# A Golfer's Guide to Education

by Steve Kendall

# Introduction

My first encounter with teaching was as a sixth-former, press-ganged by Miss Lees (our powerful, Scottish deputy-head) into ‘volunteering’ to help in a local primary school. The head-teacher of that school happened to be Mr Jackson, our next-door neighbour, a jovial gentleman who recounted amusing stories about his war-time service in Sidi Barrani. He also told me that educational theories were like buses - there’d be another one coming along very soon.

Well, here I am some forty years later, having taught for two years in a Youth & Community Project, two years in India, fifteen years as a mainstream secondary music teacher and fifteen years as a Special Needs teacher. In all that time, I had just one ‘promotion’, changing jobs to become the head (and ‘one man band’) of a Music Department. This book is not educational theory, I hope.

Having retired from teaching, I decided to try to become a care-worker, possibly with people older than myself. During the first few weeks of my retirement (in what would have been my summer holiday) my daughter, Jo became increasingly ill. Jo had battled all her life with cystic fibrosis. My plans changed and it was decided I should look after her. When Jo went into hospital (the day I would have returned to school) I started visiting her for several hours each day, and this gradually increased. Jo died on October 8th, 2016.

By a series of coincidences, I had started to work with two older pupils from my former school. These were quickly supplemented by a nineteen-year-old needing help with work experience and a social (gym / swim) session. When a fourth young man appeared and was interested in designing board-games (my main hobby), I knew the game was up: teaching of one sort or another is what I’m meant to do.

Then a former colleague (I'm not going to use any more names) contacted me asking if I could do some cover work for her whilst she did jury service. We met up. Walking into a mainstream primary school, I knew this simply wasn't for me and wasted no time in making this abundantly clear. I explained what work I was now doing, and soon plans were in place to extend the work to a small group of mainstream children. These children were having difficulties coping at school and needed help.

To cut a long story short, having set up this mainstream provision I realised I needed to explain more clearly to the parents just how I might help. And that's why I'm writing this Guide.

Before we begin, I'd like to thank the hundreds of colleagues and thousands of children that I have worked with down the years. Finally, I have decided that any funds I receive from this publication (hardly Peter Pan) will go to supporting the Cystic Fibrosis Trust.

# The Locker Room

Twenty-five years after last swinging a club, I started playing golf again. On a crisp sunny morning I hit a 7-iron straight down the middle of the fairway and thought to myself, 'I could be good at this'. Now as all golfers know, the game is wonderfully frustrating . For most of us it takes years and years of practice to be half good and progress made one day can evaporate the next. In a nutshell, to be successful a golfer must have an underlying knowledge of the game (club selection, course management etc.) and a well-organised technique (back swing, follow through etc.).

My golf has improved and if I could just get my driver sorted out I might be more than half good. Combining knowledge and technique works - and I have a spread-sheet to prove it. What's more I have come to realise that I might have been better at other sports had my performance been under-pinned by knowledge and technique. I could have been a far better cricketer had I learned the difference between a leg-break and a googly, and then practised getting my feet quickly into position when batting!

Something similar applies to my teaching. Though I have been an effective teacher, I'm sure I could have done better had I formulated and developed the knowledge and techniques that I was using. Belatedly, circumstances have conspired to do just that.

During my career I have taught content for a wide variety of subjects (Music, Maths, English, PSHE, PE, Gardening, Cooking etc.) and used a huge amount of resources and teaching methods (I started with chalk). I have received a vast amount of training and thank all those who have attempted to introduce me to new ideas, particularly as I've grown older and more resistant to change. Alongside this is my own 'experience' which is altogether less quantifiable yet something that all teachers acquire in bucket-loads.

‘Experience’ doesn’t tend to feature during in-service training , but is the stuff of staff-room conversations.

This Guide attempts to bring some much-needed organisation to my training and experience and thereby define some of the knowledge and techniques that have come to under-pin my teaching. In particular this addresses my work with teenage children who are diagnosed as being autistic. As you read the Guide you will also realise that the group of autistic children I am referring to does not include those most severely affected by the condition.

Anyone who is a family member or friend of an autistic child might find the basic tenet of this Guide untenable; the same might be the case with professionals working with autistic children. The good news is that the ‘conceit’ is explained at the start of the Guide, so the reading could be terminated without too much waste of time. That said, I hope no-one is going to get too hot under the collar - indeed a good deal of the Guide may seem blindingly obvious.

Sometimes my style of writing may irritate, as I tend to digress and become anecdotal. In order to reduce this tendency I have formatted the Guide in such a way as to mirror a round of golf. There are eighteen holes (chapters) and the yardage per hole is the number of words in the chapter. The longest hole is a 641 yard, par 5 and the shortest a mere 136 yard, par 3. There is also a nineteenth hole (the Clubhouse bar) which you should feel free to visit at any time. Each chapter begins with some thoughts about golf, which may be obtuse to non golfers, but were a useful encouragement to me when writing the Guide.

Well this locker room monologue has gone on quite long enough. Enough of the chat; let’s play some golf!

