

# Helping Children with Autism to Learn

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**Reviewed by ANGELA LEONARD, deputy principal, St. Paul's Special School, Beaumont, Dublin.**

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This book is an excellent read and is a must for all those who see themselves as educators of individuals with autism, Asperger's syndrome and individuals with severe and profound learning disabilities. It would serve as an excellent reference book for teachers in special classes and for teachers in the newly established special units for pupils with autism.

Written by a collection of authors, it is full of case studies illustrating theoretical points. In chapter three Flo Longhorn describes Natalie as a child with profound intellectual disability who ceaselessly self abuses and who, to remain safe, exists within selected major senses to the exclusion of others. Longhorn's objective is to give Natalie the opportunity to access other senses and to broaden her contact with the multi-sensory world. With the focus on relationships, communication and overcoming behavioural barriers we discover how Natalie's teacher helps her to enter the world of education, using senses and perception in a more normal way. Her potential for a fuller life, Longhorn argues, is dependent on those around her realising that she is a unique human being and not an embarrassment to be hidden. Let's reflect!

Various authors describe personal pedagogic methods not formally tested but tried and used successfully. Melanie Nind details patient and innovative work with two students Kris and Billy in chapter four. With Kris, who vocalises, repeats and wanders around the room, teachers play rhythmic games and during ten bursts of activity he offers "fleeting, easy-to-miss glimpses." The teacher works hard to find the developmental level at which to reach Kris. In the sensory room, Billy excitedly flaps his hands and vocalises in a high pitched voice. The teacher mimics the young child and plays rough and tumble. Billy exchanges a brief look, continues to wander and eventually signals to have another game. There is also an excellent chapter on family therapy, where the entire family, including the member with autism, is helped in various ways.

Powell and his associates suggest that we must first learn how individuals with autism learn. We must find ways of reaching into their worlds to understand them.

In chapter five Wendy Prevezer suggests we must be persistent but sensitive in our attempts to build bridges between the educator and the individual with autism. She illustrates various approaches including music which complement more conventionally structured teaching. Powell suspects that it may be that children with autism can learn but are not receptive to being taught, and strongly urges that we leave aside our formal and organised teaching ways and become patient, creative and flexible individuals willing to observe how our pupils learn and base our curriculum and pedagogy around our results.

There is something for everyone – the parent, the carer, the sibling, the educator, the psychologist and the therapist – in this book. It is a book full of ideas challenging our traditional pedagogies. It left me challenged and ignited with enthusiasm but above all it was an enjoyable read and a learning experience.

**HELPING CHILDREN WITH AUTISM TO LEARN, edited by Stuart Powell is published by David Fulton Publishers, London, 2000, and costs Stg£15.00.**

## **Supporting Literacy and Numeracy: A Guide for Learning Support Assistants**

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**Reviewed by CAROL LYNAM, special needs assistant in Scoil Chiaráin Special School, Glasnevin, Dublin.**

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As a newly appointed Special Needs Assistant I found this book to be of great value. The layout is a very easy to follow step by step guide to the supporting role of the assistant in the acquisition of literacy and numeracy skills for the child with learning disabilities.

The content is divided into nine chapters scattered with humorous line drawings and diagrams highlighting many of the key ideas. The first two chapters are concerned with roles and responsibilities in giving support to the pupil, the teacher and the school and the third is about how children learn in general. Chapters four to seven are on how the assistant can support the child with special needs in