

A conference presented by

SQETGC

Service québécois d'expertise
en troubles graves du comportement

RÉSEAU NATIONAL
D'EXPERTISE
EN TROUBLE
DU SPECTRE
DE L'AUTISME



"Autism and screens: a complex relationship"

January 18th, 2023 – 9 AM to 4 PM



**Real and virtual worlds,
an autistic perspective**

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Real and virtual worlds, an autistic perspective



Introduction



- The positive impacts of screens
- The negative impacts of screens
- Assessing the situation
- Helping the autistic person

The positive impacts of screens

- Compensate for deficits
- Security feeling
- Learn to socialize
- Knowledge and skills
- Pleasure and relaxation

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Compensate for cognitive deficits

- | | |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Operating memory• Planning and organization• Orientation in time or space• Transitions• Attention• Problem solving• Control and regulation of emotions• Other executive functions• "Dys" disorders | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• To make calculations• To check spelling• Tasks and appointments• Visualize the passage of time• Step by step video tutorials• Planners• Support forums• Development of capacities• Making mistakes without serious consequences |
|--|---|

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Compensate for communication and interaction deficits

- *Alternative and augmentative communication (AAC):* pictograms, tables, sign languages, chat, decision trees, mind maps, video extracts, etc.
- *No language:* diagrams, videos, etc.
- *Facilite social interactions*

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Screens provide a sense of security

- ▼ *sensory discomfort*
- ▼ *insecurity (cognitive deficits)*
- *Compatible peoples*

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Mitigate discomfort related to sensory abnormalities

- | | |
|------------------|--------------------------|
| • Sight | • Balance |
| • Hearing | • Thermoception |
| • Smell | • Pain |
| • Taste | • Thirst and hunger |
| • Touch | • Bladder and intestines |
| • Proprioception | |

Sensory cocktail for each sense:

- Hyposensitivity
- Hypersensitivity
- Synesthesia
- White noise

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Alleviate insecurity caused by cognitive deficits

- Concrete thinking
- Detailed perception
- Analyzing the whole situation consciously before making sense
- Not reacting in real time
- Perpetual danger
- ► Interaction scripts

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Make it easier to find compatible people

- Unusual interests
- Humans = aversion to strangeness
- ► fear, disgust or hatred
- ► rejection
- Similar people

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Respond to knowledge and skill needs

- Feel competent
- Understand and know
- feel competent
- Understand and know
- "Insufficient", "incompetent" and "ignorant"...
- Game = recognized and valued skills and knowledge
- Digital literacy, career or volunteering in virtual environments

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Procurent plaisir et détente

- Happy or relaxing
- + tensions ► need for + relaxing moments
- Physical, psychological and emotional tensions
- ▼ frequency, duration et intensity of autistic meltdowns and shutdowns

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The negative impacts of screens

- Physical or sensory fatigue
- Running away from reality on the screens
- Developing an addiction

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Risk of cognitive, physical or sensory exhaustion

- If solicits hypersensitivity
- Sensory overload ► physical exhaustion
- Limit sleep time
- If solicits an impaired cognitive faculty
- Do not perceive exhaustion
- Breakpoint?

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Risk of running away from reality on screens

- Exhausting and painful relationship with the physical or human environment
- Virtual environment = only one which is bearable

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Assessing the situation

- The distinctive attachment style of some autistic people
- Addiction or adaptive strategy?
- The needs and expectations of the autistic person
- The needs and expectations of the loved ones

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1. The distinctive attachment style of some autistic people

- If parents are neurotypical
- If needs aren't perceived and understood ► not responded to quickly and adequately
- Inadequate response perceived as aggression
- No response ► perceived as abandonment
- Problematic or non-existent attachment "people assigned to my care"
- Relationships with humans = no benefit and potential danger

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2. Addiction or adaptive strategy?

- Do you really know addiction?
- Are you trained to differentiate it from the coping strategies of autistic people?

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Addiction or adaptive strategy?

- *Addiction: A condition characterized by the use of a substance or behavior in order to obtain something highly desirable, despite the harmful consequences of continuing. Addiction to feelings of pleasure, power, controlled risk, etc.*
- *Adaptive strategy: Means to compensate for one's deficits, limit one's autistic breakdowns, finally feel competent, socialize with compatible people, learn and develop skills, feel a moment of security, etc.*

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Vérifier les causes des comportements observés

- Don't attribute your neurotypical intentions, always check with the person!
- Sensory perceptions, cognitive style, perception of reality, values...
- Video game = stereotypes used to release tension
- Video game = predictable, logical, clear rules (cognitive)
- Ability to adjust the virtual (sensory) environment
- Psychological defense mechanisms + cognitive escape (rest) + sensory escape (well-being)

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Check the psychological state

- Absence of future ► absence of hope
- Fleeing a world that offers nothing to autistic people
- Distress (painful environment, unbearable continuously)
- Remove access to game ► will search for another solution to distress and pain

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Drawing conclusions

- Playing video games isn't inherently bad
- Source of reassurance in a chaotic world
- Moment of relaxation: clear rules, understandable and fixed consequences
- The virtual should not be the only strategy available to protect yourself
- Variety of solutions, strategies and accommodations, in each location/situation

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3. The needs and expectations of the autistic person

- Need of the autistic person or need of parent/caregiver?
- Know the person: ambitions, dreams, desires, plans, interests, values, MEANING to their life
- Autistic-chameleons: fragmented in characters, disconnected from Self
- Real need or defense mechanism in the face of years of suffering?
- Belief that any relationship will be negative or dangerous? (you would think that too if you had suffered the same violence, social exclusion and other abuses all your life)

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Our non-standard development

- Slower socio-emotional maturation for some
- Tension ► use of psychological defense mechanisms
- Insufficient resources, inappropriate advice, poorly trained and insufficiently experienced professionals ► impatient, irritable, exhausted, anxious, discouraged, helpless parents

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The risks of attributing intentions to the autistic person

- CHECK MOTIVATIONS!!!
- Believe the person
- Carl Rogers:
The organism responds to the perceptual field as it is experienced and perceived. This perceptual field is "the reality" for the individual.

