

## **A Better Way – A Foundation in Making**

It is becoming apparent to many that the widespread attempt to "Correct" autistic children is a failed mission, and that the system we've fostered to deal with Autism is not working as promised.

We hear voices of autistic people speaking against it, and these voices ring true and loud. We hear opinions of legitimate researchers and people in the field who refute the validity of the eminent approach i.e. ABA (Applied Behavioral Analysis), DTT (Discrete Trial Training) and question the advertised results; and these opinions are supported by solid research and facts.

The Administration is becoming concerned with the huge number of disabled people coming out of the system, and society is waking up to the fact that it's been harboring a lie. We believe that the time has come for a change, and this is what "A Better Way Foundation" is about - it is about change; it is about bringing a better way to our children.

### **The Ideal – Our Mission**

They are our children, and we want to see them standing tall; see them growing up aware, alert, and comfortable in our world. We want to see them developing their gifts; learning to take care of themselves, being capable of survival, taking care of others. We want to see them move through the world with grace and confidence, and above all we want to see them happy.

We believe that in an ideal this can be achieved for every child. This is our mission - to help them and their families fulfill this ideal.

It is also our mission to help our society to rise to a higher level of acceptance - the acceptance of people who are different, who deviate from the current norm; the acceptance and accommodation of Autistic People.

### **Our Philosophy**

These children are born different, but they are born with capacity to adapt to our world and do well. There are many examples of this, as there are many examples of remarkable abilities that some have developed. We can't teach them how to develop these remarkable abilities, because we don't know how. But we can teach them how to be aware, and alert, and confident in our world.

This cannot be done away from the world; it cannot be done by isolating them, it cannot be done by restraining them, by keeping them in reformatories, by assaulting their spirit. It can be achieved only by having them experience the real world, from an early age, and this we need to facilitate to the best of our ability.

We must bring these children into our world, into real and diverse environments that are both nourishing and challenging. They need to experience it, and we need to help them understand and grow in it.

### **Scientific Background (Popularization)**

The latest research indicates that there are differences in the brain of autistic children, specifically in the prefrontal cortex which is responsible for high order functions. The researchers found that autistic children have significantly more brain cells (neurons) in the prefrontal cortex, which is instrumental for execution of speech and other motor functions. The extra neurons mean "a huge increase in potential connections" and perhaps because of that the "neuro-circuitry" that autistic children need to build to perform the varied motor functions is more difficult to accomplish. It's like bridging a wider river.

The studies and observations also indicate that progress in one area results in improvements in the other. A child finds how to bridge this river once, building a better circuitry for walking, jumping, swimming, or riding a horse, etc, and coincidentally the other things, including speech, improve as well. The child learned how to "bridge this river".

Autistic children are not born disabled. They are born with capacity for adapting to the world, just as other children, although in their own, different way. This large brain of theirs is not a disorder. Numerous examples of successes and exceptional people are proof to that. We must allow this brain to develop - and that cannot be achieved by keeping them away from the World at Large.

### **Nature as Teacher and Healer**

To foster this development, to elicit this learning in autistic children we need to provide varied environments that are beneficial for developing the efficient motor function their physical bodies are capable of; the environments that provide both the stimulus and the challenge by never being exactly the same. "Like, what you've done climbing this little hill last time is similar but not the same, and you need to find a new exciting way". These environments would be next to impossible to create in a room, or even in a sophisticated gym.

Yet these environments exist all around us in Nature, where it elicits the proper movement naturally and effectively. Nature is the best teacher and healer - it provides the stimulus, and the challenge, as well as the punishment and the reward. It is also a sanctuary with unlimited sensory modulations. That is why we should teach in the natural world, especially at a young age, when the motor function circuitry is developing. These children will never grow to their potential in a flower pot.

The World of God (you may call it "World at Large") is outside us and is inside us. And what is inside is the world that we have experienced already; it is a fraction of the World of God - poor in comparison; it lacks its challenge; it lacks danger. You can't harness the big world by staying inside. You can only learn by going out into it. This (how to go into it) we learn in our childhood. It is done not by just seeing, or hearing, or touching - but through the motion of your entire body - by immersing yourself in it, by merging with a bigger world, as you move from challenge to challenge, from one unknown to another. This is the most important thing that we learn as children. There are no substitutes, nor other time for learning this.

### **The Principles**

Our principles diverge from the ABA (Applied Behavior Analysis program). What we share is a need for interaction and attention, but our interaction is not based on a master: subordinate relationship, it is not based on correcting the behavior. It is based on finding the causes and finding together how to deal with it. It is based on exploration that we do together, learning from each other.

