

## **USING HUMOUR TO ENABLE FLEXIBILITY AND SOCIAL EMPATHY IN CHILDREN WITH ASPERGER SYNDROME: SOME PRACTICAL STRATEGIES**

Elizabeth Newson, Professor of Developmental Psychology  
Early Years Diagnostic Centre, Nottingham UK  
(formerly: Child Development Research Unit, University of Nottingham)

### **Introduction**

Able autistic (Asperger) children are the most likely to attend mainstream schools, and the least likely to be offered teaching that directly addresses the impairments of their condition; yet their deficits are of the same nature as those of 'ordinary' autistic children, albeit usually operating to a milder degree. This chapter is about specific strategies which have proved helpful to such children in weekly two-hour out-of-school sessions; they could be still more effectively offered by support staff within the integrating school, and many would be entirely appropriate for parents to use at home.

Most of our research, diagnostic and interventional work at Nottingham in the field of autism has focused on the more usual range of autistic children: those who have intellectual impairments as well as the essential diagnostic criteria. However, we have also had a special interest in children in the normal and above-average range of intelligence, and we have held three Department of Health grants to look at this group specifically. These various contacts, as well as long-term clinical experience, made it abundantly clear that Asperger children do meet the same defining criteria as the less able children, and that the only divergences between the ways in which the criteria are shown in the more able and the less able are entirely accounted for by the effect of better intellectual function, which enables good verbal ability in terms of grammar and syntax. In fact, the differences between less able autistic children and the more able or Asperger children can be seen as no greater than those we expect to find between bright and intellectually disabled children in the areas of deafness, blindness or cerebral palsy.

Thus the language problems of Asperger children are in terms of a semantic-pragmatic disorder which impedes their *social use* of language, even though their grammar and vocabulary may be almost too perfect (pedantic) for natural conversation. Poor social timing governs both verbal and body language, and the pragmatics are almost all affected; while the semantic problem is mainly about understanding the *personal* meanings or intentions of others. Social impairment is seen in more able as in less able children, as impaired social empathy. In Asperger children this is shown in more complex contexts, reflecting the different expectations we have of a more able child; for instance, bringing a conversation to an abrupt halt by walking away; not answering, or making personal and derogatory remarks in public in a loud voice; or - my favourite example - the adolescent who failed to check out what a non-autistic person would know was a mis-hearing, and bought his mother clothes when all she had asked for was cloes. Inflexibility of thought processes appears in obsessional, repetitive and stereotypic behaviour (including verbal behaviour), extreme literality (difficulty in playing with words - puns, metaphors, sarcasm, jokes, teasing etc) and insistence on sameness; there is limited symbolic play (eg *arrangements* of models rather than open-ended stories in action) and difficulty with role-play.

From all our research on the natural histories of able autistic people, we were rather hoping to collect from parents' and schools' experience, and from the adults themselves, a whole repertoire of strategies that had been tried and tested, and which we might use both clinically and in advising schools who might be integrating such children in mainstream settings. I have to say that we were not very successful in this, although we did obviously acquire considerable understanding of which kind of deficits caused most difficulty for the children and were therefore most in need of remediation. Wearing our clinical hats, we continued to have such children referred, and to supply 'therapeutic' interventions on a regular basis to augment their school experience. We provided outside support, weekly activities via supervised trainee attachments to the child (mainly carried out in evening sessions), and counselling to both parents and children, either directly, or in some more distant cases by letter or phone.

All the activities described in this chapter have been tried out with several children and found effective - not in curing autism, of course, but in helping relatively bright children and adolescents with Asperger's to tune in a little better to the way in which ordinary people think and behave - to gain a degree of social empathy, in fact - and to improve their flexibility of thinking. Obviously we have only been able to do this by managing to tune in to *them*, using the flexibility and social empathy that we are fortunate enough to possess.

