

Befriending and Autism



Polly Sheterline befriended Daniel for a year. Daniel was 18 years old and was diagnosed with Asperger syndrome when he was six. His mother was keen for him to meet someone nearer to his own age where he could enjoy social activities and gain more confidence.

"Daniel was very open about his Asperger syndrome and was quick to tell me about situations where he felt nervous. He was particularly nervous on public transport and would not travel alone. So I would get the bus to his home and we would go from there, we would go on the bus to the cinema, or go on a boat trip on the river or go on the train into London and visit the museums."

"Daniel was so keen to conquer his fears and I was also very keen to see him gain confidence. Within no time at all I could see his confidence growing. We spent many an afternoon walking down the riverfront chatting about life etc or talking over a pint in a local pub. I did nothing but be there as a friend, offering assurance and a helping hand. Daniel made so much progress. His determination and confidence grew every day. He has landed himself a great job as a greenkeeper on a golf course, which is the line of career he has always wanted to follow. He gets on buses on his own and comes to meet me in Kingston without any problems. It has been an absolute joy to be a part of this NAS befriending programme and to meet Daniel. I have learned so much and had a huge amount of fun."

Daniel's mum thought Polly was extremely reliable and a really lovely person. Daniel really enjoyed her company and their outings. She confirms that he has gained lots of confidence since the befriending began and is now able to travel alone and start a full-time job.

Befrienders can help break the wall of isolation for families and individuals whose lives are affected by an autistic spectrum disorder. NAS befrienders spend a few hours each week with the family, or with the person who has autism or Asperger syndrome. Some spend time in the family home, others go out and about. We have a number of schemes around the UK. If you are interested in becoming a befriender please call 0115 911 3369 or email volunteers@nas.org.uk to find out if there is a scheme in your area.

AUTISM—BACKGROUND INFORMATION

In 1988, Rain Man swept the Academy Awards, winning four Oscars including Best Actor for Dustin Hoffman's portrayal of a man living with autism. Indeed, the inspiration for the film, 54 year-old Kim Peek, has since become quite a celebrity and travels widely across the US demonstrating his incredible depth and breadth of knowledge. The film was a huge success both critically and commercially, and has become hugely instrumental in informing the public's understanding of autism. But while it has been effective in raising the profile of the condition, it has also cemented a strong cultural stereotype which is, in fact, both misleading and unhelpful.

The reality is that less than 1%¹ of people with autism in the UK actually have *autistic savant syndrome*, the condition displayed in Kim Peek, whereby a person possesses an unusually high level of specific ability. The vast majority of people with autism do not have such skills, nor is the condition any indication of specific mental or learning ability.

The National Autistic Society defines autism as *"a lifelong developmental disability that affects the way a person communicates and relates to people around them"*.

Matthew Day from Number 6 (www.number6.org.uk), a centre for adults with High Functioning Autism (HFA) or Asperger's Syndrome in the Lothians says;

"The public tend to define autism as either someone with a severe learning disability or as Rain Man. Definitely, the common misconception is that people with autism are all brilliant at something - this can be disheartening for a lot of people who have been told they should be, and don't deal very well with the fact they're not."

When it comes to befriending, many of the issues are the same as in every befriending project. The most important things to be aware of is the massive range of social and relational ability within the autism community. It is extremely hard to make generalisations about forming relationships with people with autism. Simply put, the specific needs of people with autism vary from person to person. In theory, providing befriending opportunities for people with autism seems complex. But in practice, the reality is about taking small steps to make individuals feel comfortable, setting clear, shared expectations and being responsive to the ongoing social and relational needs of the individual. As Matthew Day puts it: *"So many people are just your everyday people with a different way of thinking."*