

Chapter 7

Three Good Things: Puppets, Learning, and Autism

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ABSTRACT

Let us consider some good things that have happened before the year 2021 concludes: 1) On February 1, 2021, researchers at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP) announced that the autism spectrum disorders may be caused by defects in the mitochondria of brain cells of the eye. The research continues. 2) In the year 2021, many people have adopted the term "on the spectrum" to refer to the many brain dysfunctions that can and cannot be named and diagnosed yet. 3) Yale University Child Study Center and The Jim Henson Institute have invited many experts from many fields of study together to discover what happens when spectrum and non-spectrum children and adults look at puppets. What are they looking at? What do they see? Why don't we already know what they see? Are we looking at the important things? The chapter will explore these questions and specifically learning and the impact of puppets further.

INTRODUCTION

When parents learn that their children are on the autism spectrum a few things often occur. For example, many parents are given piles of pamphlets, phone numbers of experts and resources for items that can be purchased. The pamphlets can be too numerous to read, the phone numbers leading to more questions than answers and the items too expensive for the budget in many households. The following chapter provides insight into actions parents can take to direct their own learning about

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autism and to guide their child's learning about the world in which they live. Parents can access research to gain knowledge about autism and parents can use simple tools like puppets to communicate with their children and help their children learn to communicate with others.

THREE GOOD THINGS THAT ARE REALLY HAPPENING IN 2021

In late August of 2021 there may be many comments shared by many people about how much people have hated the year 2021. Is this the time to point to three amazing happenings so far in the research surrounding the autism spectrum in 2021? Let us name the three good phrases that spread great hope. Examine the three good phrases: "looking good," "almost magical" and "puppets."

- **Genetics** On February 1, 2021, researchers at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP) announced that The Autism Spectrum Disorders may be caused by defects in the mitochondria of brain cells (Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, 2021). The research continues into what is looking good very good.
- **Spectrums** In the year 2021 awareness that autism is a spectrum disorder is growing. While the DSM-IV released in 1994 was the first edition to categorize autism as a spectrum (Zeldovich, 2018), more and more people are now changing their vocabularies to use "autism spectrum disorder" in daily conversations. The people who choose to say "on the spectrum" do so because it is respectful and inclusive. The phrase "on the spectrum" shows people, their families and their medical team's kindness and dignity. It gives a name to what may not have a name at this time. It looks at what the person can do with expectation and hope in everyone's future. Many people say "on the Spectrum" without trying to explain everything. There can be progress and understanding without total perfection at this time.
- **Puppets** A Study at Yale University Child Study Center is discovering everyone likes to see puppets, but children on the spectrum spent the most time in this new study looking at the puppets. The Jim Henson Institute and Yale University Child Study Institute are partners in considering what eyes see (Disability Insider, 2021). They have invited many experts from many fields of study together to discover what happens when spectrum, neurotypical children and adults look at puppets. What are they looking at? The study showed that children with autism are less likely to attend to or engage emotionally with their social partner, which in term may limit their exposure to learning opportunities.

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