In practice, these two aims work together to help the child improve his interactional experience with others; this is one reason why I have preferred the term 'social empathy' to 'theory of mind', feeling that notions of theory of mind give a cognitive emphasis which I do not want. Clearly there are cognitive implications in rigidity of thought processes; but I suspect that in remediative terms we quickly reach a ceiling to our endeavours if we are unable to access the social difficulties, which in any case can seldom in practice be separated from the actual operation of cognitive behaviour. In discussing these strategies, then, I acknowledge our special debts to a number of children who have, both bemusedly and amusedly, given us their co-operation and friendship; for convenience, I shall call them James, Martin, William, Ben, Stephen, Luke, Richard, Paul and David. I should perhaps add that I also wear a parental hat, with a son in this same group, and that this has certainly helped me in tuning in to the finer details of the syndrome and to a pragmatic approach (in two senses) to intervention.

## **The activities**

### Exploring metaphor

**Verbal metaphor** Parents of verbal autistic children often try, with difficulty, to avoid using metaphor in their language because it makes the child so anxious. Common phrases such as 'I could eat a horse', 'He's a bit under the weather' or 'Pick your feet up, get cracking', interpreted literally, can at best confuse, at worst frighten the child. I was horrified to be accused by my son in adolescence: 'You used to threaten that I'd die'; this turned out to refer to 'Come on, get your jersey on, you'll catch your death!', a quote from my own grandmother which did not perturb his younger sisters in any way. Richard uses metaphor with great ease now, probably as a result of years of listening with one ear as his sisters were read to; his own preference was for information books, which are not the best source of metaphor, though he came to like science fiction and poetry eventually. Literal interpretation in children with autism can extend to visual misinterpretation: for instance, I know several who have screamed with terror on 'mislaying' their own feet in murky seawater, have been reassured by lifting them to see that they were still there, and then screamed again on losing them again.

We did not feel very hopeful about the efficacy of deliberately teaching a repertoire of metaphors to children, but it was at least a start. James, with whom we began at 8, clearly thought we were a little crazy, and could hardly believe it when we told him that lots of people used and understood (in a different way from him!) phrases like 'bend over backwards', 'draw a blank' and 'on top of the world'. Like many Asperger's children, he had always been amused by what he perceived as bizarre; our interest in teaching metaphor clearly came in that category, so he was happy to have a giggle or two at our expense. We used a series of booklets for ordinary children by Len Collis (now out of print) called *Things We Say: a book that helps you to understand what people mean*; there are others similar, but these we thought the clearest, with explanations in simple language and illustrations that were straightforwardly amusing (some illustrations pose their own problems of visual metaphor for autistic children, we find!).

James happily learned about fifty metaphors by heart, and then began to use them in real conversation situations: the first time in a 'what if' exchange about 'suppose there were burglars next door', with a triumphant 'We could dash in *and catch them red-handed!*'. At the end of the nine months' attachment, James's new flexibility with words was helping his tolerance of difference: on one occasion I handed him a drink in a mug which I immediately realised from his face he didn't like; but instead of handing it back (or shouting as he might have done two years previously), he took a drink from it, saying thoughtfully 'You can't judge a drink by its mug- *that's* like "You can't judge a book by its cover"'.

Martin at 6 was really amused by the whole exercise, and accepted it with alacrity as his main project for the year. During my initial explanation, he repeated each example under his breath, and started to put the phrases into his own favourite kind of structure: 'It rained on Thursday 26th September, so I could say "It's raining cats and dogs!" '. I agreed enthusiastically: 'Right - you're getting the hang of it!' - and at once realised that I had inadvertently piled on yet another metaphor which needed explanation. A few minutes later, Martin offered 'My Dad's doing nightwork this month. He's getting the hang of doing nightwork this month!' - with a smile all over his face. Martin was later to develop additional layers to the exercise by not only deciding what the metaphor *didn't* mean in literal terms, but also finding some other, often punning version that it also *didn't* mean: ' "Too big for your boots" doesn't mean you're too big to get into Boots (the chemist) in Nottingham!'. Flexibility began to develop its own impetus.

