

me@the-sun.co.uk

time

## NEW BOOK TO SHATTER MYTHS ABOUT RAINMAN CONDITION

By NATASHA HARDING

THINK of autism and you may recall Dustin Hoffman's turn in the movie *Rain Man*, based on real-life savant Kim Peek.

But not all people diagnosed with autism are maths wizards. And the disorder, which is typically but not always detected in early childhood, affects as many as one child in 100. Rates are rising, too.

There are many stereotypes that don't reflect the broad spectrum of strengths and challenges facing people with autism.

Sesame Street's new character Julia has the condition. Producers of the kids' TV show introduced her to boost awareness and understanding of autism.

Jonathan Alderson has spent 20 years studying autism. His new book *Challenging The Myths Of Autism* aims to set the record straight about some common misconceptions relating to the condition.

He has some exclusive extracts.

## 1. THE MYTH OF AFFECTION

**The myth:** Children with autism avoid and can't share affection.

**The implications:** Parents, mothers especially, are blamed for not being affectionate enough and torture themselves trying to identify what they may have done or not done to cause their child's autism.

Some parents may not seek a diagnosis for their child's autism because they feel the child is "too affectionate" to be autistic.

Autistic children and adults can be negatively portrayed as "less than human".

**The truth:** Some autistic children do reject affectionate gestures such as hugs and tickles and may go limp when picked up - not because they don't want affection but because of sensory processing disorder issues. Many autistic people enjoy affection as much as anyone else but, like most of us, it must be on their terms.

Until recently, scientists have not understood much about the biology and physiology of affection. People with autism might experience senses (sight, touch, sound, smell) differently.

For some, it is the complex, unpredictable nature of human relationships they wish to avoid.

**What you can do:** Be accepting and understanding if they push away. Build trust by moving slowly and communicating. Say: "I'm going to give you a hug."

Take time to discover their unique need for affection (hugs, verbal praise or a handshake).

## 2. RITUALS (REPETITIVE BEHAVIOUR)

**The myth:** Repetitious behaviours (pacing back and forth, lining objects in a row) are non-functional and should be stopped.

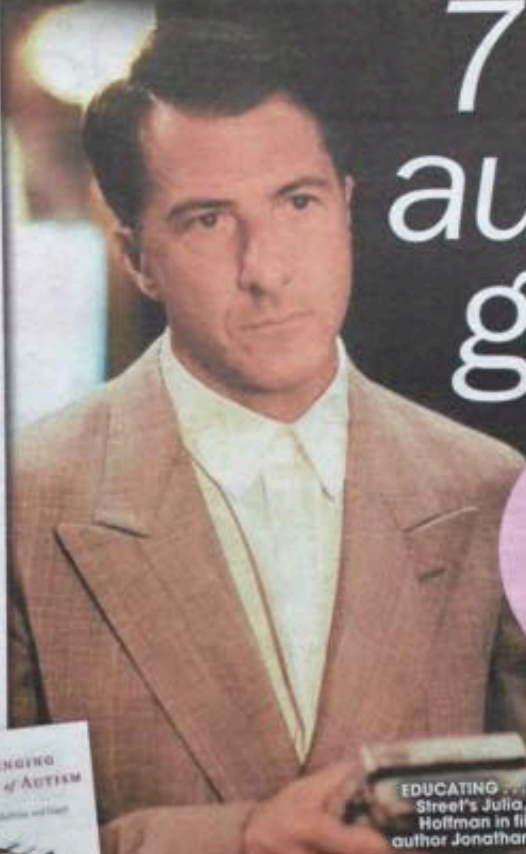
**The implications:** Blocking another person's will/needs hinders co-operation and understanding. How motivated would you be to talk to someone bigger than you who stopped your movements against your will? Being judged harshly hurts.

**The truth:** Saying "no" or physically stopping a child may limit the behaviour for a ping a child may limit the behaviour for a while but doesn't work long-term. Repetitious behaviour can be a bridge to insights, understanding and acceptance. It may have an underlying biological trigger.

**What you can do:** A non-judgmental attitude reduces anxiety and resistance. Try limiting the behaviour to show acceptance and interest.

## 3. SOCIALISATION

**The myth:** Children with autism should be pushed to socialise as early as possible.



## 7 'signs of autism' we got wrong

## WHAT IS IT?

- Autism is diagnosed by a group of behavioural symptoms which range from mild to moderate to severe
- Experts do not agree on a cause but genetic studies have identified a few genes that may make a child more susceptible to autism - although it is not caused by genes alone
- No consensus on how to treat it, but the most researched approach is behaviour therapy



EDUCATING... Sesame Street's Julia, Dustin Hoffman in film and author Jonathan Alderson



**The implications:** When a child is put into an environment they aren't ready for, it's stressful and isolating.

**The truth:** Social learning requires base-skills such as observation, imitation and social motivation, which often aren't in place when children with autism are placed in socialisation groups. The fastest way to teach these base-skills is through one-on-one, adult-led interaction.