- A. The following quotes citations from a Horse-boy approach, which we largely share - "We don't ever communicate to the child that they are somehow a problem; we create a sensory environment that sets the child for success; we teach as much as possible through movement (academics on the trampoline, swing, in the pool, etc); we model and demo what we want but we don't (yet) ask for feedback from the kid as they are afraid of failure - so we constantly interact as per ABA but with this one crucial difference - we let go of the desire for an 'outcome'. For feedback from the kid. We push a little, then back off, push a little, then back off. We tailor everything to the interests of the child. An environment that is set up for them first, where they have a sense of sanctuary".
- B. **We also believe that involuntary separation from the parent at a young age for long periods of time is detrimental;** a parent is a foremost sanctuary and a teacher as well - "but we also recognize the need for a larger community around the child teaching, mentoring, etc, so it's not too much of one personality - both child and the parent can burn out that way"
- C. There should also be a dedicated mentor, who is a big part of child's life. -  
"EXACTLY, PREFERABLY SEVERAL BACKUP TOO, WHO REALLY UNDERSTAND HIM"
- D. There is an environment with Nature and animals, and real world all around as much as the child can take -  
"YES - ALL THE BEST LEARNING HAPPENS AROUND ANIMALS; CONSTANT EXPLORATION; WONDER; JOY; FUN;

LEARNING THAT NEVER FEELS LIKE LEARNING; THERAPY THAT DOESNT SMACK OF ANYTHING THERAPEUTIC”.

- E. There are arrangements to interact with peers and the outside world -  
“YES WITH BACKUP FROM THE MENTOR(S) SO THE CHILD ALWAYS FEELS SUPPORTED”

### **The Modus Operandi**

Surround the child with love, and care. Create a “TRIBE” of relatives, teachers, friends of all ages, and animals too. Do not diminish their affections; cherish who they cherish. Make their HOME as Large as possible.

Bring them into NATURE - the best places you can find, and establish them as SANCTUARIES – a great deal of the learning and the movement therapy should be done there, and these sanctuaries (hangouts) will become the starting points of exploration of a larger world. Let the Child Lead You, while you should be smart enough to lead them.

Bring them into the WORLD AT LARGE, as wide and diverse as possible; different places, different people; real situations. Create sanctuaries everywhere, in each place you come; you start from that – there are ways to do that - learn them. Once they find comfort, entice and challenge them to explore and interact on their own. Do not restrain them when they want to move; see where it leads to, try to understand what they do, and why they do what they do; capitalize on it.

Everywhere you go, find the environments that are most beneficial – most of the successful teaching will be done there. Teach as you would teach your equal in abilities – do not drill; there’ll be another day, another place for repeating a lesson, as there’ll be time when this will naturally come to a test. You should learn to be patient and to trust the child. Always regard the child as your equal, yet remember that they are different. Their sensory input may differ from yours, and their perception of the world may be different as well. They may see what you don’t see and hear what you don’t hear, and vice versa. You do not know the difficulties they are facing.

Remember also that these children have an exceeding tendency to a predictable world, which leads to a calculated motion that may constrain their movement from an early age. They tend to over-compute every step and having a routine gives them comfort. They show a difficulty with abandoning self-control and “Letting Go”. You must carefully counteract that from an early age, by constantly helping them to stretch their limits, by expanding their routine to become as wide and varied as imaginable. You cannot change the way they operate, but you can help make it as extensive as possible, approaching spontaneity. You should strive to teach them to trust themselves, which is a way to abandon the self-control and LEARN TO LET GO. This is the ultimate goal, as this is when the boundaries of the Self are extended and true learning occurs.

### **Opinions**

- We should teach autistic children in the real world - we should not isolate them from the world. We should strive to integrate them into society from an early age. We should never teach by force (ABA, DDT), because it is a path to failure – by doing it we fail as people, and we fail them.
- We believe in the importance and power of Nature; in letting all the children explore and letting them learn from their own triumphs and mistakes; We applaud Erin Kenny (Nature School) for her ground breaking efforts of teaching young children under open sky.
- We believe in importance of Nature Sanctuaries (“Autistic Parks/Autistic Gardens”) – the semi-sheltered environments serving as the base-grounds for the ABW Schools in Urban and Suburban settings. These environments advance sensory processing and promote the development of proper motor function in young children while simultaneously serving as the teaching grounds for a variety of natural subjects. The main elements of these should include (the more the better): varying terrain, sand, rocks, trees and bushes, plants

and grasses, and running and still water. It should be under open skies, with some shelter from the wind and rain. These environments could be either naturally engineered (within public parks) or uniquely architected environments (See ideas).