**Visual correspondences** When we think about correspondences in Baudelaire's sense- the notion that one can conceptualise the smell of a day, the colour of a piece of music, the sound of an abstract shape and so on - we can see that these too are essentially metaphors, and might be helpful as ideas for a child with rigid thought processes. For children who are relatively chatty, or can be induced to be so on certain occasions, a game or running conversation based on these notions might be enough; though we find it helpful to perpetuate what we do in a project book, to encourage the child to look through it outside sessions, and perhaps to talk about its contents to his family or teacher. (Of course, metaphor can itself become somewhat obsessional - but at least one is choosing a constructive preoccupation, which was a consolation for Martin's parents!) As the content is far more important than the academic output in this kind of project, and it is vital that the child should enjoy the sessions, who actually does any 'boring bits' in producing the book is negotiable, and honour can be well satisfied so long as the child contributes ideas, and looks at the book afterwards.

When we started using correspondences with James at the age of eight, he needed more structure than 'chatting', so we decided to invite him to 'paint his emotions', later going on to painting sounds. Both involved abstract use of colours and strokes, and this was an added bonus: James had tended to value only photographic realism in drawing, and was constantly dissatisfied with his usual efforts. The need to paint emotions released him from such inflexible judgements, and also gave a focus for a kind of commentary from the adult: 'that looks like a really angry mood, now show me how it is when you just begin to feel a little bit better'. James much enjoyed these painting sessions, but again found it a very extraordinary thing to do: his comment 'I bet I'm the first person who's ever painted emotions' showed how out of touch he was with the ideas which have enabled abstract art and which other children easily assimilate. None the less, James was capable of developing such ideas when he was directly encouraged to do so. Another child (in our research sample) had been helped to control his outbursts by drawing them as colour-insertions on a grid - one of the very few examples of metaphor work emerging from that research.

### Puns and other plays on words

**Jokes and riddles** As we can see from James' and Martin's pleasure in our 'bizarre' behaviour, Asperger children can have a sense of humour; on the whole, though, it tends to be of the 'banana-skin' variety. With verbal children it seems important deliberately to cultivate a verbal sense of humour, of which the simplest form is probably the pun; and this is a good way to begin. Some children get anxious about words that have two meanings (or objects that have two names, another ambiguity), so finding the humour in this rather than avoiding puns can defuse the anxiety.

There are many collections of jokes on the market, often of the '1000 Worst Jokes' variety which are inevitably a good source of puns; some need expurgation, and it is safest to go for those published by Penguin in the Puffin Books series, of which there are several in print. The Ahlbergs' *Old Joke Book*, with a strong visual element, is another winner. It is important not to assume the child understands the joke just because he laughs; like the rest of us, autistic children can laugh politely when they don't actually 'get it' - though they probably do so because they have been set on course for a series of laughter-points, almost ritual fashion.

It is worth persisting with the tedious business of working through the reason why the joke is funny, because generalisation does in the end take place with these more able children, and a new era of social possibilities may result. Richard, who had a hard time from other children in his mainstream comprehensive school, did find himself admired and valued for a long cartoon saga in his rough notebook, full of jokes at the expense of school staff; though the tolerance of the staff was tested- and won, following discussion with the Head!

Riddles usually have a joke embedded in them in children's publications. The 'Knock, knock' - 'Who's there?' ones depend on a punning element, involve a structured verbal dialogue, and may eventually be made up by the child, perhaps with help. Martin and I were responsible for this one:

*Knock knock  
Who's there?  
William  
William who?  
Will ya marry me, darling?*

Seeing the joke of the riddle's answer involves a swift change of perspective (an abstract and complex form of 'shift of attention' in Courchesne's term), which is precisely what autistic children find difficult but which the brighter children can achieve with a lot of practice. Consider the verbal shifts involved in these two 'waiter, waiter' jokes (from *The Old Joke Book*):

*Waiter, waiter, is there soup on the menu?*  
*No, Madam — I wiped it off!*

*Waiter, waiter, this egg is bad!*  
*Don't blame us, sir, we only laid the table.*

Both rigidity of thought process and lack of social empathy are directly addressed by jokes like these, because the cognitive transformation is accompanied by a change of perspective from the customer's point of view to the waiter's. One would find it hard to devise better material for the remediative purpose we have in mind.

