

## On the Page – ASD Community Voices



### Meet Jason Oldford

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I was diagnosed with high-functioning autism in 1974, but my parents noticed that something was not right well before then. I learned to read and spell big words before I turned three. After a visit to my family doctor at the time, my parents were told that I would just get over it and to give it time. I was then brought before three specialists who could not agree on a diagnosis, and when the diagnosis was finally made, the specialist who made it doubted that I'd ever be able to communicate or go to school. I must give my parents and siblings full credit for not giving up on me. Autism has an impact on the family as a whole; it affects everyone.

### Thoughts on my early school years...

Through my early years of schooling, I had a feeling that something was wrong with me. Subjects my classmates found easy I did not. I thought that maybe I had a learning disability, but my teachers suspected nothing. In many areas, I excelled, such as spelling, grammar, and languages, but in others, such was not the case (for example, math, art, and the sciences). I did not learn that my disability was autism until my second year in high school (1987). I was kind of disappointed that my parents waited so long to tell me this, but in all fairness, had they told me during my childhood, I probably would not have understood.

### Thoughts on Junior High and High School...

I wanted to make friends during my early years of schooling, and I did, but by the time I entered junior high, they all started hanging out with people who were “more like them”, and I found myself on the outside looking in. It didn't really bother me, though; when people approach their teens, they go out more. In many cases, they go out to parties, which I was not into. I thought too much socializing would have a negative impact on my studies, and given that I had problems in many school subjects, I did not want my grades to suffer. I also feared the possibility of there being drugs or alcohol consumed at these parties.

Bullying was a problem that hit its apex late in my junior high years. To this day, bullies get their kicks taking advantage of the different ones – the naïve, gullible ones – and when you have autism, naiveté and gullibility go with the territory. I have wanted to speak on bullying in schools for quite some time, but I have never been invited, but that aside, I think schools should have zero tolerance policies regarding bullying, and victims of bullying should always tell someone (parents, teachers, school

administrators, etc.), even if they are threatened with retribution if they do so. One of my siblings always looked out for me when I was in junior high and still does so to this day.

From a personal perspective, in high school, things improved, if only marginally. I did better in math by the time I entered grade 12, but I made the mistake of overloading on science courses. I still got through high school in three years, and my teachers thought my problems were not for lack of trying, but when I entered university, I vowed never again to take science courses.

In school, I had my strong subjects and my weak ones. As I mentioned earlier, I excelled in spelling, grammar and languages, but I also did well in history/social studies. I also mentioned that I was weak in the sciences; this was because of the abstract thinking required. English literature was also a weak area for me; a lot of “reading between the lines” also requiring critical thinking. Bottom line: critical thinking has never been my forte; neither has creativity. I was also weak in art and industrial arts.

### **On the teen years in general...**

The teen years can be problematic for people with autism. As I mentioned earlier, they are often left on the outside looking in because everyone thinks they're different or odd. I believe it is important to educate teens about autism. If they know about it, we could see many more teens with autism “fit in with the rest of the crowd”. Some may not like that, however, and if they do not, they should not be pushed.

### **Life at University...**

I enjoyed my years in university. I managed to obtain not one, but two, BA's (one in linguistics and French from the University of New Brunswick and one in translation from Concordia).

### **Working life...**

I started a job search, mass-mailing several resumes to several employers and hearing nothing back from them. How could I have been so naïve as not to realize that a job search involves a lot more than just sending out resumes and waiting for a call that probably won't come? I had to take jobs outside my own field for a while, but I still got some translation experience as a freelancer and as part of these previous jobs, until just this past September when I began my current job as a full-time translator. It was a long time coming but was well worth the wait. My advice to job seekers with autism is quite simple: network, promote your strengths, and don't try to go it alone. Their communication skills (or lack thereof) often ‘do them in’ during a job search. Joining a Toastmasters club or another communication/leadership organization would be helpful. I would also recommend practice with interview skills (for example, role playing where the person with autism is the candidate and someone else is the interviewer). Educating employers about autism is essential.

### **Independent life...**

It is unfortunate that many people with autism wind up living in institutions or group homes because they do not get the treatment or services they need to succeed in life and contribute to society as people with autism. Such people would have difficulty living alone, so it would be best to pair them up with a roommate. Some people with autism are fortunate enough to get married and start families, but for the most part, people with autism who are fortunate enough to live independently should live with

someone they can turn to for help when they need it. Failing this, it is essential that they live close to friends and/or relatives they can rely on for assistance.

### **On the language of “cure”...**

There is no disputing that autism is a disability, but people have to understand that some people who have it also have special abilities that they can use to contribute to society. However, I do not buy into the arguments of some parents that autism is a disease that needs to be cured. The fact is that autism is a lifelong disorder and is treatable, but even with early intervention as soon as possible, no amount of treatment will eradicate the autism. Children will still have it when they become adults, but with early intervention, the autism will be less severe and less of a roadblock to enabling people with autism to contribute to society.

Autism is a crisis. According to an episode of *The View* that aired earlier this year, there is one new diagnosis every 20 minutes. However, I do take issue with the use of the term “epidemic” when referring to autism. This makes it sound like autism is contagious. I would also like to point out that some parents compare autism to cancer. Being a cancer survivor myself, it is easy to understand why I would oppose this line of thought. As I mentioned earlier, autism is a lifelong disorder which, even with treatment, will still affect those who have it, albeit to a lesser extent. Cancer, on the other hand, is a disease which, if left untreated, spells death for those who have it. In 2004, IV chemo and chemo by mouth, along with some blood transfusions, could well have saved my life. Bottom line: autism can never be equated to cancer.

### **Thoughts on autism research and treatment...**

I do believe that research into the various aspects of autism must continue, especially into the causes because there is no consensus as to what these are yet. As for treatments, there is one evidence-based treatment out there (ABA or IBI) and I fail to understand why the various levels of government refuse to fund it. I realize it is expensive, but if Ottawa got together with the provinces and territories to figure out a funding solution, it would not be so and the governments would get a major return on their investment in that people with autism would be able to contribute to society. To say that it is a shame that parents are left to foot the bill for this proven, albeit expensive, treatment would be an understatement.

However, while I believe that ABA or IBI must be funded sooner rather than later, I also believe that research must continue so that one day this treatment will have company in the ranks of treatments that are scientifically validated. This will give parents an array of evidence-based treatments to choose from, but proving the effectiveness of autism treatments could take months or even years. People with autism who need treatment do not have this kind of time; they need publicly funded, evidence-based treatment immediately, if not sooner.

### **Approaches to change and hopes for the future...**

On the subject of self-advocacy groups, I think it is a great idea that will definitely help people with autism and give the public a better understanding of what they are like. ASD organizations should continue their efforts for better funding of services and treatments for those who need them, regardless of age or family income level.

As for my hopes for the future, I hope that one day people with autism will get all the help they need to succeed in society. This includes the necessary treatments and services, but above all, what is needed is acceptance. Society should accept people with autism for what they are, not for what they'd like them to be.