

# Anchoring Awesome

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Situational examples included below are not intended as relative to any particular individual or school setting but do reflect true examples.

## Introduction

**Anchoring Awesome** supports SENCOs and those working with school aged children and adolescents, with a diagnosis or presentation of autism and /or associated neuro developmental differences (referred to as learners below) to explore these significant aspects of the curriculum that often present very differently for autistic and neurodiverse learners.

## Examine wonder and awe in the curriculum

For many learners wonder and awe is experienced but not always expressed and shared. Practitioners may discover a child engrossed in their learning experience which may or may not have been facilitated by them. A child transfixed by the droplets of rain trickling down the window may be mistaken as simply gazing out.

Because social and communication aspects of development differ, it is less likely that an autistic child is going to break from this fascinating hold to comply with social expectations. It is also less likely that they might say **“wow, come and look at this”**. **“Theory of mind and range of perspective-taking required for meaningful social experiences are reportedly often significantly more challenging for autistic individuals.”** (Dr Patricia Prelock).

Learners may not always instinctively want to share information or perhaps the current communication developmental level inhibits expressive language. This results in a skilful observer 'catching the moment'.

**“Get up off the grass Janey, I’ve said every break time you are not allowed on the grass.”**

The child responded with his only words of the day: **“short grass long grass fat grass thin grass no grass.”**

This quite possibly was that learners only experience of wonder and awe that day. Teachers reading this may wonder if using that as a basis for further language, further maths or further science may be awesome? Creating a life span of wonder and awe 'is the role of the setting to help children experience the awe and wonder of the world in which they live' (Ofsted, 2019).

This is how valuable wonder and awe is: it can be easily missed as a learning platform and opportunity, yet used skilfully, it could facilitate weaving wonder and awe into several of the seven areas of learning:

- communication and language
- physical development.
- personal, social and emotional development
- literacy
- mathematics
- understanding the world
- expressive arts and design

When reading the list it would appear the example of Janey's self-directed learning could have facilitated the weaving of wonder and awe into every one of the learning areas. Steve Mould from Blue Peter travels the country supporting wonder and awe in Primary Science and is a real role model for using the natural world as a trigger for engaging learning.

In high school we are often delighted by responses to science experiments that lend themselves to wonder and awe. Katherine Malanownoski highlights the importance of **“getting into the habit of responding with wonderment and awe, at math concepts like the sequence of Fibonacci numbers, and how this sequence appears in nature, prime spirals etc.”**

Many learners may excel in these areas as their brain development often lends itself to enjoying systematic, logical and factual information. Some research by Dr Turner examining repetitive behaviour and memory noted the **“response inhibition, cognitive flexibility/set shifting and generativity”** as areas of notable challenge in autism, however these thinking styles also lend to retaining detailed specific information.

**“Ask P any capital city in the world and I swear he can tell you, honestly he is awesome”** (year 7 pupil). Interestingly P did not perceive himself as exceptional and did not know his peers could not share the same level of information.

Being the topic of wonder and awe to your peers, especially for our learners is something to celebrate. P also remembered the value of many more Pokemon characters than most of his peers. The challenge for P's teacher lies in expanding and

engaging learning into areas that P does not demonstrate an interest. When planning to extend interest for a learner it is worth considering Dr Turners research noted above. Cognitive inflexibility and generativity demands creative thinking.

The area of interest is often a useful starting point to engage in skilled learning. History was of no interest to P but creative planning to set a task of finding 2 capital cities in the world that had kings 100 years ago, supported an initial engagement. Engaging learners in this way as well as facilitating self-directed learning offers a valuable opportunity for a life span of curiosity and hopefully wonder and awe.

### Creating a life span of wonder and awe

**“The most beautiful experience in the world is the experience of the mysterious.”** - Albert Einstein also commented on the imagination being the gateway to lifelong wonder and awe, describing it as a gateway to evolution and learning. Many autistic adults can explain most articulately the differences in their imaginations.