Producing a book of riddles and jokes, some borrowed or collected from others but just a few made up, can be very rewarding; word processors and copiers can be brought into action to make the 'book' more authentic. We have sometimes worked with one child to produce a magazine to which the other children attending the Unit contribute; obviously this could more easily be done in a school, where the children are present together, and where teachers could also suggest their favourite jokes, involving additional social contacts.

**Other humour** Having begun with jokes and riddles, partly because they come in conveniently short bursts for the child to cope with in the early stages, it then becomes possible to go on to more sustained humour. Comics of the Dandy and Beano type are useful; more sophisticated and much more sustained are the books of Raymond Briggs, which use the punchy comic-strip format to give a strong visual crutch to verbal understanding. Particularly recommended is *Fungus the Bogeyman*, which appeals to the very normal jokey attraction of all things yukky, and thus helps to bring the autistic child into the humorous traditions of his peers. James slept with *Fungus the Bogeyman* under his pillow for about 3 years, giving himself a quick giggle first thing in the morning and last thing at night.

This book has a quite sophisticated vocabulary and is not afraid of the long, complex and sometimes abstruse words which intellectually able autistic children often very much enjoy:

*Bogeyboots are watertight and are filled with a mixture of dirty water and grume\* or gleet\* after being put on.*

*\*grume: a fluid of thick viscous consistence      \*gleet: a purulent or morbid discharge*

One particular strength is its irony, which opens up a new dimension of humour for the child; for instance, Fungus muses: 'I'm a very lucky Bogey really ... nice damp dump- never dries out ... always full of flies'; and an information slot about Bogey television explains that 'Programmes are on the usual bogey interests - Filth and Muck, or Gloom, Despondency and Dark, but occasionally, late at night, when the Bogey babies are safely in bed, horror films are shown of sunlight, flowers, cornfields and hot dry beaches with Drycleaners laughing gaily and playing loud music'.

James in adolescence has a strong capacity for irony in his own conversation, as does Richard. Since this trait is quite unusual for Asperger adults, it seems likely that a copious diet of Fungus and similar books has had something to do with this important skill, which makes both of them much better company.

A further reason why Fungus has been so popular for bright autistic children is probably that much of it is in the form of a spoof information book. Where ordinary children may be helped by a storyline to make the informational bits more palatable, for autistic children it is usually the other way round: information is what they like best, and stories about people need too much social empathy to be very rewarding. Once they have understood and accepted that the information here *is itself a joke* (and they may need a year or two of preparation via ordinary jokes and metaphor), this is a format which they are very ready to enjoy. Fungus is one of the most sustained and rich versions of the genre, but there are other spoof information books available, three of the best and simplest being the Ahlbergs' *The Worm Book*, Malcolm Bird's *The Witch's Handbook* and Alan Snow's *How Dogs Really Work*. An adult example, of course, is *The Hitch-Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, to which Richard graduated with pleasure after a helpful period of enjoying science fiction.

'Let's suppose that ...'

For children whose depleted imaginative and symbolic play is very obvious evidence of their inflexible thinking, and whose pretend play has been largely a matter of arranging little cars, trains and landscape material rather than inventing adventures with them, 'just imagine' is not a fruitful suggestion. However, there is no need to give up on the idea of 'pretending'; rather, the need is to find a structure which will make the child feel safe enough to venture out into fantasy. This can be done through the media of conversation, sagas, drawing, puppet sketches and even role-play.

**The other-way-round world** This idea developed out of the kind of conversation which James, Martin, Richard and Ben all find so rewarding: where you take a basically cognitive notion and explore it in 'What if?' terms. It started by James, as usual, going on about his preoccupation of the moment, which happened to be solar systems. Since the adults on holiday with him were becoming healthily bored with the subject, while the children were ignoring him, one of us started to fantasise about another world that hadn't been discovered yet, where everything was 'the other way round': so, cats barked and dogs mewed, fish caught humans on the end of a line with a Mars bar for bait, you went to the doctor saying 'Doctor, doctor, please make me **ill**' (or alternatively, the doctor said to the patient 'Thank goodness you've come, I've got a dreadful stomach-ache') - and so on, ad infinitum. Other adults became amused and interested on this first occasion, and James was swept along by the impetus and started contributing his own ideas. The secret of this work is both that the imaginative element is given a logical cognitive framework (eg if it is an other-way-round world, then such-and-such logically follows), and that the child is caught up in the humour of it. On this occasion the idea became a sort of saga or family joke for the group on holiday; when we came to the last day and held our usual informal concert party, the high spot was a puppet play in which James enacted with his helper the arrival of a boy from Earth on this strange planet, and his conversations with the natives.

