



Ellen Notbohm's Newsletter

Award-winning author and columnist

EllenNotbohm.com

Issue No. 54, June 2014



*“Listen up, everybody. I got good news.
We're extending arts and crafts time by four hours today.”*

~ Happy Gilmore

Smarts and Crafts: Message in a Birdhouse

“How much do children with autism comprehend?”

This is the time of year I get a lot of inquiries about how to interact with our kids in summer camp settings. I welcome the questions because I have the fondest memories of the lengths to which our Park Bureau's summer camp programs went to accommodate our son and others like him. Because of that potent commitment to inclusion, Bryce sampled a wide variety of activities, experiencing success at nearly all of them. I want the same for all our kids.

The question above came from a person who had decided to teach a summer-camp group of kids with autism how to build a birdhouse. He'd had an unsuccessful teaching experience with a special needs child years before and wanted to do better this time. I'm grateful for this kind of outreach, but if he wanted a simple answer, I didn't have one. What might seem like a simple question in the context of a typical summer experience is anything but. Children with autism are not a monolithic block. Like all children, how much they comprehend is a matter of individual degree. Many of them comprehend enough to grow up to do what so-called normal people do—go to college or learn a trade, fall in love, get married, hold a job, even hold elective office. They are artists, musicians, writers, athletes, workers, neighbors, voters. They are citizens of their communities.

Adults who contemplate summer camp interaction with children with autism face an exciting opportunity: to learn extraordinary things from the children they teach. Teacher-crafters, if you open yourself to this possibility, I can all but guarantee that what you gain from them will exceed anything you can now imagine, and possibly exceed anything you can teach them. But you may have to step out of your own ingrained perspectives and expectations.

Let's use that birdhouse as an example of how to create—or derail—a successful summer camp craft project for children with autism.

1. The first question is, why a birdhouse? Is it relevant to the child? Does the camp experience include guided bird watching? Do the children live in homes with outdoor living space that will allow them to continue to use the birdhouse to observe, enjoy and learn about birds? Requiring a child with autism to participate in an activity that has no connectivity to his life may not be teaching him much at all, or worse, teach him more about what he can't do than what he can.

2. Assume nothing. Assumptions without factual backup are no more than guesses. Especially do not assume prior knowledge—about anything. Many children with autism have difficulty with fine motor skills, and need much repetition and time to master a skill. What fine motor skills does the birdhouse require? Hammer and nails, glue gun, sandpaper, paintbrush, drill, screws? Don't assume the children have these skills, and build time into the schedule for a longer learning curve.

Provide video or stationary instructions for everything, even, if necessary, things as rudimentary as left vs right. For many children with autism, spoken words are like steam, there one second and gone the next. Visual instructions provide a means for them to review the information as many times as necessary, in a timeframe that works for them.

Be prepared to offer easier-to-handle materials. Consider also that many children with autism are hypersensitive to certain smells, textures and sounds. Be prepared to offer alternative materials and tools.

3. Communicate, verbally and visually, in vocabulary appropriate to their developmental (not chronological) age. Many children with autism have language deficits or employ echolalia, repeating memorized phrases from books, movies, people to compensate for expressive language skills they don't yet have. Don't assume a level of vocabulary or grasp of slang or idioms.

Consider assigning a peer buddy, someone who knows the child and understands how the child learns and communicates.

4. Is there a “right” and “wrong” way to make the birdhouse? If so, consider that a free-form project might offer more opportunity for success. The objective of any craft project should be that the child feels positive about having created something that feels like an expression of self. For instance, a scavenger hunt for cones, leaves, pebbles, etc. followed by the children choosing items that appeal to them to decorate a photo frame, collage, memory jar or shadowbox, or a sensory bin or basket (popular!).

At a minimum, be prepared to modify your expectations for what constitutes a successful outcome—for each child, according to his abilities. Here's where we get to the real answer to the question of how much a child with autism comprehends. The answer is, a great deal, and they especially comprehend disapproval and disappointment coming from adults, because they get that a lot. If you think the child's birdhouse is weird or stupid-looking or “wrong,” he'll comprehend.

There's no substitute for hard information. If you really want an understanding of what your campers' current skills are, talk to the parents before deciding on a project.

When an adult seems set on a particular craft or line of study requiring specific skills or prior knowledge, I sometimes have to ask a delicate question: What's your primary reason for wanting to teach this craft or study; is it to provide a successful, meaningful experience for the child, or to showcase your own talent, interests and knowledge? No matter how gently I ask this question, it sometimes stings. Sometimes the only response I get is silence. That's okay, because once planted, seeds grow in silence. Thoughts, attitudes and perspectives are like that too.

Consider this example: I'm an avid knitter. I've used a pattern called 5-hour Baby Sweater dozens of times. Let's say the local men's recreational basketball team wants a charity project, so I'm going to have them knit one of these baby sweaters. We'll meet five times, for an hour. It doesn't matter that they're not interested in knitting; everyone knows a baby sooner or later, right? And it doesn't matter whether they have the skills because knitting is just wrapping a string around a stick, right? If I can make the sweater in five hours, so can they, right? I'll just repeat the old knitting nursery rhyme, "In through the front door, run around the back. Peek through the window, and off jumps Jack!" over and over until they get it. We'll all pretend the sweaters they produce are great, even though they have holes, knots and puckers and will hit the first available trash bin once I'm out of sight.