Rosie King (2014) discusses autism as ‘freeing her’ and she spoke when younger of a vast imagination. She explained seeing the world in pictures and animations and how her extensive and vivid imagination would mean she experienced anxiety when selecting a pair of shoes in case one pair felt left out. She is unable to imagine what she would do if she missed a bus on a planned journey and may feel panic at the idea. She uses a support aid called ‘Brain in hand’, a digital support system which helps people with making decisions, managing anxiety, and dealing with unexpected situations. If her life span opportunity of wonder and awe is fuelled by imagination as Einstein suggests, it may also be for Rosie and similar learners, that in some aspects it is also limited by it.

Marco (2011) reported **“an inability to properly filter or process simultaneous channels of visual, auditory and tactile inputs.”** While this may be experienced in some instances as overwhelming it may account for the ability to find wonder and awe in objects that for many would hold no interest.

Ros Blackburn a verbally articulate autistic adult, who is extensively supported in twenty four hour adult day to day life, speaks fondly of her shiny items including glitter tubes and ‘flappy’ silver paper. These can hold her in awe for hours. She goes on to express her gratitude to her parents for not allowing her to remain **‘lost in her own awesomes’**, that for her they were and are now, a reward after speaking in an auditorium to hundreds of people.

Ros may say her ability is to focus and be preoccupied with a subject, while we may cite it as her articulate verbal ability. She explains **“My language can be my biggest disability, I sound so sorted and clearly I am not.”**

Some autistic people describe their awesomeness as their structured organisation. An affinity with animals, attention to detail, sensory awareness and creativity can also be autism awesomeness. Tony Osgood points out **“in autism it is the significance of such differentials that counts.”**

Interpretation of these differentials can take a positive or negative perspective, consider a verbally advanced two year old, consistently and resolutely playing in the water tray:

**Positive:** Focused, intense, informative, satisfying, engaged, awed by the water trickling over and over his hands.

**Negative:** a strong personality at play seen as limited, rigid and self-indulgent.

The question practitioners may need to be brave enough to ask is is this awesome limiting his development, are they 'getting in the way' of other experiences? Observation and collaboration with parents revealed concerns around the limited experiences of their child. They were very clear that they were not sending him to nursery to only pour water, indeed he does lots of that at home but what about when he goes to school?

There is a responsibility for practitioners to ask hard questions about what, why and how long we are supporting a particular learning experience. Engaged children often pose 'no trouble' but as Lee's parents expressed, an autistic learner may need more proactive intervention to encourage and expand their learning.

A Pedagog in a Danish Kindergarten commented: **"Yanik is a complete mystery, he is so fascinating in his ability to learn and appreciate things other children don't even notice. His preciseness is so evident in his creative activities, his models are inspiring at only six years old but he truly could spend his day at the dough table."**

There is undoubtedly debate to be had here, perhaps Yanik will one day be a famous sculpture but those involved in Yanik's life need to know it was his choice, not a self limited inevitability. Winner (2009) challenges us to consider 'social' as a complex experience that requires more than just learning isolated skills. The same can be said of learning. It may be that we have in part a responsibility to reveal the engaging possibilities and elements of a given subject area for that particular learner.

If we can detect these abilities and embed them in learning it is likely we can balance expectations more successfully and celebrate positive, enjoyable and engaging learning experiences. One head teacher shared he has breakfast with six students every morning commenting “in the true sense, not watching behaviour but absorbing their experience”. ‘Absorbing the experience’ demonstrates the value of balancing intervention and expectations. If we can, as the head teacher suggested, do more than observe but actually absorb, empathise and see their moment or experience their awesome, we will likely enjoy sharing it but realistically know we may need to initiate and teach transitional skills.

Gray’s social stories (2002) are a helpful principle in teaching learners to cope with specific transitions that are potential ‘stressors’. For example you may know from observation and reflection that the feel of the flour in a baking activity is going to ‘get in the way of the task’. As the practitioner you have a balance to reach. You might decide to leave an intrigued neurotypical learner simply playing with flour knowing that because they have flexible thought skills and can conceptualise the outcome of the activity, he will break himself away from the flour to continue. For the learner in question this is less likely and he will need support and encouragement. A planned social story is an efficient tool to assist with conceptualising an idea.

Social stories also need to 'follow a recipe' of non-directive language, a positive perspective, and gently guiding rather than instructing. There are three main ingredients:

**1. Description sentences: what is happening in the situation**

Today is baking day. All the children in my group are going to put ingredients in a bowl, mix them together then put them in bun tins, bake them in the oven and when they are cool enough we will be able to eat one and take two home.

