

... with Simon Baron-Cohen

'Stories of forgiveness are inspiring to me'

One moment that changed the course of your career

In September 1981, June Felton, headteacher of Family Tree School for Autism, phoned me to say she'd heard I'd just graduated. She said she had a vacancy for a teacher in her small experimental unit of just six kids and six teachers that she ran in the back of her house in Hadley Green in Barnet, North London. It was experimental in that she had video cameras in every room: staff meetings at the end of each school day comprised analysis of the videos, to learn what did or didn't work in specific teacher-child interactions.

It was an amazing environment because in those days there were so few specialist schools for these kids, because the school learned by observation and evidence, and because the headteacher invited a stream of stimulating professionals to come visit. I was the teacher,

the school minibus driver, the cook, whatever was needed. That inspiring year allowed me to get to know those six children in detail, and their parents, and led to my writing to my wonderful former tutor in Oxford, Peter Bryant, to ask him where to study for a PhD in autism. He wrote back to say 'There is no one better than Uta Frith'. He was of course right.

Just this year I met up with June Felton again, who has just turned 80 and lives in Jerusalem. She came to Cambridge and presented me with a most special gift: a complete set of the videos from the early 1980s at Family Tree, as a donation to the Autism Research Centre, with the original parents' consent. She and I are still in touch with the parents of those original six children, now in their early forties. We talked about how those films – even though from a small sample – might give clues from a micro-analysis of what predicts long-term outcome.



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One cultural recommendation

The film *The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser* by Werner Herzog (1974). It is the story of a young man who turned up in Nuremberg in 1828. He had

almost no language, no social skills, and just a few letters in his pocket that hinted at his history of how he had been reared in social isolation for the first 17 years of his life. It is also a fascinating factual drama depicting the efforts by Herr Daumer, back in the early 19th century, to teach language and social skills to Kaspar, despite his uncertain mental age. Daumer's empathy for someone who is different shines through.

One inspiration

In 2013 I gave the 'Forgiveness lecture', and on the panel with me was Mary Foley, mother of 15-year-old Charlotte. Charlotte was stabbed and killed in east London in an unprovoked attack by a stranger called Beatriz, who believed Charlotte was someone else. Beatriz wrote to Mary from prison, wracked with pain and guilt, asking for forgiveness for killing Charlotte in a moment of madness. Mary realised Beatriz was a troubled young person who had made the worst mistake a person could ever make, and wrote back, saying 'I forgive you'.

Stories of forgiveness – over-riding the desire for revenge and the emotion of hatred are inspiring to me, and give me hope that, even in currently desperate regions like Israel and Palestine, humanity may resurface. Find out more about the remarkable charity called the Forgiveness Project here: www.theforgivenessproject.com/stories/mary-foley-england

One autism myth

That a woman can't have Asperger syndrome (AS) if she can chat, make eye contact, fit into a friendship group, and raise a family. This myth is one of the reasons many women who seek a diagnosis are turned away or misdiagnosed, and it persists because many clinicians focus on surface behaviour and don't

ask more probing questions. A 'systemising' approach to social interaction may mean their difficulties with cognitive empathy 'leak out' via rather subtle clues such as frequent faux pas, or talking too loud, or standing too close to others, or failure to understand socially appropriate boundaries. It's what Franky Happé and Uta Frith called 'hacking out' social skills, a good phrase that underlines how complex a phenomenon it is that we are dealing with, where a person may try to 'emulate' what others do more intuitively.

One proud moment

3 June 2014, when we published our paper in *Molecular Psychiatry*, showing



Taking amniotic fluid

elevated rates of fetal testosterone (and the fetal sex steroid hormones from which FT is synthesised) in the amniotic fluid of babies who later received a diagnosis of autism or AS (see tinyurl.com/n64k2qy). As I cycled home from the Autism Research Centre that day and crossed the bridge over the River Cam, I reflected on the long journey from our first amniocentesis study in 1997, to this one 17 years later. To the rest of the world, it was just another paper... to me it was one of those deeply satisfying moments, marking a special milestone for our hard working and dedicated research team.

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coming soon

A special feature on Sherif and Robbers Cave; how relationships help us age well; can reassurance hurt?; and much more...

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