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4. The needs and expectations of the loved ones

- Parents in **1+1=1** relationship with their autistic child
- Projects their needs onto son or daughter
- Needs of the loved one \neq needs of the autistic person

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Helping the autistic person

- Inform, explain and standardize
- Make the real world tolerable if not pleasant
- Make the real world safe and secure

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Inform, explain and standardize

- Normalize difficulties
- Identify irritants and find solutions
- Explain that their parent isn't mean, just ignorant

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Normalize difficulties

- Normalize difficulties, but not deny them
- ~~"We all have difficulties in life"~~
- The autistic person really has more difficulties to overcome
- Fear of failure in the real world (too chaotic and unpredictable):
 - Expose him to situations according to his abilities and skills
 - Failure ≠ stupidity or worthlessness
 - Failure = step in the learning process³
 - Experience and skill more important than short term success or failure

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Identify irritants and find solutions

- List of irritants and disagreements with loved ones
- Compromise, but never if interferes with a deficit or with a sensory abnormality
- Never require the autistic person to endure pain (sensory, physical) or unbearable stress (eg cognitive overload) in order to relate. How could he then perceive relationships positively?
- Helping loved ones to do their share (inform, train, support)
- Assess if this is a "non-problem" (Is it really necessary?)
- Evaluate alternatives (eg bath instead of shower), be creative!

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Explain that his parent isn't mean, just ignorant

- Important to explain:
 - The peculiarity of raising an autistic child for an NT parent.
 - The complex grieving of his dreams of all the things he was expecting doing with his son or daughter.
 - Difficulty in theory of mind and empathy towards one's child, due to different cognitive style, sensory abnormalities, etc. Google: "double empathy problem"
- Illustrate situations where the autistic person was also unable to put themselves in the shoes of an NT person. That doesn't make him a mean person, just someone who doesn't know what it is to be NT.
- Never demand more from the autistic person than from their parents, teachers or caregivers!
- Ability to understand according to actual stage of development (\neq chronological age)

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Make the real world tolerable if not pleasant

- Mitigating hypersensitivities and hyposensitivities
- Medication, psychotherapy and other therapies
- ▼ stress related to cognitive deficits

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Mitigating hypersensitivities and hyposensitivities

- MYTH: ~~Exposure will eliminate hypersensitivity.~~
- REALITY: Exposure will reinforce the belief that the real world is a source of suffering and that the people who claim to want to help you actually enjoy torturing you!
- Assess sensory abnormalities (occupational therapist)
- Find solutions and try them
- Spending time with an autistic adult, he will surely find things that the NT professionals missed.
- Make sure all the person's living environments follow the recommendations and applying the accommodations!

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Medication, psychotherapy and other therapies

- No medicine for autism, not a disease. It is a condition.
- Situations where medication can help: debilitating anxiety, incessant and intrusive ruminations, intolerable sensory stimuli despite reduced exposure, depression, insufficient sleep, etc.
- Autistic people are able to develop introspection and self-criticism. Some autistic people have not reached this developmental stage. Help them achieve it!

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Mitigating stress related to cognitive deficits

- Incongruences
- Impossibilities
- Orientation in time or space
- Transitions
- Unpredictability
- Lack of structure
- With the autistic person, be logical, direct, explicit, factual and honest
- See Chapter 4 of my book *L'adulte autiste* (free on [Archive.org](https://archive.org))

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Making the real world safe and secure

- NT psychology training
- No people with harmful/violent behavior
- No unnecessary stressful situations
- Make the real world more predictable

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Training in neurotypical psychology

- No training in NT psychology ► No generalization due to ignorance of the foundations of NT thinking, emotional feelings and expectations
- ~~Social skills workshops~~: a series of examples without substantive explanations are useless for autistic people ► Not generalizing
- Child
- Adolescent
- Adult

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Keep people with harmful/violent behaviors away

- Not able to protect ourselves from it without training in NT psychology
- Spend more time in his real environment, when it is full of harmful/dangerous people? And when denounces abuse and violence suffered, we are not believed.
- Spend more time with our loved ones, when our mere presence or existence causes them distress?

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Eliminate unnecessary stressful situations

- Effective way ▼ overall level of stress.
- Costs little or nothing. Be creative!
- Simple and fast.
- Check out autistic adults: books, blogs, vlogs, talks, etc.

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Make the real world more predictable

- Effective way ▼ overall level of stress.
- Check out autistic adults, local and international groups (Ask Autistic Adults - Resource for Parents of Autistics / 35,000 members).
- Spheres: sensory, social and cognitive.
- ▼ sources of sensory overload
- Do not require spontaneity in interactions and conversations, replace with scripts.
- Use schedules, sequences and routines.
- Concrete and logical explanations, diagrams and visuals, alternative and augmentative forms of communication (AAC).
- Clearly state your needs, expectations and intentions.

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Helping loved ones

- Information, training and support
- Find another source of affection and companionship
- Consult in psychotherapy if necessary

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Conclusion

- Accept other people's differences
- Integrate the person in all spheres
- Mentoring, accommodations, accompaniment, sensory aids, alternative communication, adapted transportation, monetary support, etc.
- Train the person in psychology and neurotypical communication

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