Martin at 10 used *The Worm Book* as inspiration for a long project entitled 'What if worms ruled the world?'. As well as rules for people and school curricula, he invented TV programmes and game shows, and other activities that took the worms' point of view. Similar work can be done by parents, often involving siblings without a disability: our own family had an imaginary country which was planned in great detail entirely on long car journeys. This may need some careful supervision to prevent any obsessional features becoming too overpowering for the sibs to enjoy the activity. Richard, like many Asperger people, was preoccupied with justice at the time, and beginning to read rather single-tracked political books; he insisted on a democratic constitution while his sister liked the idea of a benevolent autocracy. Our country ended up being ruled by two prime ministers with different areas of responsibility.

**'What if things were different...'** The simple question of 'what if ....?' can be used effectively for project work or just conversation, without the more worked-out and extended idea of a world or country. The child is simply asked to consider consequences, not in world terms but of one *condition* being different from the familiar one. What if we walked on our hands instead of our feet -what would be the consequences for the furniture? - for clothes? - and so on. What if we could only breathe in water? Again, humour is the oil that lubricates the child's growing flexibility of thought.

**Living dangerously, breaking conventions** Ben at 8 was a child whose life was lived entirely by rules. He draws in amazing perspective, but almost his only subjects then were trains and Volkswagen 'beetles', both of which he could draw from any angle or, in the case of trains, from changing angles. He has his own impressive train layout and a great collection of trains; unfortunately, some of these were out of use because Ben would only run a train which was painted in current British Rail livery, and if British Rail decided to change a livery, another of Ben's trains was put away forever. Similarly, Ben would scream if by accident he came upon a steam train which was no longer in service, perhaps kept on show in a station: 'It doesn't exist!' he would yell in real distress, and his parents learned to avoid such encounters.

Ben collects lots of informational brochures and catalogues on Beetles, and is interested in the various ways they can be customised. This was our cue, because Ben was inclined to be rigid about the choices that were possible, as set out in the customisation brochures. We started by getting Ben to draw an imaginary outing with his therapist; obviously they were to go in a Beetle, but what else could be added into the picture? An increasingly full landscape in which a picnic was taking place was already breaking Ben's rules for a satisfactory picture; but his therapist then decided she wanted Ben to customise the car for her. At first he was inclined to say (rather like any car salesman), 'You can only have that kind of exhaust with this kind of wheel disc' or 'That colour only comes with this type of graphics'; but he found, to his amazement and amusement, that this customer was insistent on having a Beetle such as had never been seen anywhere, though she was willing to take his advice if he could come up with entirely new features. Because Ben liked his therapist, despite considering her a little mad, he accepted her whims - even when she asked for traffic indicators that were totally out of production. Caroline's year with Ben was largely aimed at helping him to throw aside some of the many conventions which caged his way of thinking; his literality was also challenged by work with metaphor, and Ben accepted this, although previously he had been very anxious when his parents used metaphor, and would plead 'Don't say it again!'. On the principle of flooding, repeated metaphor can be less agitating than occasional use.

Ben was the major contributor, 18 months later, to Tim Webb's multi-award-winning animated film, *A is for Autism*, which was a very real collaboration between Tim and a group of adults and children with Asperger's. Every voice on this video, except one, is the voice of an autistic person; the exception is the voice of the mother of two Asperger children, one of whom is Martin. Tim's experience as an animator led him to realise that there was a quality in some Asperger drawings that could lend itself to animation, just as L S Lowry's paintings proved capable of being choreographed (and some people believe Lowry to have been mildly autistic). Unlike the portraits of people which ordinary children tend to produce, children with Asperger's have very different interests. 'My first drawing', says Ben on the soundtrack, 'was of street lights' - and from then on we are into a visual world which gives priority to spinning coins and records, bright doorknobs and water trickles, and the converging perspective lines of stairways, tunnels, buildings and railtracks, from which people are excluded except as hurrying anonymous figures.

