

Autism Spectrum Conference

8-11 October 2008, Coff's Harbour, NSW.

Report

Tracey Puckeridge

Coffs Harbour

Casuarina Steiner School in Coffs Harbour, NSW was proud to host a conference on the Autism Spectrum in October last year. In particular we wanted to delve deeper into the Anthroposophical view of autism and how as teachers, we can more fully understand how children living with autism cope and understand their world and what can teachers do to help them on their journey. **Barbara**

Baldwin was invited as the keynote speaker and she gave us wonderful insights into understanding the world of Autism. Barbara is a European trained curative educator and speech pathologist, who has worked as a therapist, educational consultant and co-director in various anthroposophical curative communities and Steiner Schools in Europe and Australia.

The following insights arose from the conference:

All the disabilities we know of are part of the human condition but have become fixed. A disability is a part of normal development that has been arrested at some point.

Autism	Ego impediment.
Aspergers Syndrome	Astral impediment
ADHD	Etheric impediment
Downs Syndrome /Cerebral Palsy/ Dyspraxia	Physical impediment

Children with Autism are locked into their head forces. Their Ego is not always available to them. Teachers need to engage their Ego so they can integrate their Ego into their physical, etheric and astral bodies. To do this certain activities can help, such as walking forwards and backwards in a straight line, rather than losing oneself in the periphery. This is an individual activity, not with whole class and should be done with an adult so the child can stimulate their own Ego.

Teachers should observe their behaviour. What is their need? What/how can we meet their need? Most behaviours are due to the child trying to minimise the stress they constantly feel as they try to make sense of their world. Children with autism have difficulty with the sensory environment and their 12 senses are often over or under stimulated. Rather than stop behaviours, teachers should look at the environment and see what can be changed to diminish their behaviours, which are most likely stress related.

A teacher should try to make activities purposeful so that the child with Autism finds dignity in the task. Assess what the child can and can't do and help them to achieve in small steps. If a child is having difficulty with the over stimulation of a classroom, then be realistic about what the child can cope with and find a place for them to go to find a sense of calm.

Barbara spoke of autism being a shock for the spirit at the point of descent into earthly being. She explained this can be like an over knowing of the life to come

and so the spirit retreats at the point of incarnating into the physical body. This can explain why Autism is seen as an Ego impediment. At age 2-3 the ego forces lift out rather than come in which is why there is often the loss of language at this age. The Ego has not penetrated and so a child with autism usually cannot speak in the early years and does not say "I" at the age of 3.

How can we help the body be the instrument of the spirit's destiny? Maybe those who are most difficult are those who are struggling the most to find their way into their bodies. Love, respect and understanding will help bring them out.

Barbara spoke at length about the senses, as children with Autism have difficulty with sensory experiences. Sensory activity is part of Ego integration. A child with autism has difficulty with sensory experiences. The sense of touch allows a child to feel its own boundary and body geography and gives them a sense of self, but a child with autism has a disturbance of boundary. They may not identify themselves with their own body. The child may not know itself or see itself as separate from the environment.

The more we use our senses, the more they help us integrate into our Ego and make distinctions of the world and differentiations in the world. Children with autism have greater sensory disturbances eg. touch, hearing (pitch, volume, differentiating sounds), word, taste, warmth, balance etc. The sense of life may be deeply disturbed in people with autism. It is in constant disturbance, causing acute discomfort, which interferes with a feeling of Selfness. The gift of the sense of life is harmony. So people

with autism may rock, fiddle etc to bring their body into harmony. We can nurture the sense of life by allowing completion of a task, the celebration of a job well done.

Children with autism may get stuck in their first local memory – many don't develop free thinking. They may associate with prior experiences. They need to do practical tasks so they are free to exercise their imagination. They need to free their will energy so it can be taken up in their activity.

Children with Autism may have idiosyncratic speech. It may be loud. They might talk at you rather than with you, or ask you a question but not really hear the answer. They will usually have narrow topics of conversations and understandings. They learn things by heart well but they may not own a conversation. Socially they may latch onto another child and may stifle or become forceful or overbearing. In the classroom they may dominate or overpower others. They will need to be explicitly taught social skills and conversation starters so they can join a group of their peers.

