

Learning Secrets From Autism

**600,000
people lie
on the autism
spectrum in the
UK. That is nearly
1% of the whole
population.**

We must start learning now...

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Learning in autism

Try to describe the many rules of English language or the many movements you make when kicking a football. Do you remember sitting down and learning when you should speak and when you should listen; when you should laugh and when you should frown; or when you should look someone in the eye and when you should not?

Many language, movement and social skills such as these are difficult to describe and are typically learned without trying. This suggests that they are easy for people to learn. Curiously, autistic individuals have trouble with precisely these skills.

Yet, sometimes they can learn effortlessly where other people have great difficulty. For example, some autistic individuals have been able to tell the day of the week for any date many years into the future or to memorise whole train timetables.

Clearly, the way autistic individuals learn is unusual. Studying their learning patterns in carefully controlled tasks allows us to establish why this might be so.

What is at stake?

Autism fundamentally affects social interaction and communication. As a result, autistic individuals and their families can face profound challenges in completing apparently mundane everyday tasks.

Learning how to overcome such challenges is incredibly important for autistic people's quality of life. Understanding the strengths and weaknesses of their learning styles can help future treatments and interventions to achieve this.

This research can also help us understand how learning processes typically develop.

Why must we be cautious?

- The disorder spans a wide spectrum of behaviour. However, we are only able to work with more able individuals. Will our findings generalise?
- The disorder is the product of abnormal development throughout childhood. Yet, we only work with an individual for a few hours. Are we able to incorporate this developmental complexity?
- Individuals with autism experience the world very differently to other people. Are we sure they are willing participants and not distressed by our tasks?

By being vigilant of such pitfalls, we have made a successful start: we now know that unintentional learning is not always impaired in autism. On a range of our tasks children with and without autism performed equivalently. We must keep learning.