

# Uniquely Human: The Podcast **Complementary Learning Styles**

in a Neurodivergent-Neurotypical Partnership

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## **Common Learning Styles for Autistic Individuals**

For many years, it was generally thought that the primary learning style and strength of autistic individuals was based on visual processing. In the early 1980s, many professionals saw that using visual supports and visual calendars helped autistic individuals to learn more effectively. However, the input of many autistic individuals, including Temple Grandin who first focused on visual thinking, has helped us to understand that the different learning styles of autistic individuals actually reflect the different learning styles in the general population. When an autistic person has a specific learning style, however, it tends to be more focused, intense and extreme, whereas most neurotypical individuals tend to be more balanced in their learning styles and able to shift between strategies for learning.

Another aspect of learning is memory. Research has shown that episodic memory tends to be an area of strength for autistic individuals. It is a type of long-term memory that involves recalling specific events, situations, and experiences in incredible detail. Semantic memory, on the other hand, tends to be more flexible and can be generalized and related to other concepts. It is seen more in neurotypical individuals. For example, a neurotypical person who learns about frogs might be able to generalize information on frogs both from the Amazon and the desert. An autistic person, however, who knew detailed information about a tree frog would struggle to talk about the moss frog. Temple Grandin admits that when she learns a language concept, it is very specific and isn't easily generalized to other related concepts.

## **LEARNING STYLES**



### **VISUAL LEARNER**

Visual learners prefer to see information through pictures, diagrams, charts or other visual aids. They learn best when the material is presented in this format as it allows them to visualize concepts and information.



### **AUDITORY LEARNER**

Auditory learners learn best by hearing and listening. They prefer verbal explanations, lectures, discussions or recorded materials. They may benefit from reading aloud or discussing ideas with others as a way to reinforce their understanding.



### **LANGUAGE-BASED LEARNER**

Language-based learners rely heavily on written and spoken language to understand and retain information. They excel in reading, writing and verbal communication. They may prefer written instructions, textbooks and lectures with clear verbal explanations.

\*In his seminal work on multiple intelligences, Howard Gardner also proposes additional learning styles and strengths across all humans.

**Dave:** My personal style is that I have to be permitted the time to go deep with the subject matter. If I am expected to learn everything in a 30-minute seminar with 20 other people in the room, it will be very difficult for me to retain the information. I need to learn the way that I learn best. I need to be able to read about the material. I can't watch a video because I get distracted by the composition of the video and the way the animation rolls out. However, if I can **read** the material and **write** it back out by hand, then I am more likely to capture it. In school, I felt there was not enough time to do that for all the subjects in one given night, especially in college.

## Benefits and Challenges

This focused learning style seen in many autistic individuals can create some challenges. For example, school systems tend to teach in a way that benefits strong language-based learners. This could be a challenge for an autistic individual who is a visual learner. In addition, a person who relies on episodic memory will remember specific details but have a more difficult time generalizing information and memories. This can create an inflexible prediction of what's going to happen. Another challenge of an episodic memory is assuming that the way something happened the first time it was experienced is how it's always going to happen. This can lead to unnecessary anxiety, fear of catastrophies and even gullibility. As an example of the latter, if someone offered to help me get on the right train and then did so, I might assume that every other person who offers to help me will, in fact, do so.

One of the benefits of being a more focused learner is going *deep* and *wide* into a subject, especially if it is based on a deep interest, or what we call an "enthusiasm." Such learners will become masters of a subject matter. It should be noted that not all autistic people acquire immediate mastery, but do put in the time and effort needed to acquire a level of mastery that is rarely seen in neurotypical individuals.

## Complementary Learning Styles

Every person has a unique learning style. It's important to know your child's learning style so you can understand his or her strengths and the areas that might need support in school and in the workplace. We have been working together for over three years to produce [Uniquely Human: The Podcast](#). We have learned over the years what are our strengths and limitations. Dave, who is autistic, has lived experience and deep knowledge of technical audio engineering. Barry, who is neurotypical, has clinical knowledge of treatment approaches and is more proficient at scheduling and other executive function skills. The table below illustrates our respective strengths and limitations.

Barry's Strengths (Dave's limitations)	Dave's Strengths (Barry's limitations)
Social connections in autism landscape	Lived experience
Knowledge of history of autism	Understands relationship issues in autism
Research in autism	Technical knowledge of audio engineering
Executive functions – scheduling, reminders	Spontaneous sense of humor
Clinical knowledge of treatment approaches	Knowledge of podcast business
Time management during interviews	Knowledge of social media
Topic management during interview	Interjects with interesting tangents
Demeanor/Personality	Demeanor/Personality
Skewed to objective/more serious approach	Skewed to reflective/light commentary

In our experience, Barry's strengths tend to address Dave's limitations, and Dave's strengths tend to address Barry's limitations. In other words, they are complementary. Parents and caregivers should seek out friends, educators and eventually workplaces for their children where their strengths complement other people's limitations, and their limitations are complemented by another person's strengths.