## Hole 1 - 641 yards, par 5
## The most important thing

Golfers tend to hold a final thought before making a swing. At one time I tried to find a 'quiet place' where I could be relaxed and alert at the same time. This was somewhat reminiscent of Mike Brearley's flirtation with Zen archery (the England Captain made a duck the following day). These days I'm more practical and I try to watch the ball until the moment the club reaches it. This might be the most important thing in golf.

*"What is the most important thing?"* The first 'chat' with my very last tutor group began with that question. Answers included: *"Put your hand up", "No fighting", "Be kind".* These autistic children had some good answers, but no one said, *"Talking".* That was the answer I gave and subsequently reminded them of whenever opportunity arose.

Difficulties with language and communication is one of the defining characteristics of autism, so encouraging talking ought to be a priority. Of course, some with more severe needs find talking extremely difficult, if not impossible, so really the answer is 'communicating' – but, to those who can speak, 'talking' is much easier to understand. In a classroom situation, there is a need for some governance of talking, and this is just as true in a school which specialises in teaching autistic children. However, the effect of that governance impacts on all further interactions between teacher and pupil - so best to try to get it right from Day One.

Inevitably, teachers are inclined to talk 'to', or worse, talk 'at' their pupils. Autistic children can only take so much of this and then their minds wander. My enthusiasm for sport meant that this tended to happen when teaching the older and more able pupils. One day during football coaching I apologised that they were having to listen to constant *"Blah! Blah! Blah! Blah!"* This went down very well, and the phrase

became frequently used by myself and by more cheeky pupils. Ironically, this simple acknowledgement helped the pupils to maintain attention.

Much more important is to talk 'with' pupils, and this means developing strategies and techniques. Let's be clear that the sort of talking that is going to be most beneficial is the sort that feels comfortable and natural. The teacher / pupil relationship has to be maintained because that is the natural relationship, but it has to be comfortable. Hopefully, most of us will have been fortunate enough to have experienced that sort of relationship with a teacher at one time or another.

Setting up a specific time for one-to-one talking works well. I would talk with each pupil during their recreation time on a Friday afternoon - a good time as they tended to be 'chilled' and inclined to see the 'chat' as something else to be enjoyed. I allocated each pupil two minutes of time and often used a timer. Sometimes I had something I wanted to talk about, but generally the emphasis was on the pupil having control of the conversation. All chats were celebrated as being successful, no matter what happened, and this continued week after week after week. Gradually, trust grew and talking increased.

Encouraging talking can be very difficult, but here's something to consider: most children will respond to a greeting (*"Hi"*) even if they decline to answer a question. Questions, closed or open, are demanding and children, even those who talk readily, are under considerably more pressure when having questions put to them. So, a trick is to avoid asking questions. Adults can find this very difficult, particularly when talking has dried up.

Instead I try to talk 'in parallel' to the child, saying things in general agreement with the gist of what they are saying, sometimes simply extending an idea. You can help a pupil an awful lot once you can talk with them.

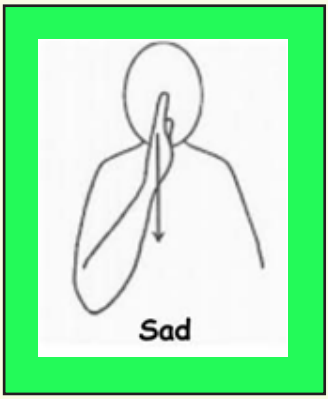
## Hole 2 - 446 yard Par 4
## Not in trouble

There's no doubt that golfers will play some poor shots. When first learning the game, a poor shot might be a drive that goes three feet off the tee or a putt that screams past the hole. As the golfer progresses, so the poor shot might be the dreaded shank or a fluffed chip, less dramatic, but equally traumatic. Most golfers carry fear of the poor shot like an extra club in their bag, and this then affects overall performance. Golf is best played with friends on a warm day with the prospect of a cold beer in the bar afterwards. Positive vibes make for positive play.

Autistic children hate being in trouble. This presents a real problem because their behaviour can often be at variance with the norm and will need to be corrected. There are two ways this can be done: by 'telling off' or by helping the child to understand. Telling off means the child feels 'in trouble' which, when you think about it, is not at all surprising. A telling off comes with a certain amount of verbal and facial aggression. This can be minimal or can escalate into something very unpleasant. To the autistic child this is very difficult to understand. To any child, the effect (and it is a desired effect) is to make the child feel insecure. 'In trouble' equates to 'in danger', and very quickly the child is struggling with feelings of anxiety and panic, fight or flight etc. This is NOT a good place to be where learning is concerned.

When correcting an autistic child, it's a good idea to immediately say, *"I'm not cross with you"*, or something similar. Establishing some such phrase and using it consistently will reap dividends. It's also essential to make sure that this is actually true - otherwise trust will be lost. Control of voice and facial expression are critical. Best to be quite deadpan; smiling is confusing.

However, if not 'cross', it is important to explain to the child how you do feel as a result of their inappropriate behaviour, again, with control of voice and facial expression, or possibly with a Makaton hand sign to make a simple statement of fact. For example, *"I'm sad"*.




The good thing is that autistic children tend to be extremely honest, like to know 'the rules' and are not duplicitous. It is relatively easy to establish a relationship that works and allows the autistic child to face the uncertainties of their life with some confidence that things will be alright. And we all need that.