Ben drew a series of trains in motion for this film, all of which he animated himself- more than 200 separate drawings. At one point he said 'I'm getting bored' - but quickly refused when told he need do no more. For me, there are moments in the film where, knowing Ben, I can celebrate his increased flexibility and empathy: for instance, the sequence where the scene is drawn from the driver's point of view, which Ben had never experienced. When Ben describes 'an imaginary branch line.....but eventually this leads nowhere', I run up an imaginary flag, remembering how a year earlier he could tolerate nothing imaginary, only the real and concrete.

**What's silly about ...?** The ability to see what is silly or funny about a story or picture demands an awareness of the contrasting but absent non-silly alternative. Abstract thought is involved, and so we are not surprised to find such items in the Stanford Binet intelligence test; but from the Asperger point of view the difficult requirement is flexible thought. Therapists can produce their own drawn, written or spoken materials; the best ready-made examples I know of are the 'What's Wrong Cards' from LDA. There are two sets of about 60 picture cards, one in cartoon form, the other photographic; it is a moot point which are more difficult. They show such scenes as a man with an open umbrella, from inside which the rain is dripping into a pool around his feet; an armchair with human arms; a boy kicking a cauliflower; a woman putting a tray of uncooked cakes into a washing machine; and so on.

These give very good linguistic practice in explaining; but some children also have some difficulty scanning to see what is wrong in the first place, though they may find it very funny when they do see it. Stephen at **II** showed most of his sense of humour in 'what's silly', though he still found puns and metaphor totally obscure.

**On camera: make a speech, grab a persona** Over the years we have frequently used video with children we are working with, in social skills groups, individual projects and on 'independence holidays'. Some of the most useful ideas have come out of the holiday situations, when the children are very much in a mood to enjoy themselves and seem especially relaxed. Many of the valuable 'happenings' we have filmed have been done on the spur of the moment, without thought or preparation by anyone. For instance, a child dressing up as a bride in net curtains triggered an impromptu wedding, for which one Asperger child sang a hymn, another collected the signatures of witnesses, while a third, Paul, gave a short but serious sermon on love and marriage (he had already lectured us at length on the habits of caterpillars and butterflies, his preoccupying topic, so he needed only a little adaptation!).

That same evening, at supper, I invited Paul to say grace, which he did with alacrity, returning to his 'vicar' role. I pushed my luck, asking each of the seven children to do something I thought they could manage, and ending with 'James, get up and make a speech', which I wasn't at all sure he could or would do. James was caught up in the general excitement, stood up on his chair, and delivered an extraordinary harangue for ten minutes on the dangers of creatures from outer space; unsmiling and in full flood, he was able to answer questions from the floor in this serious role, and eventually had to be gently brought to a close. This experience, however, certainly gave him enormous confidence (aged 10); the fact that it had been filmed by our roving video-person somehow proved to him that he could do such things, and was the beginning of an enthusiasm for role play which he took with him into comprehensive school, to the drama staff's astonishment.

Interestingly, videoing this unprepared incident had another spin-off for James; after watching the tape and enjoying the praise for his performance, he asked me privately 'Do I always rock like that?'. Like so many Asperger people, James did tend to rock on his feet when carried away by enthusiasm, and I told him truthfully 'Not always, but quite often'. His response was 'I don't like it, it looks silly'. I suggested 'You could work on that next term if you like', and he gladly accepted. Clearly it is helpful if a child is self-motivated by his own perception of what needs help, and video can achieve this.

