Promoting Independence:
creating programs, places, and partnerships

Janet Lawson, LMFT
CEO - Executive Director

Dan Swearingen
COO - Director of Studio Operations

Autistry Studios
It’s all about a boy...
...who grew up to be a man
My child can’t do [fill in the blank]...
because they are autistic.

Sometimes this is true.

But very often it is wrong and a TON of progress is possible.
Adaptive (and Maladaptive) Behaviors

Everyone

Adaptive (and Maladaptive) Behaviors

Abilities and Disabilities
Adaptive behaviors are behaviors that people learn throughout their lives in response to their environment.

Maladaptive behaviors (often used to reduce anxiety) result in non-productive outcomes— they are more harmful than helpful.
Symptoms of autism and associated neurological and systemic issues

Autism Speaks, autismspeaks.org, retrieved July 24, 2017
What we have learned about Autism

We think of Autism as made up of:

**Core neurological differences** – brain differences that cannot be changed, but can be managed and we call these the **Primary Aspects of Autism**

**Adaptive/Maladaptive behaviors** – these are learned and therefore can be treated and significant change can be achieved and we call these the **Secondary Aspects of Autism**
Primary Aspects – core neurological differences

The DSM-5 and other diagnostics are based on observables. Observables are symptoms of the underlying issues.

Observable: a fever of 39º C
Underlying issue: infection

Primary Aspects – the underlying issues:

• Language processing difficulties
• Difficulties regulating emotion, excitement, and sensory experience
• Impaired or atypical working memory
• Gross- and/or Fine-motor planning issues

We think these are the core neurological differences that are the foundation of Autism.
Secondary Aspects – adaptive and maladaptive behaviors acquired in response to the core neurological differences

*a partial list only:*

- ADD/ADHD-like behaviors and associated behaviors
- Poor social intelligence
- Poor empathy – poor theory of mind, poor ability to intuit the motivations of others
- Poor executive function, poor imagination (2\textsuperscript{nd} order ignorance)
- Tantrums, OCD-like behaviors
- Stress from, and avoidance of, new situations
- Stress from, and avoidance of, high frequency social encounters
- Poor performance in school (this sometimes does not appear until college, or even graduate school)
- Difficulty managing stress – allowing themselves to be completely ruled by fears and stress
- MANY other possible related issues …
Independence is not going it alone
What does “independence” mean?

**Independence:**
The ability to plan and make progress towards long term goals while adequately handling immediate needs as they arise.
A recipe for successful independence

Key Ingredients:

• Challenge
• Resilience
• Self-control
• Self-care
• Education
Challenge

Autistics, like NTs, grow and develop when challenged.

When left unchallenged they regress.

Independence requires the ability to challenge oneself.
They’ll figure it out, eventually.

- Stay up all night
- Get up at noon
- Mainly online friends
- No work or dead end work

No, they won’t figure it out.

The Stress box
Challenge

- Overcome fear of rain
- Move out of artistic comfort zone
- Try new food
- Learn to take the bus
- Go whitewater rafting
- Busting the brain

*When left unchallenged they regress.*
Resilience

Stuff happens!

And sometimes, “Doing the best I can” is not enough.

If you don’t fall down...
   ...you don’t learn how to stand up!

Independence requires the ability to recover from setbacks.
- Dealing constructively with failure
- Pushing through being a beginner
- Waiting for a pencil
- Big ideas, but can’t handle intermediate steps
Self-Control

Behaviors that are destructive to the individual’s ability to participate in the community need to be identified and managed.

Social Blockers

Independence requires the ability to control oneself.
Self-Care

Adults need to be able to care for themselves.

Housekeeping, cooking, shopping, first-aid, personal hygiene, navigation, and transportation need to be taught and practiced.

Independence requires the ability to take care of yourself.
Education

Education isn’t just about taking classes.

It is about learning how to learn so that your knowledge keeps pace with your growing abilities.

Independence requires the ability to educate oneself.
Ten Greatest Challenges Facing the Autistic Adult

1) Difficulty receiving a diagnosis
   - especially high verbal individuals and women

2) Less likely to attend or finish college
   - traditional special education courses do not prepare students for higher education

3) Difficult time finding and keeping a job
   - little experience of workplace culture

4) Lack of independent living skills
   - assumption of incapability/learned helplessness

5) Experience more chronic health problems than general public
   - immune conditions, GI and sleep disorders, seizure disorders, obesity, eating disorders
6) Increased risk of mental health issues
   - schizophrenia, depression, anxiety, ADHD, bipolar disorder (~500% normal risk)

7) Continued financial cost of autism
   - Residential communities can be prohibitively expensive, ongoing therapy and support adds up, loss of family income to provide care

8) Less likely to receive adequate health care as an adult
   - often don’t transition from pediatrician to adult care provider
   - often avoid medical services

9) Difficulty launching from family home
   - lack of opportunity
     + parental reluctance to let go
10. Shortened life span

- High verbal life expectancy is 16 years less than normal (~ 56 years)
- Low verbal life expectancy is 50% of normal (~ 36 years)

Why: accidents (especially drowning), stress, suicide (stress), heart disease (also stress!), see all above, epilepsy (especially low verbal adults)
Source: *Premature mortality in autism spectrum disorder*, Hirvikoski, et. al.


**N= 27,122** individuals diagnosed with ASD between 1987 and 2009 out of population **N = 2,672,185** Sweden National Patient Registry.

US death data published in 2017 found a similar result
Autistry Core:  
*We build independent adults*

**Autistry Core** - a therapeutic Maker/STEAM program where students work on projects they choose.

We work with ages 13 and up and all verbal levels in our Build Stuff groups.

Students come once a week to small groups.
The Core Workshops offer nearly one-on-one staffing for small groups of students. The emphasis is on producing projects (the **carrot**) while improving behavior and performance (the **stick**).
Project-Based Therapy

**Project-Based Therapy (PBT)** - a therapeutic approach developed at Autistry for teens and adults on the autism spectrum.

We use PBT to build social function, executive function, and develop a robust sense of self. All of these support becoming successfully independent.
Project Based Therapy: it’s all about the projects!
Autistry Comprehensive Adult Program (ACAP)
ACAP – Adult Day Program

The ACAP curriculum is comprised of four interwoven programs:

❖ Education  
❖ Vocation  
❖ Life Skills  
❖ Physical Fitness/Healthy Living

Together they provide a 5-day per week comprehensive learning experience that supports growth, maturation, and individuation.
ACAP: Education

We believe in lifelong learning.

We encourage clients to take at least one academic course each semester.

Autistry provides in-class mentors, home-work help, and coursework organization.
ACAP: Vocational Skills

Employment - it is not only how we earn a living it is how we participate in our community and, in large measure, how we define ourselves.

Our Vocational Program includes:

❖ Skill building - woodwork, computer graphics, sewing, 3D printing, laser cutting, ShopBot, and other power and hand tools.
- Paid Internships at the Western Railway Museum restoring historic trolley cars and general museum maintenance

- Paid Internships at Square Peg Foundation working with rescued thoroughbred racehorses and maintaining the farm

- Paid jobs at local businesses (past placements have included Buck Institute, Copperfield’s Books, Renew Computers, Sprouts Market).
ACAP: Life Skills

Domestic chores and community exploration. Including visits to museums and cultural events as well as cooking, cleaning, and hygiene.

Physical Fitness/Healthy Living

We encourage healthy eating and healthy activities. We prepare balanced meals and workout regularly.
For more information contact:

Autistry Studios
448 Du Bois Street,
San Rafael, CA 94901
www.autistry.com

(415) 454-1037
janet@autistry.com
dan@autistry.com