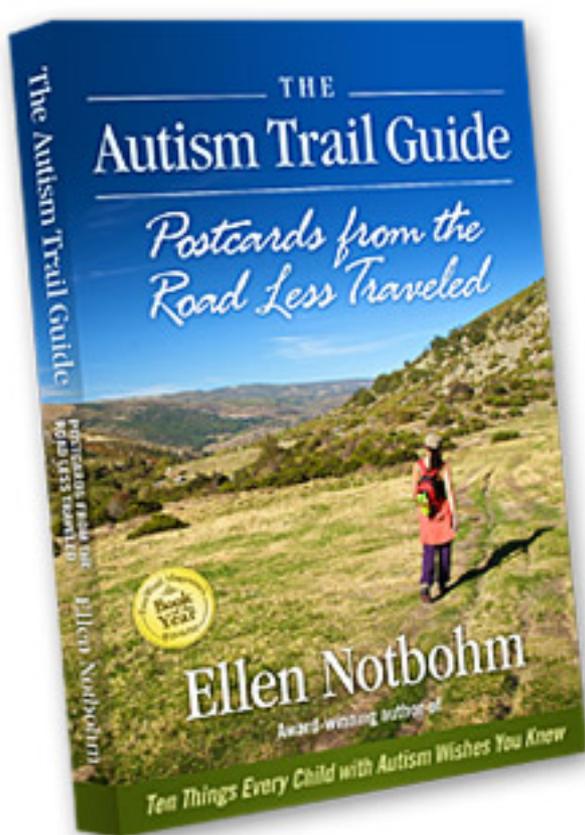
Were you cringing by the time you got to the end of that paragraph? I was! But shouldn't every teacher spend at least a few minutes imagining him- or herself on the receiving end of his or her own teaching?

One of my friends characterized her memories of summer arts and crafts as "painful images of deformed sand candles and nightmare-catchers." Perhaps an important criterion for smarts and crafts is the acknowledgment that it isn't for everyone. But more likely it's yet another example of the power of choosing to see ourselves from the child's perspective, and to welcome the multi-dimensional learning opportunity it offers us, every bit as much as them.

And we do it in anticipation of that first day of camp, when the child with autism looks at his teacher and wonders, "How much does he comprehend about kids like me?"

© 2014 Ellen Notbohm www.ellennotbohm.com

Introducing . . . my new old book!



The Autism Trail Guide: Postcards from the Road Less Traveled finally makes its ebook debut, just in time for summer reading (or cozy winter reading Down Under) for the laid-back price of just \$3.99. Updated, with an all-new appendix of questions for study, discussion, or self-reflection, it's ideal for parent support groups, classrooms, families and journal writers.

“The Autism Trail Guide is GREAT! I suggest this book to any parent with a child on the spectrum, and to any teacher of that child. Thank you to the author, for opening my eyes even wider on what I can do as a parent as well as help my child’s educators and specialists better understand him.”

~Michelle F. Buff, Founder, Appetite Solutions

“I’m renaming The Autism Trail Guide ‘The Support Group Guide.’ The essays flow so seamlessly that we use two for each meeting, concentrating on one for as long as it takes, then touching on the other for the next meeting. We pick up the new topic, and refer to the prior one when necessary. If the author had this in mind when she compiled the book, she’s a genius!”

~Linda Hamati, autism parent support group leader

Eric Hoffer Book Award finalist and ForeWord Book of the Year finalist

[Read an excerpt here](#) | [Buy now from Amazon](#)

This month in *Autism Asperger’s Digest*



[“The Cat’s Pajamas: Demystifying Idioms for Concrete Thinkers”](#)

Idioms and metaphors are so ubiquitous in our language that we rarely pause to wonder how on earth we ever came up with something as bizarre as “looking a gift horse in the mouth.” We toss around animal idioms in our everyday language like bulls in a china shop, without ever pausing to consider that they have the power to terrify our concrete-thinking children with autism. Ever tell your child that he has ants in his pants, or that you have butterflies in your

stomach or a frog in your throat? You didn't really put a bug in Aunt Kate's ear, did you? Or open up a can of worms? Nor did you hit a bull's-eye (or take said bull by the horns), grab a tiger by the tail, beat a dead horse, bark up the wrong tree, or have a cow. . .

This month on my Pinterest quotables board



Follow my [Pinterest Quotables board](#) for new pins to share each week, or browse my other boards of book reviews, articles, interviews and translations. Got an idea for a board you'd like to see? Contact me [through my website](#) or directly at emailme@ellennotbohm.com.

Downloadable PDF summaries of [Ten Things Every Child with Autism Wishes You Knew](#) and [Ten Things Your Student with Autism Wishes You Knew](#) now available on my website.

Did you miss my [last newsletter](#)? Visit the [archive on my website](#) for past features.

- The Two-Word Mantra for IEP Meetings
 - Who are They Calling a Lost Cause?
 - Autism Misconceptions for Smarties
 - Autism Mad-Libs: How to fill in the blanks
-

Writing a book? Contact me about affordable rates for developmental editing and writer coaching at emailme@ellennotbohm.com

Excerpts from all my books are on [my website](#), including full chapters from *Ten Things Every Child with Autism Wishes You Knew* and *Ten Things Your Student with Autism Wishes You Knew*. www.ellennotbohm.com

©2014 [Ellen Notbohm](#) | Third Variation Strategies