

# STRAIGHT TALK *About* **Autism**

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## On Expressing Gratitude

**Author's Note:** Just as I was putting the finishing touches on this article, news of the terrible tragedy in Newtown, Connecticut broke. The topic of *gratitude* struck me as particularly poignant, as the tragedy at Sandy Hook underscores the importance of openly expressing our support and appreciation of one another, rather than letting those thoughts go unexpressed. As if to punctuate this point, during one of my regular consultations in a Connecticut elementary school yesterday (just four short days after the tragedy) a mother of a child with ASD shared the following sentiments with staff:

*I know I have high expectations of the school and my son's (progress)... and that I can be frustrating to you as well, but I want you to know that I appreciate you for caring deeply about my son and his well-being. After what happened in Newtown I felt compelled to tell you that you are appreciated and I thank you for being a part of my son's life.*

The coordinator of the program told me that this generous expression of gratitude signaled a monumental shift in the relationship with this parent.

### Expressions from the Heart

I am writing this article during the weeks between Thanksgiving and the winter holidays. Over the past few weeks, I have been fortunate to receive a flurry of kind and generous notes and messages of thanks, simply for doing what I have chosen to do in my life. These messages have come from parents who feel that our research and writings have helped to provide a better understanding of ASD, or that our services and advocacy have directly benefited their child. I was one of many recipients of one parent's message sent to a group of

service providers in appreciation of her son's progress stating, "I thank you with every cell in my heart." Messages have also come from former students who feel that their lives have been enriched by being motivated to choose such a meaningful career path. And some have come from professionals saying, *thank you for doing what you and your colleagues do*. Such expressions of gratitude communicate their appreciation of the values and beliefs that we express in our publications and seminars, as well as their recognition that those values and beliefs are consonant with and validate their own, in their efforts to support individuals with ASD and their families. Most gratifying of all are the verbal and nonverbal expressions of gratitude—expressed in different ways—that come from persons with ASD.

All of these expressions of gratitude shine through like beautiful gemstones against what feels, at times, to be a gloomy background of complex challenges in providing effective support and quality services. Put simply, messages of thanks keep us going and energize us. After all, for most of us who provide services, we are not simply doing a job; we are fulfilling our life's mission. Parents, too, have told me that simple messages from service providers such as, *thank you for all you do for us and your son (or daughter)*, keeps them going at difficult times, and reassures them that they are not alone.

As we begin the new year, it is a good time for reflection, for sharing special moments with family and friends, and for thinking about our hopes and aspirations for the coming year. As both professionals and parents know so well, new challenges emerge as students transition back to school routines and move through winter and spring to the completion of the school year. Despite these challenges, it is a time to give thanks for all the wonderful people in our personal lives and in our communities;

a time not only to be thankful and show appreciation, but also to return kindnesses.

### **A Teachable Moment**

I remember one of my first aha moments that taught me the importance of expressing gratitude – in this case, from parents to professionals. As a speech-language pathologist in the 1970's, I volunteered to assist at a holiday party for children with ASD. On a Saturday, we set up the classroom with various toys that we knew the children typically liked and were familiar with, and welcomed the parents, children, and siblings with great enthusiasm and high expectations. Initially, some children appeared to enjoy the party and were mesmerized by the Christmas tree and lights, while others were cautious, perhaps bewildered by the busy scene. We planned this event in order to provide parents with an environment in which they would not need to explain their children's behavior, and where they would not be the targets of harsh and judgmental stares if their child demonstrated unusual behavior.

I was not prepared, however, for the moment of truth—the inevitable appearance of Santa Claus—who in daily life was a work colleague of one of the fathers. There was a knock on the door and good old St. Nick bounded into the room in all his glory, with a great “HO HO HO,” his bright red outfit and his shiny white hair flowing onto his shoulders, all of which resulted in a virtual “tsunami” of sensory stimulation. At that moment, almost all of the children appeared startled. Many quietly moved or darted away from this imposing figure. As Santa attempted to interact directly with some of the children, their caution escalated into anxious whimpers, and in some cases, screams, while in others, with children dropping to the floor. With the best of intentions, Santa insisted on “doing his job” of engaging the children, which of course inadvertently caused further distress. (Apparently, he was not aware of sensory sensitivities!) Eventually, Santa was escorted away, given an early leave from his appointed mission. The food was then served which enabled most of the children to calm down, at least relatively so. What stands out in my mind as the families began to leave is that *every* parent and family member expressed to the staff how much they appreciated this party. Thus, notwithstanding our miscalculations regarding the “Santa Claus Effect,” the gratitude expressed by the parents helped us to feel that they appreciated our efforts in planning the party for their children, an acknowledgment that helped

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us to know that it really was the thought that counted!

