

Autonomy, Disabilities, and Specialised Educational Needs

by Abbie Green

Life is a journey, with many different roads to take. When Ram was small we started going down the home education road. At the time I knew that he was different from other children; he was very bright but wasn't reaching certain milestones like other children were. He was four when we made the decision which meant that not only did he never go to school, but we had plenty of time to explore different methods of education.

As time went on we realised that he fitted the profile of Asperger's Syndrome (AS), although we haven't felt the need to have a formal diagnosis. He has problems with social situations, sensory sensitivities, language and communications, and also some physical problems resulting in hypermobile joints.

When I first heard of autonomous education, like many people I thought it meant that you just left the children to their own devices. There is also a feeling that autonomous is the opposite of structured, and there seems to be two roads you can go down, the autonomous one or the structured one. But I soon realised that this was not accurate.

Autonomous education is not about leaving the children to their own devices, it is about their intrinsic motivation for learning. It's about who makes the educational choices and how those choices are delivered. I realised that true autonomous education meant that the parents were actually very engaged with their children.

This means that if a child wants to do worksheets, then that is autonomous. To not allow them to do worksheets would be coercive. It also means that if a child wants to play Simpsons Hit and Run on the computer all day, then that too is autonomous. But to not let a child have a computer because the parent decided that they didn't want computers in the house, would be coercive. If a child wants to follow a curriculum and do exams, which many older children do, then that is autonomous, but if that child is not allowed to or the parent refuses to facilitate exams and curriculum then that is coercive.

So I guess you could say that autonomous is the opposite of coercive!

When Ram was a toddler I could see that autonomous education would work quite well. Life is all about playing and children learn a lot with play. But I soon realised that there was more to autonomous education than that.

People often think that autonomous is the easy option. But in fact it can be more difficult. Parents have to be on hand to facilitate their children's education, which means coming up with ideas, doing research behind the scenes and generally making sure that the child has everything they need to educate themselves.

This becomes even more difficult if you have a child that is disabled or has specialised educational needs. Some children are not capable of communicating their wishes, their interests, or their feelings. With these children it's even more important to help them find out what they do want to do. This could mean spending time exploring different things with them, or it could mean offering different items for them to try. It also means knowing when to back off and allow them to do what they want to do, even if that seems like it will never result in any learning at all.

We found ourselves swept along the autonomous road very early on for several reasons. First, it not only fitted in with the Attachment Parenting style that we were already following, but it also fitted in with Ram's personality. He is very oppositional, and can't be told what to do. I did try to

introduce workbooks, and in particular reading books, but he just wasn't interested. I did worry that he would never learn to read, but many more experienced home educators pointed out that children will learn to read when they need to.

So I backed off, but I wasn't just doing nothing. I read aloud to him all the time, and played games that happen to have a basis in language. We had to be very careful to make sure that they weren't seen as educational, or he would refuse to do them. We had a large selection of beginner books, lots of Beano and Dandy comics, as well as appointments with the behavioural optometrist to help with his eyesight. That alone brought on the necessity of finding more creative ways of doing the exercises which were needed to build up his physical readiness to read.

It would be too simplistic to say that we just did nothing and he just started to read. There was a lot going on in the background because of his disabilities. From his perspective, he taught himself to read, but from our perspective we facilitated this by making available the appropriate building blocks needed to learn to read.

A second reason why we ended up going down this path is motivation. Like many children with Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD) Ram has obsessions. These have ranged from The Thunderbirds, deep sea creatures, certain computer games, to the present day and longest lasting one, Lego generally and Bionicle Lego specifically. If autonomous education is about following the child's internal motivation, then with an ASD child, that motivation will be very strong!

Tony Attwood¹ one of the world's top experts in AS, always recommends that people use the child's obsessions for education. So rather than have a curriculum to follow, we found it was much easier to follow the obsessions. In fact, I don't think we could have done it any other way! The intrinsic motivation to follow an obsession is so strong that to fight it would be futile and would only result in unhappiness and anxiety for the whole family; and a child who is unhappy and anxious is not one that will be able to learn.

One example of obsessive behaviour is the use of computer games. Parents often despair if all their children want to do is play on the computer all day long. This can become even more difficult with children on the autistic spectrum as they often will retreat into something that is familiar and comfortable for them, like playing the same game over and over again or perhaps watching the same video tape over and over again. Watching things once or twice can always be educational, but watching the same Thomas the Tank Engine episode 50 times loses a bit of its educational value.

Ram loves The Simpsons Hit-And-Run computer game and it has been very educational. For instance one of Bart's phrases is "ow, my ovaries." Ram started imitating this, and eventually asked me what ovaries were. This led to a discussion of what ovaries are why it is so funny that Bart says this, and on to a book of human anatomy.

But Ram still carried on playing the game over and over again for many weeks. Being autonomous would suggest that the child should be left to carry on playing obsessively, but to do so would not necessarily result in education or even happiness for the child. What we did was to think about why Ram was doing this. Was he worried about something? Was it the easy option or, as he puts it, default mode (just doing what you always do without thinking in order to give your brain a rest)? Or perhaps he was just playing this because no new opportunities had been presented to him? Did he want to move on but didn't know how?

