To arrive at the edge of the world's knowledge, seek out the most complex and sophisticated minds, put them in a room together, and have them ask each other the questions they are asking themselves.

https://www.edge.org/response-detail/10669
Printed On Fri November 4th 2016

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The Rise of Autism and the Digital Age

Whichever country I travel to for conferences on the subject of autism, I hear the same story: It's on the increase.

In 1978, the rate of autism was 4 in 10,000 children; today (according to a 2006 article in *Lancet*) it is 1 percent. No one can explain this increase, though conservatively it is put down to better recognition and broadening the diagnostic category to include milder cases, such as Asperger syndrome. It is neither proved nor disproved that the increase might reflect other factors, such as genetic change or some environmental (e.g., hormonal) change. For scientists to answer the question of what is driving this increase will require imaginative research comparing historical and cross-cultural data.

Some may throw up their hands at this increase in autism. They may feel that the future is bleak for all of these newly diagnosed cases. But I remain optimistic that for a good proportion of them it has never been a better time to have autism.

Why? Because there is a remarkably good fit between the autistic mind and the digital age. The digital revolution brought us computers, but this age is remarkably recent. It was only in 1953 that IBM produced their first computer; but a mere fifty-four years later many, children now have their own computer.

Computers operate on the basis of extreme precision, and so does the autistic mind. Computers deal in black-and-white binary code, and so does the autistic mind. Computers follow rules, and so does the autistic mind. Computers are systems, and the autistic mind is the ultimate systemizer. The autistic mind is only interested in data that are predictable and lawful. The inherently ambiguous and unpredictable world of people and emotions is a turn-off for someone with autism, but a rapid series of clicks of the mouse that leads to the same result every time that sequence is performed is reassuringly attractive. Many children with autism develop an intuitive understanding of computers in the same way that other children develop an intuitive understanding of people.

So, why am I optimistic? I anticipate that many among this new generation of children with autism will find ways to blossom, using their skills with digital technology to find employment, to find friends, and in some cases to innovate. When I think back to the destiny of children with autism some fifty years ago, I imagine fewer opportunities for

them. When I think of today's generation of children with autism, I do not despair. True, many of them will have a rocky time during their school years, when their peer group shuns them because they cannot socialize easily. But by adulthood, a good proportion of these individuals will have not only found a niche in the digital world, but will be exploiting that niche in ways that may bring economic security, respect from their peers, and a sense of worth because of the contribution they are making.

Such opportunities may be open only to those individuals with autism who have language and otherwise normal intelligence, but this is no trivial subgroup. For those more severely affected—by language delay and learning difficulties—the digital age may offer less, though even for this subgroup I remain optimistic that new computer-based teaching methods will have an appeal that can penetrate the wall that separates autism from the social world. The autistic mind—at any level of IQ—latches onto those aspects of the environment that provide predictability, and it is through such channels that we can reach in to help.

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