When things don't go well, it's usually helpful to say *"It's alright"* or *"It's OK"*.

## Hole 3  427 yard par 4
## Sharing a conversation

Golfers shouldn't talk when their playing partners are taking their shot and should be equally respectful to golfers on adjacent holes. At the end of a round it's customary to shake hands with opponents and thank them for the game. More important than these etiquettes are the conversations (sometimes about golf) that take place during the round. These help improve a golfer's game and build friendships. Knowledge and technique extends into the psychodynamic.

Autistic children need help with conversations. Talking may be the most important thing, and establishing structures to help conversations is good practise, but reaching a deeper level of communication and trust can be  demanding. Developing techniques to accomplish this is essential.

When I taught in India (a different round of golf) it was a real privilege to meet and get to know many, many people from that amazing culture. I had no difficulty with the heat, the food, sanitation etc., but gradually began to suffer from culture shock. Despite innumerable conversations, I never felt I was getting close to anyone in the same way I might within my own culture. Might an autistic child feel the same? And can that culture gap be breached?

Yes and no.

The autistic child must be helped to function as effectively as possible in the mainstream world. One temptation is to try to make the autistic child NOT autistic, but this isn't going to happen.  Pushing at that door will tend to make the child push back - and they can push hard. So, despite it often feeling counter-intuitive, a shared conversation should be led by the autistic child, no matter how bizarre or repetitive this might be. For example, one child might want to share their love of The Simpsons - episode after episode. Another might

like computers – and, boy, some children can know a lot about computers. The role of the teacher is to get into that world,to genuinely find it interesting and to then effectively communicate that interest back to the child. Autistic children may not be good at understanding how other people feel, but they do know when a person is really on their wave-length, and at that point a connection will be made. This connection is an end in itself; do not jeopardise it. Excessive use of leverage contributes little in any relationship. Best is to encourage the conversation to grow by taking it along new pathways: ask an unexpected question, introduce something related but new. This will reinforce the connection because it will demonstrate a commitment to being interested.  It's also fun.

## Hole 4  258 yard par 3
## Being in control

There is something supremely independent about being a golfer.  I arrive at the clubhouse in time (if not on time). Golf shoes on, bag fixed to trolley, mobile phone on stand-by. Meet and greet playing partners and head to first tee. Take balls, tees, marker and pitch mark repairer. Fill in score-card.  A few warm ups, then glove on and select club for first shot. Everything in order. Game on!

Life is seldom so organised. The autistic child has such difficulties making sense of the world that it is no wonder they crave order. In this context, wanting tables to be in neat rows is not anomalous and nor are the fascinations with collections. Railway trains are great because they always stay on the tracks. Not surprising then that OCDs are a feature of the behaviour of many autistic children.

All of us are on the autistic spectrum and all of us exhibit some controlling behaviours in our lives. Being in control (or more accurately, having a sense of control) is important to us; it makes us feel secure and generally means we can function with greater confidence. So, encouraging autistic children to be in control is a good thing.

This doesn't sit easy with me.

I know that some autistic children will take control to the exclusion of other factors, and that this can include their own best interests and the well-being of others.

Being in control is a strength and a weakness. This is where the teacher's job demands discernment, courage and commitment.

## Hole 5  454 yard par 5
## How the brain works 1

There's a famous video of Tiger Woods on TV with Bob Hope. Tiger is swinging the club and hitting the ball beautifully. He is five years old. The problem for most golfers is that the first time they hit a golf ball, they don't have a perfect swing. Thereafter they develop a style of their own that feels comfortable, and the brain remembers this. No matter how the swing is subsequently adjusted the brain holds on to a default setting which still feels 'right'. I know this, because my golf swing keeps drifting back to a comfortable, familiar, fault-ridden 'hoick'.

Explaining to autistic children about how the brain works is great fun, because they find it interesting. The science doesn't have to be totally accurate; it's more about a general sharing of ideas.
For example, in sex education lessons it's necessary to explain hormonal change. By starting from a notion of brain development, it only takes a few considered steps to create a discussion on how adolescents find the world more confusing and at times difficult. Very soon pupils gain an understanding of why they themselves might be having difficulties and, what's more, they are then involved in considering their own and other people's experiences.

There are many ways to have a conversation about *"How the brain works"* (it doesn't have to be in or related to sex education) and it-can be used to help consider lots of different things. What is important is engaging the pupils so they not only gain some understanding but are empowered to take some measure of control of their own circumstances. So, for example, a child with a 'bad habit' might be helped in thinking about why their brain is making them do something. Once that's agreed (and it doesn't have to be very scientific), then the child is in a far better position to do something about it. Changing behaviour is very difficult, especially if you don't consider why it's happening in the first place.

The awareness of how the brain works can be brought to the fore in demonstrable situations. These can be those moments when a child achieves something a little out of the ordinary, for example, giving an answer that surprises the rest of the class. It's good to say something like *"That's your brain working"*. It can also be during a routine task; after all, the brain is still working, but we don't always recognise the awe and wonder of it.

One last thing -never forget that the child who yawns in class is usually the one whose brain is beginning to switch on to learning. Start pointing this out and everyone will soon realise .... it's true!