I looked for opportunities to move him away from the computer in ways that were acceptable to him. In the morning if he said he wanted to go onto the computer I would remind him that the day before he had said he wanted to play outside. If he said he still wanted to go onto the

computer that was fine. I never made any suggestions expecting that they would ever be acted upon. Sometimes this works and he remembers that there are other things to do, sometimes he needs that default time. Sometimes it transpires that he has been thinking about the game and a new strategy for quite some time without me realising it, and wants to try to achieve something new in the game. It is only when I present alternatives to him and give him the freedom to say no to my suggestions, that we know that he has achieved autonomy.

I used to have problems reconciling autonomous education and attachment parenting with specialist needs and disabilities, but I think I now have it much clearer in my head since reading Jan Fortune-Wood's book *Winning Parent, Winning Child*. Before that I used to think that to a certain extent you couldn't be autonomous with some SEN children, and I could never figure out how you could be autonomous and still get a child to take their epilepsy medicine that they hated so much you had to force them!

Since reading the book I understand it more, and we have now had a situation where we have been testing it. We had a physiotherapy assessment recently and it turns out that Ram's legs are in worse shape than I thought, and we have to stretch his hamstrings. He can't sit on the floor with his legs straight, and if we don't address this he won't grow properly. Addressing this is not something that is optional.

Of course he isn't happy about the exercises he has to do because it is painful. I thought about how a brick wall parent would do it. Just tell them to do it regardless of the pain.

Then I looked at how I could do it without being a brick wall parent. Ram clearly couldn't understand why he had to do the exercise so I explained four times over the next two days, what he had to do and why, using his stuffed toy sheep Bob. Then I explained it again to his Dad when he came to visit, why it was so important for Ram to do the exercise, with Ram there in the room with us so that he could hear it again. Then I got Ram to demonstrate how to do the exercise but not do it.

Ram was still adamant that he would not be doing the exercises and was in tears just talking about it. But then suddenly he told us how he was going to do it! It is on his terms, and it isn't exactly how the physiotherapist said it should be done, but we got there! He is now happy and willing to do the exercises, in a way that is acceptable to all.

So the fact that he had to do the exercise wasn't negotiable, but how he approached it was, and in the end we didn't have to force him to do anything, but he was totally willing to do it, completely understanding why he had to. Ram just needed more time to process what was happening, and time to come up with a way of doing things that worked for him.

There are plenty of benefits for children generally when home educated autonomously, but some of those benefits are more important with disabled children and those with specialised educational needs. Most children learn better when they are not stressed or anxious, and this is even more evident with ASD children who often suffer much greater levels of stress and anxiety at school. Often these children feel that they are out of control and, by autonomously educating them, they can regain that control over their lives, and the stress and anxiety levels drop enabling them to learn better.

There are benefits for the whole family as well. By parenting by consensus, the children and the parents learn to trust each other. This in turn leads to less conflict in the family. There are still going to be difficult days, and times when factors over which we have no control will cause high levels of stress, but if the relationships are built on mutual trust, then when something comes along that has to be done, like yucky medicine or painful exercises, then the children will be able to

trust that the parent is making good sound choices, and will help and facilitate them to make the experience as pleasant as possible.

I think in a way I was lucky that Ram made sure I went down the autonomous road. A very traumatic day still comes painfully to mind. When he was three I asked him to help me tidy up his toys. I knew that he couldn't cope with much, so I didn't expect him to do it all or on his own. I just asked him to put a couple of toys on a shelf. He refused, and we had an entire day with me trying to force him to put some toys on a shelf. I did everything I could think of. I told him I would take all his other toys away, which I did, and I even said that he couldn't have anything to eat until he put one toy on the shelf. Finally he was so hungry at tea time that he put a toy on the shelf. I praised him, but as I turned to go to the kitchen to get something for him to eat, he swept all his toys off the shelf!

In tears I rang a wise friend of mine and asked how I was going to cope with Ram when he was older if I couldn't make him do things now when he was little. She pointed out to me that you can never force people to do what they don't want to do. They have to want to do what you want them to do!

Many families have children that will just do what their parents tell them to do, and they go through life never really expressing themselves, until they are old enough to finally rebel against their parents, at which time it comes as a bit of a shock. I am really grateful that Ram took things into his own hands at such an early age, and let me know that I couldn't just tell him what to do and expect him to do it. Attachment Parenting and autonomous education have allowed Ram to be a relaxed, happy and educated child, and has allowed his parents a relatively stress free, if different lifestyle.

The autonomous road may be a longer one, and a more difficult one to walk down, but it is also a more pleasurable one.

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1 *The Complete Guide to Asperger's Syndrome*, Tony Attwood

2 *Winning Parent, Winning Child: Parenting so that Everybody Wins*, Jan Fortune-Wood