



# Why?

## AVOIDING ASSUMPTIONS (and Discovering Octagonal Crackers)

By JENNIFER O'TOOLE

Yesterday, my three-year-old son asked if he could have some cheese and crackers for lunch. Now, I have to admit, I thought this was a bit odd, as it had been his "turn" to provide snack for the class that morning, and cheese and crackers were exactly what I had sent. "Didn't you eat your snack today, buddy?" I asked. "Yes," he replied, "but my teacher told me I was done...even though I wasn't."

It turned out that he had been asked to clean up his plate and snack because the teacher saw dilly-dallying at the table. She had asked him not to "play" with his food; he kept up the behaviour that she deemed "play" and, accordingly, he was excused from eating. I get that. It's logical. Natural consequences.

Here's the problem. He wasn't "playing." He wasn't "playing" before she asked the first time, nor was he "playing" after she asked him to stop. My child, like most kids with Aspergers Syndrome, is a consummate rule-follower who wants nothing more than to please. When he does something "wrong," he is so embarrassed that he wells up in tears, hides in shame or yells (often at others) in frustration with himself.

What, then, was this little guy doing at the table instead of eating? Geometry. He was doing geometry. The crackers, he decided, were squares - like the metal insets he had been taught to finger carefully, counting the corners and sides. But when he nibbled each of the corners off, that square no longer had four sides!! It had five, then six, then seven, and finally eight sides! Silently nibbling and scrolling through the words in his head, he was

recalling pentagon...hexagon...septagon and finally...that was it! An octagon! He had turned the square into an octagon!

Only he didn't say that. He just thought and nibbled. When told not to "play with his food," he followed directions - as usual. He didn't "play." He thought. He counted. Then suddenly -- and to his mind, for no understandable reason -- he was told that he was to clean up his space and leave the table.

What went wrong? Well, first, "play with your food" is "figurative" language, much like "sitting on top of the world." Kids on the spectrum take language VERY literally. On a different day, this same little guy was asked if their class had stories during "circle time." Our son said no, they didn't have "circle" time. "We sit in an oval," he finished. His older brother once told a teacher that he couldn't take off his jacket as she had asked. She put him outside the class for disobedience. "But I'm not wearing a jacket," she finally heard him crying in confusion and despair. "I'm wearing a raincoat!" Their sister, a few years earlier, "jumped in the shower" at my direction - just after having spinal surgery. She slipped and went crashing onto her incision.

How we say something is at least as important as what we say. A clearer, positive direction to "Please eat your food now," would have gotten a much better response than, "don't play with your food." Moreover, expectations have to be clearly set before trouble ensues, not afterwards. This weekend, I heard my children arguing over whether or not someone had won the board game they played. They hadn't agreed to the rules before they began,

and now there was trouble. Unless we explain what "being a good girl" or "playing nicely" looks like in our minds, how can we expect children to guess? Fair play means everyone knows what is expected - with illustrative examples of success and defined rules or boundaries - beforehand.

Beyond language and rules, there was another problem in the "snack situation." Of course, the teacher did not mean to be unjust. And I certainly don't expect her to have known (or even guessed) that he was quietly considering polygons! The trouble was the basic assumption of what "misbehaviour" means. It is not always mutinous, impolite, or even problematic.

With or without the advantage of knowing that a child has Aspergers, the standard must always be to seek out the "why?" behind a behaviour before we make a correction. There is an old adage about making "ass"umptions. To take for granted that we know all there is to know about any situation is, truth be told, sophomoric.

Of course, all of us operate on some basic assumptions. I assume the sun will come up tomorrow, and expect to be right. But people are less predictable. If you yell at a child near the road, he may assume you are angry with him. The reality, though, is that you are frightened. Mad and scared look a lot alike. So do shy and stuck-up, overwhelmed and impatient. There's lots of room for mistakes when we assume to know what is going on in someone else's mind or heart...or head.

The most frequently incorrect assumption "neurotypicals" make is that they know what Asperkids "look like." "But you're so normal," people will say to me. "And your kids are so smart!" The truth is that normal is a setting on the dryer, and I don't know anyone who ever chose a hero because she was so "typical." Aspergers Syndrome/autism is merely a different neurological hardwiring. It's not new, it's not wrong, it's not better and it's not worse. It's just different. I have red hair, and have since the moment I was born. I can't be "cured" of my gingeriness any more than I can (or ought) to be "cured" of my Aspergers.

Like me, like my sons, my daughter, my husband...like Emily Dickinson and Albert Einstein, like Henry Ford and Marie Curie...we Aspies live alongside you, but we process and perceive the world very differently than you. It's the same life...but with the "volume" - of sound, of light, of touch, emotional intensity, thought, insecurity, sense of morality, justice, and general creativity - turned way up. The same truths. Just spoken in "neurological dialects."

This autumn, my family visited England. Although he had been warned about differences in American versus British English, our six-year-old son did manage one spectacular gaff. As we

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crossed near an enormous puddle outside of Victoria Station, he got splashed by a passing cyclist. "Oh, no!" he yelled. "Now my pants are all wet!" To us Americans, that was a perfectly accurate observation - the lower half of his jeans were thoroughly soaked. To the Brits around us who all looked up in shock, however, this school-aged boy seemed to be declaring that he had just wet his underwear. The word "pants," you see, has a very different meaning on each side of the Atlantic.

What does that have to do with assumptions and cracker nibbling? Simple. Misunderstanding. When you don't know what you are seeing (or saying!), you probably don't know what you are seeing (or saying).

We've all heard about how important early intervention is in supporting children with autism. The trouble is that kids with Aspergers present a bit differently, so teachers, parents, and caregivers often dismiss what they are seeing as "behaviour" problems -- saying a child is "too smart" or "too sensitive for her own good." Meanwhile, children are punished instead of supported. And often, exclusion beats out kindness.

It all begins with avoiding assumptions and learning the facts. A child who "goofs off" or is silly may, actually, be trying to avoid a task that is too hard or too long -- one at which he knows he will fail or can't figure out how to begin. Another may talk endlessly about dogs because it's the topic on which she feels most comfortable, not because she wants to be a know-it-all. A cold and an allergy look very much alike. So do a neurotypical child misbehaving and an Asperkid being him or herself, but they require very different responses.

There is, then, one fail-safe way to give every child a fair shake. Learn. Investigate intentions before you pass judgement. Consider perspectives very unlike your own. Anticipate and prepare, rather than reacting and responding. Be clear. Be concise. Be specific and consistent. Be curious and humble rather than sure and wrong. Don't assume. Take the time to ask, "Why?" Wonder. Really, there is so little that even we, "grown-ups," know for sure. And so very much more beauty in the surprises left to come. ■