Call Me Different,

When I was asked to write an article for this issue about teaching kids with autism, I thought, who better to tell that tale than me? I grew up with undiagnosed autism in the 1960s, so I have a first-person understanding of what it's like. I've also raised a child with Asperger syndrome, so I've seen autism from the parent's point of view. I jumped at the chance to offer my ideas in the hope that tomorrow's teachers may have more success than the ones who tried to educate me and my son.

A Special Kind of Teacher

The first step toward connecting and succeeding with kids with autism is to accept that we are different, not "difficult." Frankly, if you cannot get past this hurdle, one or the other of us needs to be in a different school. It is a rare autistic child who sets his mind on being difficult. However, if you are neurotypical, every autistic person sees the world very differently from you. That neurological difference may make it harder to teach us, but it's the situation that's challenging, not the person.

Not everyone can accept that. Although both my son and I attended "progressive" schools, most of our teachers were not supportive. In my case, they had some excuse because Asperger syndrome was not recognized when I was in school. With my son (who is now 22), the situation should have been different. Unfortunately, it wasn't. Rather than embrace or accept his difference, the school fought tooth and nail to resist any sort of education accommodation.
Leveled Literacy Intervention

**BENCHMARK LEVEL GAINS**

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**Proven Results for Struggling Readers**

Independent empirical study confirms the effectiveness of Fountas & Pinnell Leveled Literacy Intervention K–2, Levels A–N.

- Average student gains of 5 benchmark levels
- Substantial gains by ELL, Special Education, Hispanic, African American and economically disadvantaged students

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Give struggling readers the boost they need as grade-level reading demands increase

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- Novel study to support sustained reading of literature
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They told me he was lazy and implied he just wasn’t smart. Like many parents, I simply gave up on school because we couldn’t afford private education and it took too much energy to fight these educators’ smiling, steadfast, deliberate obstructionism.

Today, I understand that some people just are not accepting of folks who are different. Any parent who has fought with a school over a child’s special needs has experienced this lack of acceptance firsthand. If this fact surprises you, I invite you to take a tour of the various special needs parenting forums on the Internet. The rage parents express toward schools is palpable. If those forums are any indication, the special education system in the United States is not working to many parents’ satisfaction.

Autistic kids say and do some pretty peculiar things, and it takes an exceptional teacher to roll with our twists and turns and keep things moving with a smile and a bounce. If you’re not one of those people, it’s OK! Your skills are surely needed elsewhere in the world of education. If I’ve learned one thing in my 50-some years, it is this: Don’t try to be something you are not.

Begin with Understanding
I know all too well how challenging educating autistic kids can be. Teachers ask us questions, and we ignore them. They spell out our assignment, and we do something totally different. When the time comes for class discussions, our questions have nothing to do with the topic at hand. It’s enough to drive anyone crazy—even me, a fellow autistic person!

The thing is, as strange as our responses may seem to others, they often make perfect sense to us. Kids with autism will often tend to get drawn into minutiae, losing sight of the original task.

For example, in junior high school, I was supposed to write a report on Panama. Being a geek, I became fascinated by the canal and its locks, which are a great triumph of engineering. I discovered that the tallest gates, at Miraflores, are 65 feet wide and 82 feet tall, and weigh more than 700 tons each. Yet the gates are so well mounted and balanced that two electric motors are able to swing them open and shut.

Because we have a hard time reading unspoken messages from other people, we often can’t tell if you are happy, sad, or even angry.
Naturally, I wrote my report about the lock gates because it took two pages to tell their story and anyone could see they were the most interesting thing about Panama. My teacher disagreed: "This is a report on gates, and I asked for a report on Panama." Although I felt that I had the best paper in the class, I got an F—and I had no idea why.

Autism is a communication disorder. Researchers say that 60-80 percent of the content in any conversation is expressed nonverbally. Those messages include most of the emotion and a fair part of the logical directions as well. People with autism may be oblivious to some or even all of that unspoken material. Sometimes we miss so much, and seem to ignore you so completely, that you think we're deaf. But our ears work, just not the way you expect them to.

Because we have a hard time reading nonverbal messages from other people, we often can't tell if they are happy, sad, or even angry. Disabling as that can be for us, it can also be hurtful to others. If you approach me feeling sad and I continue playing a video game with seeming indifference, you might understandably be upset. Yet we don't mean to ignore you; we are just oblivious to your state of mind.

Friendship is a great mystery to many of us. I recall being on the playground as a small child, hearing teachers say, "Just leave John alone. He prefers to be by himself." Nothing could have been more wrong. I wanted friends more than anything; I just didn't know how to make them. I played next to the same kid in the sandbox every day for three months. I thought of him as my friend, even though we never had a conversation. However, he didn't see me the same way, and hearing him say that I wasn't his friend hurt me deeply.

People with autism often have challenges with spoken words, written words, or both. Just as we can hear but not understand, we can read without comprehending. When it comes to language, we may be delayed when we have trouble making sense of words. However, once we figure them out, or sort out our minds, we are often quick studies. The secret lies in helping us find the keys to unlock the riddles of written and spoken language.

That's what happened with my son. At age 7, he could barely read; five years later, he read at a post-college level. It was Harry Potter that precipitated that change. My son wanted so much to read that huge, daunting book that he stared and concentrated, and some switch flipped in his mind. At the beginning of summer vacation, he had an unread book and plenty of time. By the end, he'd mastered every book in the Harry Potter series. That fall, we sent him to an intensive tutoring center to solidify his gains. He never had a reading problem again.