- We advocate that parents of autistic children, rather than schools, should be the recipients of Government Funds and they should make decisions of where and how to spend it on educating their children. (A voucher system could be a way to accomplish this).
- This is not a Bible, it is work in progress, and it is up to us to define it, refine it, and make it work.

### **The Concept**

“A Better Way” school (ABW School) is an ages old concept in Education, where the school and the environment are not separated, and the traditional school and the home-schooling meet (see below).

We envision three variations of ABW schools (pre-school and elementary): Rural, Suburban, and Urban. We believe that the rural environment is the most beneficial for raising a young child (a small school at a farm of an old kind, where all the diversity of subsistence is at play - gardens, orchards, fields, animals), but there’s a need for all three. In Suburban and Urban environments we promote the creation of engineered semi-sheltered environments to serve as the base school grounds, which we’ll refer to as “Autistic Parks” and “Autistic Gardens” – the environments where learning is natural and fun (see below).

With your help the foundation will work to refine and open these schools around the country, and abroad. We plan to learn as we go.

### **Projects**

- A. Work on raising awareness to “A Better Way”. This is our most important project. You can do it right NOW by becoming a member and spreading the word!
- B. Work on bringing to life - “A Better Way School” (ABW School, see below). The foundation will help to start these schools around the country, and abroad.

Work on bringing “A Better Way change” into the existing education system. We don't need to disband the system we have. All we need is to change it, and that change may be gradual, starting with simple yet important things.

- C. Promote creation of “Autistic Parks”, and “Autistic Gardens” – the semi-sheltered environments serving as the base-grounds for the ABW Schools in Urban and Suburban settings. Create the environments that advance the development of proper motor function in young children, while simultaneously serving as the primary teaching grounds for a variety of natural subjects. (See ideas below).

### **A Better Way School (Guidelines)**

“A Better Way” school (ABW School) follows an ages old concept in Education - where the school and the environment are not separated, and the traditional school and the home-schooling meet.

How does it work? ABW school is a private organization (likened to a franchise of the ABW Foundation) envisioned as a not for profit formation, which will have both staff and registered students, and may or may not own property. The school may be initially bootstrapped by the ABW Foundation, which may also act to help a school at different times. Each school may also independently vie for local and/or federal government funds for each

registered student and may also look for donations (The Foundation will assist ABW schools in these efforts worldwide). Alternatively it may be formed as a "for profit company", in which case it would not be subject to donations from the foundation. The ABW Foundation will still help bootstrap the school, but the school would have to repay the foundation.

The school (urban and suburban) may not have building facilities of its own, but instead would need to make arrangements for access to public schools facilities, such as a gym, art, music, and other needs. It will also need to make arrangements for controlled inclusion of its students, to the extent possible, in some general population classes which will be designed individually for each student, based on children's specific needs and interests. This will not be easy to arrange and would require public support.

As per our Philosophy most of the pre-school and elementary classes will be taught not behind closed walls but in real environments such as parks, wildlife areas, streets, farms, shops, restaurants, museums, and other areas to which the ABW school will make arrangements for access. Whenever possible the teaching will be done under the open sky, or in semi-sheltered areas, such as an "Autistic Garden". The disciplines required by public school curriculum should be taught, yet the correlation between the place, time, and duration of the lessons taught may be spontaneous, prompted by everything at play; at teacher's discretion. It will require a great deal of ingenuity and patience on a part of a teacher. We must accept as teachers, that WE CANNOT INDUCE LEARNING BY FORCE (this we believe leads to failure), but instead we should be BUILDING ON THEIR STRENGTHS - LACK OF EGO, ABILITY TO FOCUS, NOT WORRIED BY WHERE THEY STAND IN THE SOCIAL PECKING ORDER, INCREDIBLE MEMORY, PATTERN THINKING, ETC.

The school should also make accommodation for home-schooled children to be included in its classes, as per arrangement with parents, in which case the participation of a parent or a surrogate would be required. These guest students may be sponsored by The Foundation or would pay a fee as per their use of ABW school's staff and resources.

The ABW School may own some property, such as needed, for transportation of children, staff, and educational materials, etc, to different areas and facilities. Other property as may be needed (when settings allow), include farmland as well as horses and or other animals.

Teachers would be required to have similar credentials as are required for teaching the same curriculum in public schools. The ABW Foundation will be providing additional training for staff. The school will look forward to employing Autistic people in a capacity of advisers.

We envision three variations of ABW schools: Rural, Suburban, and Urban. We believe that the rural environment is the most beneficial, but there's a need for all three. Each may present its own set of issues and things to be resolved.

Need to Define all the details; Do's and Don'ts; What works and what doesn't; Materials, Tools, Techniques, Environments, Guidelines; Guides, etc.

We plan to learn as we go.

