

Intensive Interaction by Phoebe Caldwell

The processing of speech and other sensory inputs presents extreme difficulties for people with autism. Intensive Interaction (Int. Int.) is the name of an approach used with people on the autistic spectrum who have difficulty processing or organising spoken language: instead of speech it uses a person's body language, their sounds and movements to communicate with them. Based on 'imitation' and the way that mothers and babies communicate, it quickly moves beyond this, valuing and respecting all their body language and using it to set up a conversation, one that has meaning for their partner since the signals do not have to go through the speech processing system as they are hard-wired in. (This is **not** to say that it treats its partners as infantile, rather that it values their attempts to communicate, their sounds and movements, that it takes the trouble to learn their body language to communicate with them.)

Initially, 'imitation' gets attention, but the exchange moves on and should be thought of as response rather than copying, so that a sound might be answered with an equivalent rhythm through touch (for example, I 'draw' the shape of the rhythm of your sound on your arm/back.) I need to show you that every time you make an initiative you will receive an answer that has meaning for you. My 'answers' may vary or be in a different mode but they will always contain an element of your body language. I will always pick up any variations you introduce. You will notice my responses as they are familiar - but since you did not make them, you will start to look round outside yourself for the source of 'your sound' or 'your movement'. Where did it come from?

What Int. Int. does is to set up an autism-friendly environment where our partner can always know that they will get a response that has significance for them. In the chaotic world of unprocessed kaleidoscope sensory impressions, this can feel literally life-saving. The outcome is a decrease in disturbed behaviour, an increase in the desire and ability to relate (emotional engagement) and as the stress level triggered by overload in the word processing system falls, the brain starts to work more effectively, even to the point where a partner who already understands language, (but cannot organise responses) may begin to use it themselves. We cannot frogmarch people on the autistic spectrum into our world but we can make it more intelligible and user friendly for them.

Just try it. Start with using their sounds and movements to answer them and watch for any responses they make, positive or negative. Work off their responses as if you were having a verbal conversation. It usually

works even if they are becoming upset. Make their distressed sounds only softly and with empathy. this moves their attention from the distress in their brains where they are stuck to interaction.

Word of warning: If your partner gets better do not reduce the non-verbal input since you have not cured the autism but rather introduced coherence so your partner has at least some idea of what is going on round them. As Joshua says, when he is becoming confused, it is like having a delicious conversation.

Information:

Simple introductory pamphlets,

‘Can We Talk’ (Autism)

‘Speak to Me’ Int. Int.) Download free from www.nwtdt.com under

Further Useful Publications.

Books,

‘Finding You Finding Me’ Jessica Kingsley Publishers

‘From Isolation to Intimacy’, Jessica Kingsley Publishers

‘A handbook on using Intensive Interaction and Sensory Integration with people with autism’ is coming out in April 2008,also Jessica Kingsley

Training DVDs,

‘Learning the Language’ (Autism)

‘Creative Conversations’ (Multiple Disability). Pavilion Press.

‘Reaching Ricky’ can be seen by Googling Teachers TV, and looking for title under ‘Inspirations’ (working with a child in school using Int. Int)

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