One thing you and your students can take hope from is this: Autism is a condition that gets better with age. The older we get, the more strategies we learn to minimize our disabilities, and the better we can blend in.

Six Rules for Helping
As a teacher, you can play a big part in helping your students discover themselves and learn those all-important adaptations. I've assembled a few rules that may help. When you consider how to apply these rules, however, remember that every autistic kid is different. If you have five kids in a class with autism diagnoses, they may well have five totally different sets of challenges and gifts. Those differences complicate the task of teaching because the things that succeed with one kid may fall flat for another.

Rule 1: Tell students exactly what you want, and say exactly what you mean. Our autism makes it hard for us to understand things that seem self-evident to you. For example, you might point to one side of the room, and every other kid gets the message and goes and sits over there. We don't understand nonverbal cues, so we're left standing in the middle of the room, alone and scared because all the kids went somewhere else and we don't know why.

When giving directions, first make
Rule 2: Be consistent and predictable. Remember that we have great difficulty understanding social dynamics. Therefore, we feel most comfortable and safe when things happen in a smooth, predictable way so that we can anticipate the flow of events. Most kids like variety, especially in school, where it breaks up boredom. Not us! We want to know that art class will always happen at 10:00 a.m. on Tuesday or that we will always sit in a certain spot in the lunchroom at 12:15.

You comfort a kid with autism the same way you make friends with a skittish pet. Move slowly, speak kindly and gently, and don’t do anything unpredictable. (Actually, that strategy works with most kids, but it’s particularly effective for us.)

Rule 3: Be flexible in your conversational responses.

When a kid says something totally off the wall, follow his lead. Sometimes our responses seem disconnected because our mind really is somewhere else. Other times, we say unexpected things because we see the world differently.

In a typical conversation, you might say, “I went to a really good movie last night” and expect me to ask about the actors or the story. But if movies are not on my mind, I might answer with a monologue about my current science project. This usually leads to failed interactions with other kids, who ridicule us when we don’t follow their social lead. When they laugh or turn away, we’re sad and confused.

Adults, however, usually have the mental agility to follow our unexpected responses. Adults can stay connected, and that can mean a great deal. But even more important, adults can help us learn how to give appropriate responses in different social settings and can explain why we need to do so.

Rule 4: Expect good manners.

All too often, I visit schools where the kids in special ed are bouncing off the walls, a pack of ill-behaved beasts. When I ask why, the teachers tell me the kids have autism, as if that excuses their behavior. Sure, autism makes it hard to act the way others expect. Sure, we say and do inappropriate things. We also pay a high price for those behaviors—people call us names, make fun of us, and leave us isolated and alone.

That hurts. We don’t want to be rejected. No one does.

The best way to avoid being rejected is to stop acting weird. You will never get into trouble by keeping your mouth shut, nor will you ever be criticized for saying please or thank you. The idea that kids with autism can’t learn manners is ridiculous. The more polite your students are, the more successful they will be.

Rule 5: Pay attention to sensory issues.

Years ago, observers assumed that people with autism were essentially deaf and blind, not sensing the world around us much at all. “He’s in his own world,” was a popular refrain.

Recent scientific studies have shown how wrong that idea is. Often, autistic people have sharply heightened senses compared with their neurotypical peers. We may have the ability to distinguish individual cars from the roar of the freeway. We might see a million shades of color where others see a red wall.

At the same time, we may not have the ability to communicate that exceptional sensitivity; indeed, we may just assume it’s ordinary.

Sometimes our sensory sensitivities are a gift. An ability to see into music might help one of us to become a successful recording engineer or symphony conductor. It was autism that gave me the intense focus to unravel music and create unique tools to shape

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and process it. That led to success in my first career, when I worked as a sound engineer for KISS and many other big bands of the 1970s. But this overpowering stream of sensory data can be overwhelming for some; what seems like a gift one moment can become a crushing disability the next.

Then there is the flip side—sensory oblivion. Even if we have exceptional hearing, we may concentrate so deeply that we unconsciously “turn off” our ears. We may stand right in front of a flashing red light, and not even notice it’s there. Hard to believe, I know, but I’ve done it myself.

Rule 6: Be sensitive to our state of mind, even if we seem oblivious to yours.

You may be relaxed and cheerful; at peace with the world. Sadly, few autistic people share that feeling, especially in school.
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When autistic kids are asked to describe their feelings, the two most common emotions are anxiety and fear. Neurotypical people send one another nonverbal signals for reassurance. Autistic people, who don’t receive the unspoken messages, may live in a state of perpetual anxiety as we struggle to follow an ever-shifting world where any new person may be a threat. No wonder that when I watch kids with autism in school, so many of them have the “wary animal” look I remember from my own childhood.

It’s important to remember that an inability to read other people is one of the key elements of an autism diagnosis, but we may hide that weakness very well. Adults often look at us and say, “He’s so serious,” when in fact we are rolling with emotion. The knowledge that we can’t see what is obvious to others is often humiliating, so you should approach this area with sensitivity.

Beacons of Hope
With all these challenges, it’s easy to see how teachers get discouraged. Just remember that no one saw the promise in me when I was little. You have no idea which of your misfit kids will grow up to be the next superstar scientist, literary genius, or software designer.

Autism has always been with us. Its challenges shape us as a society and as individuals. Its gifts bring us the technologies and creative works that set us apart. Your job is to help your students discover those gifts, while minimizing the pain of disability and helping them find their way.

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