They need to work with the arts; with nuance and movement as their movements are generally wooden and clumsy. We provide rhythm but they demand ritual so we need to help them slowly accept change. Teachers can help by always pre-warning of a change in activity, not once but maybe 2-3 times. Eg. (10 minutes before, 5 minutes before, 1 minute before).

Teachers may help a child with Autism by working with the spiritual world to allow the child's 12 senses help their Ego come into being. Teachers can only start working on the child's higher senses

when the lower senses have established.

Barbara spoke about the **Pedagogical Law**:

As teachers we can use this understanding to know what aspect of ourselves or the spiritual world we need to connect with to help children with impediments causing difficulty for them to fully incarnate into their bodies.

Other Difficulties:

tion to that they get exhausted by their Etheric life forces

* parents are exhausted, children are exhausting

If we see difficulty in the Etheric, we can help them with our Astral (see Pedagogical Law). Children with ADHD invoke antipathy as it seems they are deliberately trying to destroy activities. Love and acceptance is their greatest difficulty to receive on a daily basis.

Dyspraxia is a disturbance in space and an inability to plan the sequence of events. Something is incomplete at a physical level – although it is a motor planning disorder. Create consistency and form – work from the Etheric so their physical body can flow into the sequence of events (see Pedagogical Law).

We thank Barbara for her great insights and I know she gave the teachers who

Teacher/adult	Pedagogical process	Child	Disability
Spirit-Self (Higher Ego)	guides the incarnating ego (individuality) of the child through the use of speech and language	Ego	Autism
Ego	brings order into the developing astral body (feeling life) of the child through enthusiasm	Astral Body	Asperger's syndrome
Astral Body	strengthens the etheric (life and memory) forces of the child through objective compassion and interest in every phenomenon of the child. [Hence the importance of child studies.]	Etheric Body	Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder
Etheric Body	brings health and harmony to the physical body of the child through humour	Physical Body	Dyspraxia Down's Syndrome Cerebral Palsy

Aspergers Syndrome is often described as high functioning autism, but it is an impediment of the astral body; the soul forces are often locked. With this understanding, you wouldn't diagnose a child with Aspergers Syndrome until after 9, because it is an Astral difficulty.

Children with ADHD often get stuck in the details and lost in the periphery. You can describe them as tired, erratic, inconsistent, intolerant of sense impressions, hyperactivity, distractibility, impulsivity; attention drawn out into the world and they pay attention to everything. They can become totally absorbed as they can't contain focal and peripheral attention at the same time. These children often have a lack of rhythm –

- * no rhythm in sleeping, eating, breathing processes
- * many have digestive disorders and food intolerances
- * they get judged by others
- * they have so many things to pay atten-

Teachers could keep in mind to always begin a parent interview by looking at their sleeping rhythm. From 4pm, how can we prepare them for a calm, slow, bedtime rhythm and ritual? If they have a digestive disorder, it can prevent the Ego and Astral penetrating fully. When asleep, does this mean the Ego and Astral have difficulty departing fully? Astral forces can make them thrash about and have a restless sleep so they wake up exhausted and not refreshed.

They don't learn from their mistakes, children with ADHD live in the moment, they don't think about consequences. They need love and acceptance from our Astral forces to their Etheric body. They need movement and lots of gardening – responsibility for animals and plants – to gain an understanding of the rhythm of the natural world. As ADHD is an Etheric difficulty, Etheric massage may bring order into their life forces – oilings, baths, physical therapies are good places to start.

attended the conference may ideas to work with in the classroom.

My son Brock, who was diagnosed with Autism at the age of 2 ½ also gave a talk one night about his experiences living with Autism. He turns 18 this month and has been a great gift to all who meet him as he enables us to see just what is possible when you strive to understand what it may be like to cope in this world when your senses are askew and it seems nobody understands you.

As both a parent and a teacher I had been trying for many years to put an anthroposophical perspective on my understanding of Autism. Hearing that is was an Ego impediment and that Aspergers was an Astral impediment, in such simple terms, opened another huge door for me and I hope it does for other teachers or parents who may be reading this.