

Here's What's Different About Us!

Fostering Play and Friendships for Individuals on the Autism Spectrum

We hope you enjoy reading Friend 2 Friend Social Learning Society's Spring 2011 issue of "Here's What's Different About Us!" Please forward this newsletter to other friends, family or members of your organization.



REGISTER NOW FOR OUR UPCOMING CONFERENCE!

Fostering Peer Play & Friendships for Children & Teens on the Autism Spectrum

October 21st & 22nd, 2011.
Vancouver, BC

Early Registration Ends June 30, 2011!!!



Register on-line at:

www.friend2friendsociety.org/calendar/seminars/

The Pop Culture of Autism

By Joanne McCartney-Prest, MA

The Boy Who Could Fly, Molly, David's Mother, and Rain Man. What do these characters have in common? They were all the title characters in movies about individuals with autism, released in the 1980s & 90s. All of these movies did a good job of ensuring that we at Friend 2 Friend Social Learning Society would have jobs "demystifying the world," as Heather puts it, for some time to come. The characters with ASD in these movies were all based on a deficit model of autism, often an unrealistic caricature of any and all characteristics of autism the writers could find to throw together into one person. Based on these depictions, it is not surprising that there are so many misconceptions about autism (see "McCartney's Myths" in previous newsletters). Thankfully, it appears that Hollywood is finally figuring things out.

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AVAILABLE NOW!!

"Can I Play Too?"

Package includes:

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By Joanne McCartney-Prest, MA

Let's "Let the Cat Out of the Bag!" Disclosure: A Place to Start

By Heather McCracken



The Pop Culture of Autism (continued from Page 1)

At an Integrated Play Groups® model (IPG) conference hosted by F2F in 2009, one of the attendees asked Pamela Wolfberg creator of the IPG model for recommendations of TV shows or movies depicting individuals with ASD. As I recall, the response was short. *The Big Bang Theory*. It has since become one of my favourite shows and although the writers have not officially labeled one of main characters named “Sheldon” as being on the spectrum, the characteristics are quite recognizable and he is amazingly well-written and portrayed (earning an Emmy and a Golden Globe for the actor, Jim Parsons). It seems that the rest of Hollywood is following suit, with the movies *Adam* and *Temple Grandin* and TV shows such as *Parenthood*, *Community*, and *Grey's Anatomy* all depicting characters with autism fairly accurately and as contributing members of society.



So what has changed? Why, in the last few years, are we seeing such a shift in La La land? Perhaps with the increased incidence of autism there are more celebrity parents of children with ASD to lead the way. Perhaps there are more individuals on the spectrum contributing in the entertainment business and speaking out about their unique kinds of minds. Perhaps Heather's plan to demystify the world is starting to work! Regardless, it's refreshing and I hope they keep it up. It would certainly make our jobs easier. While we at F2F are busy “demystifying the world” I highly recommend checking out some of the movies or television shows mentioned above. You might just find yourself demystified.



A New Friend...

Heather McCracken and Nelson Tao are working in partnership to develop the first intervention centre in Beijing, China to offer both the Friend 2 Friend Autism Demystification Programs and Integrated Play Groups. Stay tuned for more news or check out our website at www.friend2friendsociety.org for updates.

Let's “Let the Cat Out of the Bag!” Disclosure: A Place to Start

By Heather McCracken

In our home a spade has always been called a spade, or as my son puts it, “an autistic individual”. This piece of information is just a fact in our lives - one of many facts. Perhaps our attitude has to do with my upbringing. My father was visually impaired. The white cane he carried at all times was his eyes. As a child, friends often asked me questions about him and I always answered them honestly and directly. Imagine if I had answered their questions by saying something like, “Oh, he carries that cane because he likes to carry canes.” in an effort to “hide” his unique needs or my feelings of embarrassment.