Stephen has made two videos, one with himself as a celebrity on a Wogan-type interview, another showing the viewers around his new house and garden; both have stimulated sustained language as well as empathy for the camera-person. Richard at 10 was helped to join his younger sisters 'playing schools' by being allocated the role of visiting lecturer, in which he gave the assembled dolls the benefit of his considerable knowledge of certain preoccupying topics; for the pleasure of doing this, he was prepared to go along with the pretend world of the dolls, which he had regarded as 'silly'. This role was later adapted more flexibly into genuinely helping his sisters with their homework (which required social empathy for their needs), and sowed the seeds for his adult profession as a successful lecturer and consultant in medical statistics.

**Play house, cooking equipment, large dolls and animals, doctor's bags** Autistic children require much greater stimulus from materials than other children if they are to role-play. We find that very realistic cooking equipment in the play house is particularly helpful, especially in the form of many kinds of plastic food (often better from a joke shop than a toyshop, but educational catalogues such as *Step by Step*, and even garden centres for fruit and vegetables, can be good sources). A realistic fried egg and bacon in a small aluminium frying pan is hard to resist. Very large toy animals make the most useful spare actors. We do a good line in 'waiter, waiter' scenes, in which the child is asked to serve a 'meal' to adult and dog; and this gives opportunities for lots of complaints of the dog not liking the food, flies in the soup, etc, which the child can enjoy finding strategies to deal with. 'Doctor, doctor' is an equally fruitful situation; our doctor's bags are temptingly filled with real stethoscopes, kidney bowls and so on, and our large dog has become quite hypochondriacal. The adult, of course, must not mind making a fool of herself in throwing herself into her own actively complementary role!

## 'Advanced' social empathy

As the children grew through adolescence, we have needed to look for more complex and taxing ways of refining their social empathy since they were now capable of this. Many of the group games suggested in drama workshop handbooks, especially the 'non-competitive' games, are suitable for enhancing empathy and can often be adapted for one-to-one work. It is worth looking at the various boxed games in toyshops with social empathy in mind; many of them call for the participant to make a guess at what his opponent is thinking (or is seeing in his or her 'hand'), and such games can present a real challenge to otherwise very able young people. 'Happy Families' and other such card games are good examples, but there are many more novel games which have attractive and amusing features in the way they are presented and therefore keep motivation high through a difficult task: an example is 'Guess Who?' (M and B Games), which involves a board with lots of pop-up faces, has a good logical basis to support the able autistic child, but also demands a degree of empathy which creates a real stumbling block.

The most sophisticated game we have used, and with particular success, has been the adult game of 'Scruples' (Milton Bradley). I first realised the problems, and therefore the potential, of this game when James, on holiday with my family, attempted to play it with us. The game involves the participants considering a series of social or ethical dilemmas (eg. 'You lose an expensive gold watch and are reimbursed by your insurance company. Shortly afterwards you find the watch- do you return the money?') - and then predicting what other participants would say if faced with such a dilemma (in three categories- YES, NO or IT DEPENDS). Scoring can be by correct prediction, but there is room for bluffing, and you may then challenge the other participant by arguing why you believe your prediction is correct, while she defends by argument her own position; the affair is then settled by general vote.

James had great difficulty, as one might expect, with the grey area of 'IT DEPENDS', and never used this to start with, which certainly put him at a disadvantage. This alone would have made the game an attractive one on which to base the following year's programme; but the need to predict other people's views gave still richer promise. On this first occasion James was aghast when I answered 'It depends' to the dilemma of whether I would appear naked on the centrefold of a magazine, and firmly argued that my answer *must* be 'No' because I was 'too old and too fat'. However, he was prepared to consider my argument that it depended on the amount of money offered and (crucially) whether my face would be shown.

The game was eventually adapted to one-to-one play by using 'stand-ins' for other people James knew, and in various forms the structure underpinned a whole year's work which paid off enormously in James's increasing interest in 'how people think and feel' and in personal relationships generally. Some of the benefits were unforeseen. For instance, after a few weeks James pointed out that some of these printed dilemmas (eg 'Your mate has been unfaithful - do you leave him or her?') had little relevance to an adolescent boy like himself, so it was suggested to him that he might like to produce an entirely new set of dilemmas which *were* relevant to him. This exercise, which he much enjoyed, was very valuable in itself: both because it sharpened his own awareness of dilemmas generally, and his in particular, and because it offered the therapist a window on these which James usually kept firmly shut. More important still, however, was that his new list of dilemmas formed the basis for a series of counselling opportunities over the rest of the year: once James had been facilitated by the game's structure to admit to his dilemmas, there no longer seemed an insuperable barrier to putting them on the agenda for much more open discussion.

