - Hard to do – don’t want to stand out

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What Can You Do?

- School Bell
  - Hypersensitivity to noise
  - Do not show habituation
    - Allow compensation mechanisms (ie hands over ears/watch bleeping 1 min before/etc)
- Homework
  - Home/work divide
    - Help to keep it in place
      - Allow time to do homework at school
  - We have to work twice as hard to live in your world
    - Sometimes do not have the energy to do MORE work

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What Can You Do?

- Adapting the Curriculum
- Is it *really* worth taking 12 GCSEs?
  - "You need 10+ good passes at GCSE to get to a good Uni" - WRONG
  - Better to take 5 (incl maths and eng) and pass at C+ than 12 at F-D
    - 5 not right for all, some can and should do more, some less
  - Use extra time wisely
    - Do homework, Life skills, de-stress tactics etc
      - SHOULD STILL BE IN SCHOOL
        - Need the structure

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What Can You Do?

- Increased structure
  - Lunchtime, PE, Group work are very unstructured
  - We need structure
    - Add a schedule for what to do in lunchtime/PE/etc
- Safe room
  - Somewhere safe, calm, and quiet where we can go
    - When things get too much and we need to calm down
    - To work
    - To just be by ourselves

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What Can You Do?

- Increased awareness of bullying
  - People with AS are natural born targets
  - 54% of children with Autism/Aspergers in mainstream school have been bullied
    - Strong link between Bullying, Depression, and Suicide
  - Take it very seriously every time
    - Often after the nth time it is reported, people stop dealing with it
  - Ensure there is a safe place to go that is monitored
    - Library, etc.
  - Education about Autism
    - Once it is understood by others, they are often “off limits” or gain protectors

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What Can You Do?

- Adapt teaching methods
  - WISC/WAIS
    - Verbal Comprehension, Perceptual Reasoning, Working Memory, Processing Speed
  - Often have a very varied profile
    - Can mean:
    - They cant express themselves well (VC)
    - They cant think/solve problems visually (PR)
    - They can’t hold and manipulate as much stuff in their head (WM)
    - They take longer to figure stuff out (PS)
  - Need to work with strengths and support weaknesses

Just because they are bright, does not mean they don’t have difficulties!

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What Can You Do?

- Make teachers aware of
  - AS
  - The individual
  - My Handouts: “So, you have a child with Aspergers Syndrome in your class…” and “Teacher Information Sheet”
  - Aware teachers are very time limited
    - These are designed to be a quick and easy to read reference guide
    - Gives info on AS generally
    - Allows for personalisation: individual strengths and weaknesses, friends, etc.

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What Can You Do?

- 1 point of contact
  - 1 person to go to when things go wrong
    - 1 person to get to know
      - Make sure they are known to teachers/parents as well as the individual.
- Written Communication
  - Much easier – no social element!
- Review support
  - Too much and our comfort zone decreases
  - Too little and our comfort zone decreases
  - Just right and our comfort zone expands.

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Back to my story

- Recovery year – Satellite Virtual Schools
- GCSE/As Study in Maths, Economics, Physics and Computer Science
- Advantages
  - Could work at the pace I needed
  - Could work in a safe environment
  - Teachers asked me about problems
    - Teachers had good understanding about my problems
  - Tailored schedule around me
    - More work on good days, less on bad days

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FFEC

- Nervous breakdown – January 2006
- Needed mainstream environment
  - With appropriate Support!
- September 2006 to June 2008 - Farleigh Further Education College/City of Bath College
- Based in Frome, Somerset
- Live in Frome, Attend City of Bath College (Mainstream FE College)

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FFEC – Why it worked for me

- Why did it work?
- Key worker who knew me well in lessons
  - Training in AS
  - Acted as a safety net
  - **Developed a rapport/friendship**
    - **Individually tailored support**
- All it took, was a little bit, of the right support
- A Levels
- St Andrews

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Support at St Andrews

- Student Support Services
  - Make staff aware
  - Make exam concessions
  - Deal with any emotional problems
  - Set up extra support where needed
- Academic Mother and Father
  - Tradition at a lot of old universities
  - Help with socialisation/general problems
  - Help settling in

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Support at St Andrews

- Friends
  - Strong group of friends
  - Mutual help
    - The value of friends can be really underappreciated by NTs
- Result
  - On track for a Strong 2:1/1st
  - Lots of friends
  - Active in the students union
  - Feels like home

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So what have we learnt?

- **All it takes, is a little, of the right support**
  - The curriculum should adapt to the person, not the person to the curriculum
  - Teacher training and understanding of Autistic Spectrum disorders can greatly improve the quality of teaching
  - Preparation can yield great rewards
  - Ask

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and finally…

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Book: Raising Martians: From Crash Landing To Leaving Home.

Coming out this December