## Hole 6  449 yard  par 4
## Having a strategy

Playing a round of golf takes around four hours. That's a good byte of time, so it's useful to have a big picture of how you envisage playing hole to hole, as well as concentrating on individual shot-making. So, for example, I usually try to play more aggressively on the last four holes of a round in order to combat the effects of fatigue. Conversely, I will sometimes decide to play a particular hole more cautiously. It doesn't always work out as intended, but it keeps me focussed on making the best of a round.

Helping pupils to make strategies for themselves is well worth the effort. Of course, it depends hugely upon being able to have productive conversations, so there's a fair bit of ground work that usually needs to be done  first. As with those conversations, a key feature of success will be in the pupils sensing they really are in control of the strategy,and are not being cajoled. It will take time, but it will be time well spent.

Now, many teachers will read this and think *"targets"*; and well they might. I hated doing targets. All those rules about 'time' and 'achievability' and whatnot. Producing the written evidence of targets (and outcomes) tended to drive the agenda and took a huge slice out of the creative privilege of working one to one with a pupil. And that was in special schools with only a few pupils to encounter; mainstream targets were even less fulfilling.

What I like about strategies is that they are more about the journey than the destination. For example, a pupil might say *"I want to improve my maths".* A target-setting agenda might suggest finding one aspect of maths to improve and to then set a timeframe for when it might be achieved. That's fine for the pupil who is on a steady progression. But for a pupil who actually means *"I'm not good at maths",* a strategy might begin by looking at how said pupil engages

with the subject generally. Having that conversation can uncover all manner of unresolved difficulties, thus getting the pupil back on track and thereby leading to progression.

Of course, this doesn't always work out as intended.

So, from the start of a strategy, it is important to agree that there are no guarantees with what's being tried. It may be promising, but there are no promises. The strategy is simply what seems like a good way forward at a particular time. And it can be fun.

What's more, if the strategy doesn't work, then admit it, have another conversation and decide on a fresh strategy. No-one has failed and no-one is in trouble.

## Hole 7  454 yard par 4
## Out of control

I haven't played on any really great golf courses (St Andrews, Augusta etc.), but I've been lucky enough to play at many clubs in and around Surrey. It makes for a wonderful day out and I never fail to feel excited at the opportunity. Of course, that excitement is also tinged with some trepidation as playing your way around an unfamiliar golf course is quite demanding. However, I'm less anxious than I used to be because my scoring on new courses is generally better than when I play the same course a second or third time. The adrenalin rush of the new helps raise my game.

Autistic children need to have their comfort zones extended. Even a small step in this direction can be a challenge, but providing they have the support they need, such steps can be made. The children will not only benefit from this, but will enjoy it and will very often look forward to new things happening. The big difference compared to mainstream children is that autistic children won't generally seek out new things; they have to be introduced.

'Out of control' has very negative overtones, but the right degree of 'out of control' is where much learning can take place.

Class trips are great, and there's something marvellously secure about the mini-bus. Rather like the Tardis in Dr Who, it is a safe and secure environment and is the point of return after an outing in the community. Spotting the minibus from afar is often an up-lifting moment for pupils - and staff.  Tardis-like, the mini-bus can transport the class to somewhere unfamiliar to encounter things anticipated and sometimes unexpected. Making trips fun involves exploring these tensions.

'Out of control' can also apply to the teaching experience and perhaps 'not in control' is a better phrase. Allowing pupils to drive an

agenda is great for their learning, but can feel awkward for the teacher. At the simplest level, it can be accepting a pupil's lead in class as being equally or more valuable than the one pre-planned. Sometimes the teacher might acknowledge a mistake and apologise to the class; this will certainly cause a positive reaction. Similarly, it works well for a teacher to point out their own weaknesses and vulnerabilities, and indeed to actively create situations where these can be appropriately demonstrated.

Finally, with more able pupils it's always good to hand over the reins every so often. An easy way to do this is to explain to the child or group that there will be no more teacher instructions for a duration of time, then stand back and observe.

This might be common practice for the mainstream teacher; autistic children are not that different.

## Hole 8  356 yards par 4
## Friendships

It may be my age, but I seem to be making more friends these days. Golf has been a vehicle for this, and some of my golfing friends are really good, life-long friends. Sometimes complete strangers become friends (albeit short term) simply because we share an interest in golf. *"We must have a round together"* is a common rejoinder, and it doesn't seem to matter if we don't.

Having friends is probably the single most important factor in a child being happy at school. This is so glaringly obvious that it beggars belief that more isn't done to help children who find themselves without friends. It's sort of presumed that children know how to make friends but, clearly, some have difficulty.

Autistic children can find other children very annoying, particularly other autistic children, and some  can become isolated as a result. The child who is less autistic in a class will generally be the one whom other autistic children prefer to be with. This is not at all surprising as what each child can tolerate of others is the mitigating factor. What can a teacher do to help?

Firstly, the teacher and other staff may be the only people prepared to tolerate a particular pupil. If these staff are not prepared to be friends with (and not just 'to') that pupil, then that pupil is not going to have any. So, forget all the advice about a teacher being a teacher and NOT a friend. Better learn what makes a friend a friend - and try to do it. Having mastered that art, then set about trying to transpose the same across the class peer group.