But autism is an invisible disability and that is perhaps the reason many people (especially parents) feel they should not disclose that their child is on the autism spectrum. I firmly believe in a family's or an individual's right to walk their own path and make their own decisions and choices. However, the decision to keep the diagnosis of autism from the individual on the autism spectrum worries me because I have seen the cost of keeping this secret on the families and especially the individuals when this secret comes out. And like most secrets, it usually does come out.

In our previous issue of the Friend 2 Friend Newsletter we provided readers with the article “To Disclose or Not to Disclose? That is the Question”. This article provided several questions to ask yourself if you are like the many parents trying to decide if, when and where to tell your child that he or she has autism. (See www.friend2friendsociety.org/newsletter for full article.)

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Let's "Let the Cat Out of the Bag!" Disclosure: A Place to Start (cont'd from Page 2)



In this article we look at how to "let the cat out of bag" so to speak and provide helpful tips and suggestions on how to begin the life-long process of disclosure for individuals on the autism spectrum.

The *Friend 2 Friend Demystification Model* views disclosure as a living process, not a one-time event or action. Self examination or "getting to know oneself" takes a lifetime for most of us, and this is no different for individuals on the autism spectrum. The ultimate goal of the process is to promote healthy self-esteem, acceptance of oneself, and the ability to communicate one's needs to others. Therefore, disclosure should be a process that begins as soon as the individual has the label of autism, with discussion and support continuing throughout the person's life.

The disclosure process begins in simple forms, such as reading children's books about individuals with differences or watching programs or movies that represent individuals on the autism spectrum as positive, happy, functioning individuals. Modeling acceptance, and adapting our language and behaviour to demonstrate respect for "different kinds of minds" is also important and hopefully ends when your child can to someone, "Could you please repeat that, I have autism so I don't process language as fast as other people do."

The *Friend 2 Friend Autism Demystification Programs* can also be used in the process of disclosure. The *Can I Play Too? Autism Demystification Puppet Program*, designed for individuals ages 3-12, or *Demystifying Autism: The Friend 2 Friend Simulation Game Program*, designed for individuals ages 12-18, can be used as a tool to start the process of disclosure with individuals on the autism spectrum, their peer groups, extended family members or your community at large.

What follows is a brief list of steps in supporting an individual on the autism spectrum to better understanding their own unique kind of mind by using the *Can I Play Too? Autism Demystification Puppet Program* to either begin the process or continue the learning.

The *Can I Play Too? Autism Demystification Puppet Packaged Program* includes a DVD of the puppet play entitled "Can I Play Too?" and the What did Roger Learn? Puppet Review of the learning goals introduced in the play. The package also contains an implementation manual, 5 colouring/story books that are adapted from the puppet play, and a printable materials CD. When implementing the program as a disclosure program with an individual on the autism spectrum we suggest the following steps: *(please notes these steps can be implemented verbally, with support of visuals and by using augmentative communication techniques depending on the learning style of the individual)*

- Watch the *Can I Play Too?* DVD with your child.
- Identify for your child how **you** are like or unlike the characters/puppets in the puppet play.
- Help your child identify how he/she may be like or unlike any of the characters/puppets in the play.
- Discuss the concept of "different kinds of minds" as introduced in the puppet play.
- Help your child identify his/her affinities and challenges. Link these (if possible) to the characters in the puppet play.
- Talk about your affinities and your challenges, relating back to the characters in the play whenever possible.
- Begin to use the affirmative language included in the *Can I Play Too?* program in your home and when you are out in the community. Examples: "I have the kind of mind", "affinities", etc.
- Encourage school-based and home-based teams to use the same language.
- Watch a variety of TV shows, movies and cartoons that highlight unique differences in individuals.
- Support your child to design their own friendship tips (prosocial communication strategies) and share those tips with family and friends.

When practiced over time, we believe this approach will help your child recognize, understand and express his or her unique kind of mind to you and others.

Remember: You know your child best so trust your instincts!

Kid Quote...

"I've done vigorous testing of the 7 Friendship Tips and they don't work on girls!"

Jack, Grade 6 student, Fall 2010
F2F-Integrated Play Groups® Program