

INTERVENTION SHEET #3

WELCOME TO AUTISMAPOLIS

By Brigitte Harrisson, 2001

There are 29 million autistic people on the planet... Let's pretend they all live in the same city... We'll call it Autismapolis.

When our story begins, all the city's residents are autistic... Only the tourists are not...

In this city, no one needs places like bars or clubs. Every citizen has their own small house that can organize and tidy in their own way. Every morning, everyone's alarms go off at 6:30 a.m. Seven days a week. There's no need for weekends or special holidays.

Autismapolitans are big fans of routine. At 6:30 a.m. sharp, all the residents get up. They eat, wash, then dress. At 7:15 a.m., they take fifteen to just to relax a little before heading to work.

At 8:00 a.m., everyone gets to work. Autismapolis is known for its large computer and electronics companies and for their excellent performance rates. The city is also internationally reputed for its artists—they've got the best musicians and the best designers. People around the world envy Autismapolis... There's zero crime, everything in the city is in its rightful place, and it's easy to find whatever you need because of all the signs. You can return to the city after being away for a decade and nothing will have changed. You never have to worry about getting lost. For anyone nostalgic, it's paradise.

The Neversad family used to live in Montreal. The couple married in a fairytale wedding ceremony, and they were very happy. They had a son, Norm Neversad, now six years old.

The Neversads always provided their child with the best of everything to help him develop to his full potential. They gave him the best toys, they sent him to the most highly rated daycares, they showered him with attention and affection, and they participated with him in many activities to help him excel. In short, the Neversad family was like every other family on the planet... every family, that is, that doesn't live in Autismapolis.

During a holiday trip to Autismapolis, the Neversad family realized that this city might offer little Norm—whom they already imagined as president of a large computer company—many advantages.

In Autismapolis, not only would Norm be able to study toward becoming a programming genius, but the supportive environment was ideal for him to continue to develop his artistic talents. After the family's ideal vacation, where everything just seemed perfect to them, the Neversads packed up and moved to Autismapolis.

A few days after their arrival, they enrolled little Norm in a local school. Norm's parents were confident that they'd done everything in their power to make their son happy. With his high grades, they thought there wouldn't be any problem for him to change schools. Norm, after all, was a cheerful little boy—just like all his friends in Montreal! He'd quickly adapted to new class and made new friends last year, so his parents thought it would be the same this year when he went to school with the autistic children of Autismapolis.

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Within the first week of school, however, the teacher realized that something wasn't right with little Norm. Norm refused to play a full hour on his own and he wouldn't follow everyone else's schedule. While all the children settled in at exactly 2:02 p.m. for a nap, Norm wouldn't nap until 2:05 p.m. In addition, he wouldn't put his toys back EXACTLY in their rightful place. Finally, when Norm left school at the end of the day, he never took exactly the same route home, and worse, he didn't put his boots, coat, and gloves on in the same order from one day to the next.

After two weeks, the teacher decided to speak to her principle about the matter because the child's strange behaviors were disturbing the whole class. After a long conversation, the principal and the teacher, both suspecting Norm's parents of obvious carelessness (and they were new to boot...) decided to convene a meeting with Norm's parents as soon as possible. They decided it would also be wise to request the presence of a psychologist, a social worker, an occupational therapist, and a psychoeducator.

The meeting took place three days later. Norm's parents were surprised to learn that their son had already experiencing so many challenges. They assured the school professionals that they had always done their best to educate their child according to their values. They never had the slightest comments about little Norm's behavior at his previous school. They didn't understand why their child couldn't comply or respond adequately to the instructions he was given.

Everyone agreed: Norm was developing a serious problem, and it was necessary to intervene as quickly as possible—his future depended on it! It was decided that little Norm and his parents would be entitled to the best school support services available. The parents were puzzled but still relieved to know that Norm was going to be well taken care of.

A little while later, after a few meetings with all these new adults, little Norm overheard some of them talking. He began to understand that something was wrong. Meetings to play with the adults at his new school weren't just games: he, little Norm, had what the grown-ups called a problem. He felt dejected—he wasn't like everyone else. But he didn't understand...

The more time passed, the more unhappy little Norm became. No one told him why he was different.

The more time passed, the angrier he grew, and the more he shut down. His new friends now refused to play with him. Sometimes Norm even hit them; they thought he was mean.

Norm became increasingly unhappy and isolated. Eventually, his school created a special classroom to send him to since he no longer collaborated with the other children. Feeling more and more isolated, Norm eventually decided to drop out of school.

Norm had a very sad life. He was too different for others; he was never able to fit anywhere in his new city. He never became the president of any large company... or even of any small company. He and his parents were very sad because they never understood what had happened. They had stumbled across Well-Meaning People... Well-Meaning yet Unaware...



SACCADE
CENTRE D'EXPERTISE EN AUTISME

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The moral of this story in two points:

- ▶ 1. "Normal" is a very subjective word... It really depends on your perspective.
- ▶ 2. When dealing with a world we don't understand, it's in our best interest not to simply rely on our established frame of reference, but to take a closer look before making any decisions.

FOR MORE INFORMATION,
please refer to: Harrison B, St-Charles L.
L'autisme expliqué aux non-autistes.
Quebec City: Trécarré; 2017.