Here are some possibilities? :

- talking together (see Hole 1)
- sharing conversations (see Hole 3)
- being 'in control' (see Hole 4)

- being ‘out of control’ (see Hole 7)
- The best thing (see hole 18)

Not easy!

One last thing: if a child senses they are liked, their relationship with others is so much better. If they are difficult to like, it’s well worth pretending. And in time ... chances are they will become likeable.

## Hole 9  475 yard Par 5
## The work matters

Stapleford is golf's most brilliant scoring system. Each hole is ranked as to its difficulty and then shots are awarded to players depending upon their golfing handicap. This not only allows players to enjoy balanced competition, but is also a tool to be used in managing each round of golf. More difficult holes are flagged up and players can adapt their play accordingly .Getting better is intrinsic to the game, and the importance of winning (or feeling able to win) should not be underestimated.

No one should underestimate the importance of being a teacher. By passing on knowledge and skills (technique) teachers play a critical role in establishing and preserving the culture of society. That same society needs young people who can contribute to the complex world we live in and to function well emotionally. Higher-functioning autistic children are generally capable of doing both.

So, the majority of teaching time for these autistic children is spent in helping children learn knowledge and skills. Classroom management and management of individuals might be different, but the message in lessons should be: *"There is something to learn, it's worth learning and we're going to have a go at learning it."* This is the work of the school and it is the work of pupils – no matter how much it may not seem like work sometimes. And work matters.

When work matters, it is also a tremendous vehicle for talking and conversations. It is a shared experience with shared objectives.

But ... in a special school environment levels of participation will almost always vary significantly from pupil to pupil. Differentiation in various forms will be needed, but the teacher also needs to address the attitudes of pupils and staff in this context. *"Opting out"* and *"Getting away with it"* are familiar expressions of angst.

A principle objective is to try to ensure pupils feel part of a class and more than that, part of a team. Young people are influenced tremendously by their peers and this applies equally to the majority of autistic children, most of whom enjoy being in class with their classmates. Those finding it difficult might need time out from the group, but, given that breathing space, they will generally drift backto the group.

Some pupils don't manage this and it may be better for them to be 'satellites' of the class, making occasional visits to the group for favoured activities. Managing autism can be challenging for everyone.

No two pupils will participate equally or produce the same quality or amount of work. Pupils participating or producing less can easily feel disappointment and experience a lowering of self-esteem. Best not to judge effort, but presume each pupil is trying their best – who knows what underlying difficulties they may be having. *"We're all working together and we're all doing our best."* Everyone's a winner!

## Hole 10  380 yard par 4
## How the brain works 2

To putt well a golfer needs to have a 'feel' for the greens. Similarly, it's possible to sense just how to play a particular chip or pitch. Presumably this can also be achieved with long irons and woods - though that's something I've yet to enjoy. When things are working well there is no finer moment than when a shot is executed just as the golfer has visualised. What a wonderful thing the human brain is!

Pupils who are struggling with their work may never enjoy these kinds of moments in the educational setting. Instead of being able to answer a question, the pupil experiences a 'block'. Repeated failures can lead to the block becoming more generalised. *"I don't know"* can become the only answer, or, worse still, no verbal answer and a blank expression. Eventually, a kind of panic can set in, even when the question is very straightforward and the answer known. This experience can happen to anyone who has ever been part of a Quiz Night team!

Contrast this with the child who is getting answers correct. The child grows in confidence as one answer leads to another. Eventually (and this also happens at Quiz Nights) answers start appearing which the child didn't even know they knew. That's how the brain works, and at this moment it's good to tell the child: *"That's your brain working".* A high five at this point doesn't go amiss.

To make this happen, try activities that the child can easily do such as Powerpoint presentations in which very familiar objects or events are recognised, or a quiz where the answers are easy and humorous. The content is useful, but more important is generating the enthusiasm that comes through success, creating fertile ground for future learning.

The real breakthrough moments are when a child starts to ‘feel’ they know something. This is most apparent in maths where number bonds are concerned. For the child who has struggled for years and relied on ‘counting on’, it is a joy to behold when they realise they can add numbers because they simply know their combined value. The expression a ‘feel for numbers’ is not misplaced. And when that happens, don’t forget to marvel at how their brain is working.

## Hole 11  439 yard par 4
## Feeling anxious

Many golfers suffer from 'yips'. This is an involuntary movement when making a putt, usually short and easy ones. The on-line dictionary says it is caused by extreme nervousness, but I suspect it isn't so much extreme as 'entrenched'. There doesn't appear to be a remedy, and the yips have ruined the careers of some very good golfers. I'm trying to avoid the condition by keeping things simple and accepting I can always miss a tap in.

An autistic child can spend a huge amount of time, each and every day, trying to manage their anxieties. Consider your worst fear: spiders, heights, money problems, illness in the family, whatever. Now imagine that fear being with you day in, day out, and seemingly unavoidable because of the environment you have to be in. School is often such an environment for the autistic child. It's hard to deduce just how large an anxiety may loom in the child's mind, but a child's behaviour is a way of communicating this if (and usually when) words cannot express it.