### **Interfering Variables Affecting Expressions of Gratitude**

In my consulting to schools and agencies, I regularly observe many opportunities for the expression of gratitude, some of which are seized upon by parents, staff, and school administrators. I also observe situations in which the expression of gratitude rarely occurs, even though it would be a natural and even simple thing to do. This occurs both on the part of parents and family members, as well as professionals and service providers.

I've heard some parents express that they intentionally withhold expressions of gratitude. This may occur because they believe that to get what they want for their child, they have to keep professionals “on their toes” by indicating that they're either not pleased, or only marginally pleased with their child's program or progress. I have also observed some professionals and service providers that withhold expressions of gratitude even when parents extend themselves in unexpected ways. This reaction is fostered by the following type of thinking: We are the helpers and the ones who provide the services that parents and children need. Shouldn't they be grateful to us? The problem with each of these types of attitudes is that when gratitude is withheld, so are the potential benefits that expressions of gratitude create—the sense of appreciation and trust that goes a long way in relationship building. When, however, gratitude is expressed openly and sincerely, it creates a sense of cohesion that becomes the foundation for collaboration, cooperation, and mutual respect and support, even at the most challenging times. Expression of gratitude is also contagious; once it becomes part of the culture, it becomes a natural reaction to acts of kindness for all contributions made by both parents and professionals.

### **Indirect Expressions of Gratitude**

Gratitude can be expressed in many ways, and by all parties who are involved in the lives of individuals with ASD and their families. Professionals and service providers can express gratitude by being reliable; understanding the parent's experiences and perspectives; listening well; being a resource for needed information, and “going the extra mile” in supporting families. We should also take care to address parents' priorities; advocate for the child and family when appropriate; and show interest in the family as a whole, not just the family member with ASD.

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In addition to direct expressions of appreciation, parent and family members can indirectly express gratitude by understanding and acknowledging the many ways in which professionals serve their children—for example—by remaining actively engaged with their child’s program; collaborating with others; offering recommendations based on their intimate knowledge of their child; following through on suggestions made by staff or parents; communicating with staff and parents regularly; and participating in meetings. Additionally, I have observed that when school or program administrators express gratitude in any way they

can to program staff, it fosters a sense of mutual support and positive staff morale. In one program I consult to, the program director makes a big Italian lunch for all of the staff around the holidays, in addition to being openly appreciative, supportive, and proud of staff throughout the year. Another administrator in a rather large school always takes an interest in the personal lives of staff, gets to know them well, regularly visits classrooms, and is always available as a source of support when needed. At his recent retirement party, hundreds of persons attended to say thank you, including parents and previous staff dating back more than 25 years.

### End Notes

My mission in this article has been to encourage parents and professionals to reflect on the importance of recognizing that we all are in this together and as such, to seize upon opportunities to express gratitude to each other for his or her efforts on behalf of individuals with ASD. Ultimately, I truly believe that the beneficiaries of these acts of kindness are the individuals with ASD, and their families. And to “walk the walk,” I wish to thank all service providers who have chosen to devote their lives to helping others, and who have allowed me to come into their classrooms with generosity and trust. I also wish to thank all parents and family members who continue to do the best they can, and who find joy in providing a positive quality of life for all members of their families. 🇺🇸

**BIO**



**Dr. Barry Prizant** has more than 40 years experience as a clinical scholar, researcher and international consultant to children and adults with ASD and their families. He is an Adjunct Professor, Brown University, and Director of Childhood Communication Services, a private practice. Barry is co-author of *The SCERTS Model: A comprehensive educational approach for children with ASD* (Prizant, Wetherby, Rubin, Laurent & Rydell, 2006) and the assessment instruments, CSBS, and CSBS-DP (Wetherby & Prizant, 1993, 2002). He has published more than 100 articles and chapters and has presented more than 700 seminars and keynote addresses in the US and internationally. Barry developed and co-facilitates an annual weekend retreat for parents of children with ASD, and is the recipient of the 2005 Princeton University-Eden Foundation Career Award for “improving the quality of life for individuals with autism.” For further information, go to [www.barryprizant.com](http://www.barryprizant.com), or contact Barry at [Bprizant@gmail.com](mailto:Bprizant@gmail.com).