## Overview and evaluation

The activities that I have discussed have not been evaluated in formal ways; we are still at the stage of working on the problems that present by whatever means we can. Given that we started by taking account of the underlying deficits of autism in quite direct ways, we would expect some measure of success. Perhaps the first measure is in simple terms of survival in mainstream: all the children named except Paul, with whom we have only had brief holiday contact, have coped in mainstream school, and those old enough to take public examinations have been successful. The oldest, whose initial presentation in terms of stereotypes and obsessional behaviour was at the 'severe' extreme of our Asperger research sample, is now also the most successful in terms of academic and job achievement following sustained interventions of these kinds; and James so far has done extremely well academically, despite a severity of condition that necessitated a specialist school for his first three years; younger children seem very much on a similar course.

However, we are aware that this has been a small group of children who were fortunate enough to live close to a university research group specialising in pervasive developmental disorders, which also had the luxury of including this kind of contact as part of the curriculum for developmental psychology postgraduates. Much more beneficial would be to introduce such activities into the remedial programme offered within the mainstream schools where most Asperger children should be receiving support that allows for one-to-one contact periods.

Most of what has been described has in fact taken place on a one-to-one basis, and this has often seemed crucial in making it possible to monitor closely the child's appreciation of humour, with a rapid response to any difficulty. It must be evident that most of the time we have been dependent on the child's goodwill, which has itself been earned through his perception of the enjoyable possibilities of humour. Thus what we have been asking of the child has never really seemed like 'learning asocially'; and in fact there have been many examples of the child tolerating the learning because he found our aims and behaviour amusing. The social relationship, *facilitated* by humour, has been an essential thread in the 'therapeutic strand' that Christie identifies as a necessity for the successful education of a child with autism.

Nonetheless, there have been times when a small group, usually including other children with autism and their support workers, has given an impetus of excitement not otherwise available, and it has been clear that children have been carried along on a wave of shared enthusiasm. James's rousing speech at the supper-table would have been unlikely in one-to-one; so would Paul's sustained role-play as vicar, without a wedding and a respectful audience. The 'concert-party' performances on the last day of our 'independence holidays' often seemed the result of what we came to call 'excitement therapy'; with only one hour for each child and helper to plan their contribution, being swept along could be crucial to success. When David, an autistic child with moderate learning difficulties, animatedly performed with his helper a slapstick dialogue between two furry animal glove puppets, it was not until the following day that we learned from his parents, as they watched the video, that 'David *never* touches fur. How did you get him to do that?'. We had no answer; all we had done was to say 'Quick, quick David- we're on!

The mainstream school with keyworker support, so necessary (if we take the long-term view) in ensuring usable qualifications for job prospects in later life for Asperger people, would seem ideally placed to provide the enhanced curriculum the child requires. However, it does need flexibility and social empathy, as well as a sense of humour, from those who plan the Asperger child's support, and a realisation that these qualities are wholly appropriate ingredients for a broad, balanced *and relevant* education. Is that too much to ask?

#### References

Ahlberg, J and A (Reprinted 1991)	<u>The Worm Book</u> , Armada Paperbacks.
" " (1976)	<u>The Old Joke Book</u> , Penguin Books
Bird, Malcolm (1984)	<u>The Witch's Handbook</u> , NY: St Martin's Press
Briggs, Raymond (1977)	<u>Fungus the Bogeyman</u> , Hamish Hamilton, London.
Collis, L (1978)	Things we say, London: Thurman Publishing
Snow, A (1993)	<u>How Dogs Really Work</u> , Harper .Collins, London
Webb, T (1992)	A is For Autism (video), London: Finetake Productions. Distributor: Connoisseur Video