An instance:
*One day the fire bell went off and the class trooped out to the playground. When the all clear was given, everyone returned to class and all seemed well. However, it wasn't - and we learned this very quickly when one girl violently pushed her table over.*
It wasn't a one-off event: it was the culmination of living with constant anxiety.

Real progress is being made in finding ways to address anxiety. For example, *'The Incredible 5-point Scale'* is terrific and any teacher who has not encountered it would be well-advised to look it up and maybe incorporate it into their practice. It combines visuals with numbers (which is usually a good thing) to provide a framework showing a child's emotional state - ranging from 'chilled out' to

'melting down'. It's at its best when used as a vehicle for extended conversation with the child about their feelings, and therefore requires time and opportunities to revisit. Hopefully it helps generate increased self-awareness, leading to better self-control. *One very engaged child suggested there should be a zero added to the bottom of the chart to show "depression".*

Another strategy is to have a conversation and then write down any anxieties in a note-book. *One boy who worried a great deal made two entries and then didn't need to write any more.*

Mild anxieties can be expressed in all sorts of ways. Sometimes just talking can reduce anxiety. Not talking usually means the anxiety will find expression some other way and this is generally not good.

Talking is the most important thing.

## Hole 12  471 yard par 4
## Feelings

On more than one occasion, I have come across a golf course litter bin with a broken club hanging out of it. This could be natural wear and tear, but more likely someone has 'lost it' - and I don't mean they've lost the club. Such a deficit of emotional control is rare, but for most golfers each and every round is an emotional roller-coaster, with good-shot highs and poor-shot lows.  That's to be expected, but the golfer who can maintain some degree of equilibrium will see the benefits on the scorecard.

Some autistic children have very good emotional self-control - and some haven't. Language deficit, sensory issues, rigidity and simple failure to understand may all be contributory factors. Rarely is there a simple solution.

One thing to bear in mind is that when an autistic person is upset, they really don't want to be. Telling them off is unlikely to help and neither is punishment. Whatever caused the upset may well occur again, and they are going to need help to sort it out. Sometimes it won't be possible to give that help, and that's a very bad place for anyone to be. Sometimes it may be best to limit the chances of recurrence, which may mean engineering significant limitations on that person. That's at one extreme, but it's important to recognise that this is the reality for many autistic people and for their families.

Many autistic children are able to improve their emotional self control, and it's possible to help them in this respect through directly addressing any problems they might have. When good conversation is happening, it is relatively easy to talk about the difficulties and to develop strategies. The subject is of real importance to all children, but particularly to those who have most difficulty. After some initial reluctance, the subject will be something they are prepared to talk about. Of course, this has to be done with sensitivity as most of

the children with difficulties are acutely aware of them- and are very embarrassed by them.

The key thing is to help children develop strategies that they can implement as and when the cause of being upset occurs. *For example, a child who is afraid of dogs might practise standing still "like a tree" when a dog comes near, and then implement that when out walking.*The very fact a strategy has been devised will mean that the child already feels a measure of control in the situation, and of course if the strategy is successful, then the self-control can go from strength to strength. If the strategy does not succeed, then the child should not be 'in trouble', and at a later time the conversation can be shared about the occurrence and a change of strategy developed.

Talking, conversations, strategies, control, feelings - all inter-twined.

## Hole 13 - 257 yard par 3
## Structure matters

When visiting a golf course for the first time, it's always good to ask for general advice in the club house. Then there's just you and the scorecard. A particularly fine scorecard will have hole diagrams showing the yardages and position of hazards. It's also very useful for finding the next hole.

You might wonder why this Guide has not introduced structure sooner, and you might also think there's significance in this being Hole 13. Let me begin by saying that teaching autistic children without a lot of structure would be folly. A good classroom is full of visual indicators to show where children are to be seated or other places they may be expected to work. Moving from one location to another (transitioning) can similarly be helped. What will happen in the lesson is presented in a whole class schedule or broken down into individual schedules. The work itself is highly organised so that the child can navigate their way through activities with as much independence as they can manage. Structure enables the child to better understand the world they are in, helps them manage activities in the world and helps them grow in confidence.

Structure is so central to teaching the autistic child that it is close to being the most important thing. If Hole 1 had been about structure, it would have been of little surprise. But structure is simply a means to an end; it's not the educational goal of any child.

Oh, and the hole number is of no significance.

## Hole 14  539 yard par 5
## Low self-esteem

*'Watching the ball'* is closely followed in importance by *'committing to the shot'.* This means believing the shot is going to be successful and then playing it with real confidence. The technical outcome is that the club accelerates through the ball. Conversely, feeling indecisive about the shot can result in club deceleration, which then results in duff shots. Committing to the shot is important on all strokes, from drive to final putt.

In many ways, this Guide is all about helping autistic children manage low self-esteem.  A helpful starting point is to explain that everyone experiences low self-esteem. To the more able autistic teenager this should sound like familiar territory, because most autistic children of this age are aware that they are autistic; one of the first things to explain about being autistic is that everyone is on the spectrum. At this point (and as a way of demonstrating vulnerability) the teacher might reveal an autistic trait in their own behaviour - which has probably not gone un-noticed anyway.

