

# Autism



# The Way I See It

by  
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## Disability versus Just Bad Behaviors

During my travels I have observed that many children on the autism spectrum need more discipline. Many parents and teachers seem confused about the cause of some of the behaviors that surface within their kids. Is it just bad behavior or is the problem behavior caused by the person's disability?

Teachers and parents need to differentiate between a troublesome behavior caused by sensory problems and just plain bad behavior. This is especially true for highly verbal autistic and Asperger children; I think that many parents and teachers do not hold high enough expectations for good behavior from these individuals, nor do they hold them responsible for their behaviors. My being raised during the 1950's probably was an advantage. Life was much more structured then. I was expected to behave when my family sat down for dinner. It was quiet at the house during dinner so there were no problems with sensory overload. Today, in the average household, dinner time can be noisy, chaotic and stressful for a child on the spectrum. Music is playing or the TV is on, or siblings are all talking or yelling at one time. To my mother's credit, she was also a good detective about what environments caused me stress. She recognized that large, noisy crowds or too much noise and commotion, in general, was more than my nervous system could handle. When I tantrummed, she understood why.

Bad behaviors should have consequences, and parents need to understand that applying consequences in a consistent manner will make gains in changing these behaviors. I behaved well at the dining room table because there were consequences: I lost TV privileges for one night if I misbehaved at the table. Other misbehaving, such as swearing or laughing at a fat lady, had consequences. Mother knew how to make consequences meaningful, too. She chose those things that were important to me as my lost privileges.

I was always testing the limits, as most children will. Parents should not think that because their child has autism or Asperger's that this will not happen. Mother made sure there was consistency of discipline at home, and between home and school. She and my nanny, and she and the teacher worked together. There was no way I could manipulate one against the other.

The table below shows some examples of "just bad behavior" and some of the more common behavior

problems caused by either high-functioning autism or Asperger's Syndrome. Many of these examples came directly from parents and teachers I've met at workshops and conferences. Bad behavior needs discipline. But parents must never punish a child with autism for acting out, or a tantrum, when it is caused by sensory overload. If you know your child well, and understand how the various sensory systems are affected by autism, you'll know when your child's behavior is 'just plain bad' and when it's a manifestation of his/her autism.

### **BAD BEHAVIOR that should be corrected- Autism or Asperger's Syndrome is NOT an excuse:**

- Sloppy table manners
- Dressing like a slob; poor grooming
- Rudeness: to either a teacher, a parent, another adult, or a peer
- Swearing
- Laughing inappropriately at people: ie at a fat lady, someone in a wheelchair, etc.
- Inappropriate sexual behavior in public
- Manipulation by throwing a fit: at home, school or in the community
- Stealing a toy and then lying about it
- Cheating at cards or during sports

### **Behavior Problems caused by Autism or Asperger's Syndrome- ACCOMMODATIONS may be required:**

- Screams when the fire alarm rings because it hurts his ears.
- Tantrum in a large, busy supermarket/mall/recreation area due to sensory overload; more likely to occur when the child is tired.
- Removing clothes/excessive scratching/itching: cannot tolerate feel of certain fabrics, seams, fibers against skin
- Hyperactivity and agitation under fluorescent lighting
- Sloppy handwriting: often due to poor fine motor skills; allow child to use a typewriter or computer instead.

**Temple Grandin** is the most noted high functioning person with autism in the world today. She is the author of two books on autism: *Emergence: Labeled Autistic* (1986) and *Thinking in Pictures* (1995). In her "day job" she specializes in designing livestock handling systems. Temple devotes much of her time to increasing awareness of autism through extensive speaking engagements. She makes her home in Fort Collins, Colorado.