**2. Perspectives: what others feel or think**

Everyone in my group loves the taste of cake. I like the feel of the flour, some children don't like the feel of the flour. I will use my hands to touch the flour. Some children will use a spoon. The flour needs to go into the mix to make the cake.

**3. Directive: what to do**

It will be good to put all my flour in the cake. When we have finished mixing the cake and put the mix in the tins I can use some flour and the sieve until the cakes come out of the oven. Baking will then be finished.

Other strategies can also assist in developing flexibility of thought and expanding the executive functioning skills of managing thought, actions and emotions. On a school trip B was grasped by a shard of light cutting through a barn panel. He spent some time totally awed by the light, he picked up a stick and experimented transfixed in the moment.



It was so awesome to witness the magic of wonder and awe transporting B to being totally absorbed in the moment, that his TA described it as **“painful to know somehow, I had to move him on. I had 2 other children I was also responsible for, there were animals to see and lambs we were booked to feed. I decided to capture the moment, took a photo on my phone and showed B this, to break his attention. I got the feed from my pocket and said first feed goats and lambs then more light. I gathered my other two children less reluctantly from the slide. I did take their picture and once I reminded them we were going to see the animals, they didn’t need any coaxing! B was understandably reluctant, but the photograph helped enormously, and he really enjoyed the animals. When we returned to the barn for a final play the light had moved, he surprised me by just searching for it for a few minutes. I got the photograph out and said light gone, shadow.”**

This experience was skilfully balanced back at school using torches and different items inside a blacked-out cardboard box to extend the interest in light and shadow. The logical and systematic approach of the TA had worked well.

Explanations and reasoning need to be balanced against communication ability, levels of development and tolerance - sometimes less is more! Clear, concise communication complemented by ‘rules’, visuals, a schedule, a motivator and a reward is likely to support a successful transition from one activity to another.

A helpful 'homework activity' to explore how to achieve balance may be to metaphorically or physically use scales, especially if working with your learner on achieving a balance.

1. Identify the 'wonder and awe moment'.
2. Acknowledge the enjoyment and if possible, label this.
3. Communicate the reasoning for transition, offer structure to help explain or reveal this.
4. Reassure if possible, a further opportunity, if not explain why not.

**"In Great Lessons, it is important to step back from time to time to contemplate the subject in hand, instilling a sense of Awe. This is how the seeds of a deep-rooted love of learning are sown. We're not just learning this stuff because we have to or because it is useful. We are learning it because it is just so fabulously, fascinatingly awe-inspiring. There is no greater motivation to learn than this."** Teacherhead.com

Hand dryer in the school toilets.  
Enjoy lovely warm air  
Can control the on and off



**The rule is:**

Hand wash and two turns with Dryer before lesson then Handwash and two turns with Dryer after lesson.

Write this into timetable

Introduce a pocket fan

## Further Reading

Dr Patricia Prelock in Winner, M (2009) A Politically Incorrect Look at Evidence-Based Practices and Teaching Social Skills, California, Think Social Publishing

Osgood, T (2020) Supporting Positive Behaviour in Intellectual Disabilities and Autism, London JKP)

Katherine Malanownoski Learning Personalised Education Hub 2020

Turner, M. Annotation: Repetitive behavior in autism: A review of psychological research. Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry (1999;40:839–849.)

Marco, E et al (2011) Sensory Processing in Autism: A Review of Neurophysiologic Findings. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3086654/X>

## About Witherslack Group

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## About Ideas Afresh Education

This resource is brought to you by Anne-Marie Harrison, Education and Training Director for Ideas Afresh Education Ltd, in partnership and with thanks to Witherslack Group. Anne-Marie offers family support and CPD accredited staff training.



If there are any topics raised in this resource you would like additional information on, or for a range of virtual support, home/school visits, or whole school CPD accredited training please contact Anne-Marie at [annemarie@ideasafresh.co.uk](mailto:annemarie@ideasafresh.co.uk) or visit [www.ideasafresh.co.uk](http://www.ideasafresh.co.uk)