The same can be applied to low self-esteem. Everyone feels inadequate and stupid in one situation or another and, when failure in that situation happens, then those feelings of inadequacy are confirmed. The cycle can then repeat again and again causing increasingly serious low self-esteem. Some people are more affected by low self-esteem than others, just like autism.

Hopefully, that explanation alone will reduce the anxiety of the child and conversations can develop. These conversations can follow the similar pattern of sharing at a level appropriate to the child and talking 'with' rather than talking 'to'. However, there is good reason for the teacher to *'Blah! Blah!'* as well, because most children don't recognise the effects of low self- esteem; they simply feel they are failing.

So,the teacher should be on the look-out for instances of the effect (a bit like spotting bubbles on a pond and knowing a fish is in there). Here's an example:

*The child has difficulty with reading, but is making solid progress reading one to one with the teacher. As the story nears its end, the pupil begins to make more and more mistakes. The final sentence is a real struggle, even though the words are relatively simple and familiar to the pupil.*

The child's low self-esteem is causing the child to feel failure is imminent, and so it proves.

Having recognised the instance, how can the teacher make a difference? Simple: point out to the child (there and then) exactly what is happening and then say: *"It's because of low self-esteem".* In order to illustrate further, the individual elements of the failure (in this case individual words) can be isolated so that the child can understand that it is their low self-esteem that causes the failure and NOT their inadequacy.

Of course, this is just a starting point for the teacher, but a starting point is good in helping this most debilitating of conditions. Once a start has been made, then hopefully the tide can be turned and other underlying issues that need to be addressed can enter the conversation.

It's important that child understand themselves as far as possible; understanding and then managing low self-esteem can be a giant step forward.

## *Hole 15  136 yard  par 3*
## *Being Smart*

Match play golf involves players competing one on one, hole by hole. The player with least shots on a hole wins one point and a tied hole is 'halved'. The first player to reach nine and a half points wins the match.  Playing well in match play involves making simple and essential decisions, so that whatever else you might do, you can take less shots than your opponent!

Being smart is different from good academic ability. Most autistic children are smart; they may not get everything right, but they tend (not always) to make good decisions. It's important to recognise this and when a child makes a good decision say: *"That was smart".* Very soon they will be making more and more good decisions. From there it is a short step to improved learning.

## Hole 16  242 yard par 3
## Less is more

A golf swing feels as easy as leaves blown in the wind. So, when things go wrong a golfer will often abandon all recent modifications and just try to do what feels natural. And very often this works - for a while.

*Football is on the time-table for half a term each year; in addition, school matches and inter-school matches are organised. It's easy to wave the flag about such events, but this two-hour teaching slot is where the sport can be nurtured. These lessons include the same simple, repetitive drills of passing, dribbling, tackling and shooting. The first of these is the most interesting in that pupils in pairs will happily continue for far longer than one might ever anticipate. Pupils gain satisfaction from feeling the ball spring away from their foot and towards a target partner, and then to have the same ball come back. It gives a pleasing physical sensation and a feeling of control. Best to let them get on with it.*

It's terribly easy for the teacher's busy agenda to dominate and stultify. In the case of the football lesson, more and more different drills might engender confusion and frustration with progression coming a poor third. Less is often more.

Similarly ... an under prepared lesson can often be marvellously successful, pupils gaining space to make their contribution.

Oh - and one last thing - when a lesson goes well, don't let it overrun.

## Hole 17 453 yard par 4
## Homework

My return to golf began when I encouraged my ten-year old son to take up the game. I enthusiastically bought him some junior clubs, and then delighted in using them myself. As a birthday present he received one of those pop-up nets that allowed me to practise my drive in the back garden. The fun lasted for about a week, and some years later the net was sold at a car boot sale - it hadn't been used in the interim. Golf in the back garden didn't improve my technique as I couldn't tell whether the shots were staying straight or not. The exercise became purposeless and boring.

Homework is a contentious subject - loved by parents and loathed by pupils. Well, let's not paint it so black and white and let's not make a hard case for or against. Homework (like many things in education) has strengths and weaknesses. Very often, the autistic child will demonstrate types of behaviour that are shared by the wider population, only more accentuated. For example, the autistic child will often make a very rigid division between home and school; what happens at school, stays at school and vice versa. A teacher encountered out of school, might simply be ignored; the teacher is not part of the home world. You can see where this is going with homework!

However ... challenging the autistic child's rigidity is a good thing - providing the outcomes are positive in so doing. What works well is finding homework that the pupil is comfortable with, and that means giving homework that the pupil finds easy and does not take too long. Parents find this idea difficult - the pupil is clearly not learning, because they can do the work and do it quickly. The assumption is that education should be some sort of struggle - and where does that idea come from?!?

The positives of easy homework are these:

- the pupil goes home confident that the homework will be manageable;
- the homework is done positively and often independently;
- the parents can praise the child for doing the homework;
- the pupil returns to school pleased at having done the home work;
- the teacher can praise the pupil for doing the homework;
- the next homework can be explained / taught in class
- the pupil goes home confident that the homework will be manageable, etc., etc.;
- as time goes on, the pupil can be taught that if there is diffi culty with doing the homework (and this shouldn't happen often),
- they can ask for help from the parent;
- the parent / pupil relationship is strengthened;
- the school / home divide is challenged.

