

Actually Autistic Educator

Episode 2: Autistic Communication

July 2021

Overview

Autistic communication has historically been heavily pathologized and seen as deficient/lesser, but recent studies that look at information transfer and interpersonal comfort that directly compare autistic/autistic, autistic/non-autistic, and non-autistic/non-autistic pairings have found that autistics are often just as capable at effective communication with each other as non-autistics, we simply use language differently. Likewise other studies are finding that bias by non-autistics can be a major contributor to social disconnects between autistics and non-autistics. By studying autistic communication techniques directly, rather than only in contrast to non-autistic communication techniques and assuming any differences must be deficiencies, we can better understand autistic communication and the unique strengths it can have. Jeanne is joined in this episode by previous guest and disability advocate Morgan Leander Blake (they/them), whose omnibus book of poetry written during 2020, *These Cold Equations*, will be out later this year.

Key Points:

- Autistic communication may have its differences from non-autistic communication, but different is not lesser. Presuming the less direct, less logical, and more presumptive styles of speaking common to neurotypicals are the objectively best ways to communicate is deeply ableist and goes along with racist and colonialist assumptions about hierarchies of language/accent/dialect. Societal prejudice regarding what “normal” should look and sound like harms multiple marginalized populations - we need to unlearn our biases around expecting others to match the types of communication we grew up associating with power/education/authority and become more comfortable understanding people whose communication preferences may differ from our own.
- Many autistics are more comfortable typing or using augmentative and alternative communication

(AAC) than speaking verbally, and some use these exclusively. Ability to form spoken words does not equate to ability to understand spoken language, nor does it reflect intelligence/capability in other areas. Be open to people communicating in ways outside your personal preferences.

- Time: 48:54

Quotes:

“Autistic communication is in a lot of ways better understood if you treat it as its own distinct language. Where it works very effectively, we can communicate with each other very effectively, but it has a lot of false cognates with non-autistic communication. So, when you and I are talking, we tend to be very direct, we tend to state our intentions and our goals more explicitly. We don’t use more passive aggressive or subtle language and it makes it a lot easier for us to communicate. As a result, though, when someone is not used to that more direct, more truthful, more logical type of communication, those behaviors which can be really helpful for actually understanding what we’re saying, can be interpreted as aggressive or as us not picking up on the subtext or purposely ignoring what people are hinting at.” - Jeanne

“it’s not just autistics that are going to run into these problems. What’s interesting is I work with a lot of non-native English speakers because I do reading and study skills support and we’ve ended up having so many conversations around them expressing similar frustrations, because when they’re not as fluent in the language, it’s a lot harder to jump around and do all of the insinuations and the side talking. So they end up feeling like they’re misinterpreted. They’re treated as being unintelligent or less capable because they’re having to go through and manually translate everything that’s being said into the communication style that is natural to them.” - Jeanne

“And I’ve noticed that in autistic communication, there’s a lot less emphasis on couching communication behind layers. Like I don’t have to have a pretext

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to ask you about a random trivia of medieval history. I could simply ask you. I don't need to look you up and say, hi, how are you doing? And have a conversation with you first because you would rather that I just ask you, because you'd like to know. You'd like to know what I want to know." - Morgan

"Being autistic has made me a much better teacher because I go into every interaction with a student assuming that their brain is going to work different from mine. They have a unique backstory, personality and way of communicating. And it's my job as their teacher, as the one who's getting paid, to make sure that I can figure out how best to communicate with them as an individual. And I've had so many students of so many different backgrounds resonate with that incredibly strongly because they're just not used to people willing to put in the extra effort to see from what their perspective is." - Jeanne

"Autistics who use assistive devices, who type and have it read out loud or who write out their words, can be just as smart and capable as Stephen Hawking, who also used assistive tech. But we shouldn't have to be a world famous scientist to be treated as a person. Just because we use tech to speak, or sound or look different to what you'd expect, should not be a valid reason to see our mannerisms as wrong." - Jeanne

"If you are autistic and listening to this, your brain and your ways of communicating are just as valid as anyone else's, and you deserve people in your life who are willing to learn to translate to you just as much as you translate for them. If you're not autistic, especially if you're in a position of authority or control over autistics as a teacher, a therapist, nurse or parent, I'd ask you to really think before you

judge someone for their mannerisms. Are you just perpetuating trauma and your own biases?" - Jeanne

"If we can create a society that doesn't keep sidelining people and viewing them as less or deficient simply because of their language, accent or mannerisms, how much better can we make it for everyone?" - Jeanne

Studies referenced:

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Morrison KE, DeBrabander KM, Jones DR, Faso DJ, Ackerman RA, Sasson NJ. Outcomes of real-world social interaction for autistic adults paired with autistic compared to typically developing partners. *Autism*. 2020 Jul;24(5):1067-1080. doi: 10.1177/1362361319892701. Epub 2019 Dec 11. PMID: 31823656.

Crompton, Catherine & Ropar, Danielle & Evans-Williams, Claire & Flynn, Emma & Fletcher-Watson, Sue. (2020). Autistic peer-to-peer information transfer is highly effective. *Autism*. 24. 136236132091928. 10.1177/1362361320919286.

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