**What you can do:** Teach base-skills first and practise in larger groups second.

## 4. EVIDENCE

**The myth:** Applied behaviour modification (ABA), previously called behaviour modification, is the only evidence-based treatment.

**The implications:** Many therapists are trained to do ABA only and shun other methods, limiting the choices for parents. Only half of children respond well to ABA but it gets almost all the funding.

**The truth:** ABA is no longer the only evidence-based treatment for autism but it has the most evidence to support it. Many children respond well to non-ABA treatments including play, speech and occupational therapies.

**What you can do:** Stay up to date with

progress. Use facts, not fear, when choosing treatment.

## 5. INTELLIGENCE

**The myth:** Most children with autism have mental retardation.

**The implications:** Parents and therapists are less likely to look for the strengths, creativity and communication that is possible.

**The truth:** IQ scores and measures of intelligence are not used to diagnose autism and there is evidence that as a child with autism gets older their IQ score will increase. A person who cannot control a pencil may not complete the questions on a test but could still be very intelligent.

**What you can do:** Accommodate cognitive differences. Intelligence isn't always obvious at first and is expressed in different forms.

## 6. THE "FIVE-YEAR WINDOW"

**The myth:** Children with autism lose their chance to change once they turn five.

**The implications:** Terrible pressure on parents. Most funding goes to "early intervention" with far less invested in treatment beyond five years of age.

**The truth:** Supporting children's development as early as possible is a good idea. Families facing a lifetime of caring for and

parenting a child with autism need hope and support, not fear. Many autistic people learn through their lives into adulthood.

**What you can do:** Look for evidence of learning.

Don't pressure parents or child. Support continuing education as much as possible.

## 7. IMAGINATION

**The myth:** Children with autism lack imagination and creativity.

**The implications:** When we impose structured learning routines, we squashed opportunities to explore so imagination can't mature. It's a self-fulfilling myth.

**The truth:** Treatment focuses so heavily on teaching "appropriate behaviour" that creativity is squashed. Few programs provide time for unstructured play. Children with autism have the ability to grow imagination.

**What you can do:** Look for imagination beyond speaking. Non-verbal children still be imaginative. Be a supportive coach by choosing toys and materials that invite exploration.

● *Challenging The Myths Of Autism* by Jonathan Alderson is out now (Harper360, £9.99)

## STEVE UNCOVERS THE TALE OF TWO TRIBES

STEVE SILBERMAN has spent

young patients seemed to inhabit private worlds, ignoring

patients of his own who seemed strangely out of touch with other people, including their own

treatment of people with autism. Silberman's phenomenal book goes a long way to uncovering some of the myths





Jonathan Alderson, Ed.M

**The implications:** When a child is put into an environment they aren't ready for, it's stressful and isolating.

**The truth:** Social learning requires base-skills such as observation, imitation and social motivation, which often aren't in place when children with autism are placed in socialisation groups. The fastest way to teach these base-skills is through one-on-one, adult-led interaction.

**What you can do:** Teach base-skills first and practise in larger groups second.

#### 4. EVIDENCE

**The myth:** Applied behaviour analysis (ABA), previously called behaviour modification, is the only evidence-based treatment.

**The implications:** Many therapists are trained to do ABA only and shun other methods, limiting the choices for parents. Only half of children respond well to ABA but it gets almost all the funding.

**The truth:** ABA is no longer the only evidence-based treatment for autism but it has the most evidence to support it. Many children respond well to non-ABA treatments including play, speech and occupational therapies.

**What you can do:** Stay up to date with

progress. Use facts, not fear, when choosing treatment.

#### 5. INTELLIGENCE

**The myth:** Most children with autism have mental retardation.

**The implications:** Parents and therapists are less likely to look for the strengths, creativity and communication that is possible.

**The truth:** IQ scores and measures of intelligence are not used to diagnose autism and there is evidence that as a child with autism gets older their IQ score will increase. A person who cannot control pencil may not complete the questions or test but could still be very intelligent.

**What you can do:** Accommodate cognitive differences. Intelligence isn't always obvious at first and is expressed in different for

#### 6. THE "FIVE-YEAR WINDOW"

**The myth:** Children with autism lose the chance to change once they turn five.

**The implications:** Terrible pressure on parents. Most funding goes to "intervention" with far less invested treatment beyond five years of age.

**The truth:** Supporting children's development as early as possible is a good idea. Families facing a lifetime of caring for

...DISCOVERS THE TALE OF TWO