What's not to like?

## Hole 18  336 yard par 4
## The best thing

So, you find your ball but it's covered in leaves and blocked out by a tree. What joy! So many exciting possibilities as to how to play the next shot - forwards, sideways, under, over or through. You make a calculated decision and then try to maintain good technique: head still, eyes on the ball, smooth swing, follow through. Golf at its best - and often the shot to recollect in the bar.

Much of teaching is necessarily routine. To produce good lessons day in day out generally requires established planning regimes, institutional and individual. Autistic children feel reassured by the same lesson format and by the repetition of tasks and drills; not forever and a day, but perhaps on a half term basis. A solid lesson template means planning can be speedy, and it frees up planning time for a teacher to develop appropriate innovation. Everyone can arrive at a lesson feeling confident that things will go well.

Then there are the magic moments. Something unexpected happens in a lesson: maybe a comment by a child or maybe some behaviour issue. Or maybe something happens outside the classroom or maybe you (the teacher) think of something totally outside the box. I love it – time to play on the wrong fairway.

It's not that what's being taught is derailed, it's just been parked or sidelined in the nicest possible way. Providing the children are with you it's time to go on a learning adventure. Where will the talking take you, yours and theirs? Take the risk and go with it. Adventure is the best thing in teaching - and children thrive on it.

And then there are the planned adventures: the class trip into the community, the football match against another school, a school concert, a lesson involving role play, listening to a story, a board-game, watching a video, gardening (gardening?). One child's adventure

will vary from another's, but watch their eyes shine.

Talking and conversations happen during adventures and friendships are made.

## The 19th hole
## Yes, but …

My best score for a round of golf is 83. It should have been better but I managed to 4-putt the last green from around twenty feet.

The vast majority of work done in special schools isn't done in isolation. Classrooms are places where teams work together. All the ideas in this Guide are the result of collaborative work between professionals in the classroom, and of course, it is the children themselves who have contributed most to our understanding. Therefore, as the Guide progressed, chapter by chapter, I tried to avoid using the word *'I'*, except where it refers to my playing of golf. As this is the 19th hole (imagine me propped against the bar) I'm allowing myself to slide back into the habits of the first few chapters.

One of my favourite classroom assistants would begin her contributions to discussions by saying *"Yes, but..."* and going on to find a perfectly sound reason why something wouldn't work. This can be, and was often, valuable. However, there comes a time when the message has to be: *"Let's give it a try".*

I hope some people will go on to try some of the ideas in this Guide. I'm sure other people will think some, if not all the ideas, are as quirky as the golfing format; I don't have a problem with that. I just hope I haven't caused offence and that there isn't too much that might be deemed contentious. I've enjoyed writing about my experiences working with remarkable young people, and it has helped me clarify at least a few of my ideas.

Where I am likely to be contentious is in this next short section and the *"Yes, buts..."* may well multiply.

I wrote earlier that autistic children are not so different to mainstream children. However, working with them is very different in

that almost invariably they are scrupulously honest and devoid of malice. I worked in mainstream for just as long as I have in Special Needs and know that this honesty and goodness is equally true of the great majority of mainstream pupils. There are, nevertheless, a minority who do present difficulties for the teacher. As a result, teachers often have to strategise to establish and maintain control, and 'discipline' then becomes a hot topic of staffroom conversations.

Working with autistic children has been extremely liberating for me because the tension that can exist between teacher and pupils has simply not been there. This has allowed me to try things out, knowing the outcomes are not going to be jeopardised by such tensions. I wish all teachers could experience this.

So, returning to the idea that autistic children are not so different, I would suggest that the principles in this Guide could equally be applied to mainstream children, and perhaps more importantly to mainstream children who are struggling with the pressures of our society today. Thankfully there is growing recognition that the mental health and well-being of young people is a real concern, and hopefully things can generally improve. Meanwhile there will continue to be those whose lives are majorly affected by their inability to manage successfully in the complex world in which they find themselves. I hope the parallels with autistic children are apparent and that if in any way this Guide can help, it will be put to such use.

## End of the day

Before moving schools and gaining my promotion, I went on a one-day training course for aspiring Heads of Music. The good fellow running the course declared that there would never be enough time when running a music department, and then went on to extol the virtues of time management and a clear desk on a Friday tea-time.

One of the kitchen staff at another school told me: *"If you want something done, ask a busy person."* Which I think is equally sound advice.

Children in special schools have huge amounts of time (years and years) ahead of them in which to progress in their learning, and yet each day can feel so short of time for delivering all that's needed. Time for real individual work is particularly precious.

My own experience is that there is always just enough time. Make of it what you will.

*A Golfer's Guide to Education is available for anyone to read and share at no cost. However, if you would like to show appreciation then, in memory of Joanna, I politely request that you consider making a small donation to Cystic Fibrosis Trust using My Donate platform:*

*https://mydonate.bt.com/fundraisers/stephenkendall7*

*Many thanks,*
*Steve K*