

Inclusion Can Be a Wonderful Thing

By Jason Oldford

I must confess that I'm starting to get a case of writer's block, but thanks to some suggestions sent my way I can come up with a good topic to write about during Autism Awareness Month, so I chose inclusion (or inclusivity; call it what you will). We'll focus this submission on schools and the workplace.

Let's start with schools. In a lot of activities in schools, especially elementary ones, the students have to pick a partner. Autistic students can be shy and be afraid of choosing a partner for fear that they'll be told no (they are scared of rejection). My advice would be for teachers to assign a partner to such students or maybe introduce the autistic student to a classmate and encourage him/her to ask if that student would be their partner. Partners are sought in a lot of elementary school classes, including gym and art. Later on, students do science labs and they'll need a lab partner, but sometimes teachers just assign those. In gym class in high school students have to choose square dance partners—yet another unpleasant situation for a student on the spectrum.

Some autistic students are lucky enough to move on to university and get a degree, then a decision has to be made: go to graduate school or try to enter the workforce. Once someone on the spectrum enters the workforce they may be in situations where they have to be part of a team working on a project. Yes, there are some people who won't want to work with them because they think they're "different," but once they get on the team everyone is amazed at what they can do and what team players they are and the contributions they can make. Moreover, often they can detect problems that the rest of the team can't.

Bottom line: Autistic people can be very shy and, because of that, afraid to choose partners in scholastic or professional settings. It's always a good idea for teachers and employers to assign partners to such people, the line of thought being "He/she is afraid to approach people; I'll let them try and if they can't find a partner, I'll assign one." Even in Toastmasters I was afraid to choose someone to evaluate one of my speeches. I got over it and found someone but if that person had to cancel, I'd be downcast. It's like "back to square one. I wonder what the next person will say." That aside, though, fellow students and co-workers should be happy to welcome someone on the spectrum onto their teams. They'd be surprised at what they can contribute, and inclusion can indeed be a wonderful thing.



About the Author

My name is Jason Oldford. I work as a translator for Lionbridge. I have been on the autism spectrum since the 1970s, and back then not much was known about autism. I learned to read by the time I turned three so I guess you could say I got a head start as I entered school. I was a year late doing that, but it was for the better.

Although I am one of your shy, introverted types of autistics, I do have a knack for memorizing things like license plate numbers, dates, facts and figures, and I fell in love with pop music at a young age. I love listening to countdown shows from the 80s, remembering the old songs, and being able to count them down from 20 to 1 with computer-chip accuracy (and remembering the numbers of some memorable tunes further down the charts).”