**Dave:** If [Uniquely Human: The Podcast](#) was just managed by me, we would have six episodes total, spread out over the course of five years. Barry is very methodical, moves like clockwork, and is pragmatic. Barry will keep us on track and make sure we have a long runway of guests in the queue. My area of expertise is with the audio. When it's time to do the audio production, I get very particular, at the atomic level, about how things are recorded and what audio we use. You wouldn't send in a linebacker to run the offence because that's the quarterback's job. Barry and I do a great job of complementing each other and staying in our own lanes.



## Advice for Parents



**Understand your child's strengths.** Know your child's learning style and advocate for education that will be a good match. Make sure that your child's journey in education and in life is a good match for his or her brain. Unfortunately, the co-occurring mental health issues seen at such high rates in autistic individuals cause the demands placed on autistic children to not be a good match for their individual learning styles.



**Level the playing field.** Consider your child's strengths and how they can benefit others. For example, Barry once worked with Chris, a child in 3rd grade, who loved to read. He was hyperlexic and could read complex words and printed sentences better than any of his classmates. He also had an ear-piercing scream that was triggered by his sensitivity to certain sounds. After one occasion when Chris screamed when a fire engine passed by the school, one of his classmates came up to me and told me that Chris would scream every once in a while, but that he was the best reader in the class. Take note of the incredible strengths and interests of your child and how they may help to support the learning and success of others with similar interests. Help others to see these strengths as you advocate for education and employment for your child.



**Don't assume the world will make accommodations for your child.** In school and in the workplace, some accommodations will be purposefully and intentionally made, like when Barry chases down Dave to schedule interviews. However, such accommodations may not always be put in place. Raise your child to know the areas in which he or she needs to seek out or accept help, as well as what extra work is needed to be successful in school and the workplace. You may need to advocate for change, but don't assume people will know how to or be willing to accommodate.



**Do your best to understand your child's experiences and why he or she is reacting in a particular way.** This is what we call "The Deep Why." Your child's behavior may not consistently conform to society's expectations. With appropriate support, however, your child's enjoyment of learning and confidence in sharing knowledge will continue to grow. Be the kind of person who does not judge your child, and do your best to understand your child's experience.



**You are the expert on your child's development and well-being.** Healthcare professionals, speech-language pathologists and occupational therapists might be experts on the research about learning and teaching approaches, but the true experts on their child are the parents. Let your parental instincts be your North Star, especially in view of individual differences in autistic children as well as differing opinions and even disagreement. It can be disorienting when there are so many experts and opinions. Carefully sift through all of the opinions and remember that **you** are the expert on your child and what's right for your child.



**Find informed professionals you can trust, as well as people who "get it."** Include these individuals in your circle and your tribe. There are many reliable professionals in different disciplines who do excellent work.



**Avoid the "doom and gloom" crowd.** These can be individuals in your community, educators or even other parents or family members. Seek positive energy. Parents often hear that they shouldn't expect their child to reach certain milestones or participate in certain activities. Time and time again, however, the so-called experts are proven wrong. Don't allow yourself to experience needless grief and anxiety, and to go down rabbit holes of negativity. Invest your time, energy and resources in building a better quality of life for you and your family by surrounding yourself with people who appreciate your child and who can be trusted to build positive relationships with you and your child.



**Dave:** We all find ourselves in a world that is marked by neurodiversity, whether we're looking for it or not – the workplace, classrooms and relationships. If it were all completely homogenized with, for example, one neurotype, then would we really benefit from new ideas? Probably not. It's important for neurodivergent individuals to learn the culture of the neurotypical world, and for the neurotypical world to recognize and utilize the strengths of neurodivergent people. Don't sell yourself or your child short, just understand how your child learns best, how you work and how that might be beneficial or challenging to someone else.



Barry and Dave's partnership in co-hosting and co-producing *Uniquely Human: The Podcast*, is just one example of the potential of different individuals with their own learning styles working in a complementary fashion and resulting in a very successful outcome. All autistic children and their families can benefit from a renewed focus on different learning styles. Supporting children through the lens of these differences and designing school experiences that provide individualized learning opportunities will help them gain confidence, achieve school success and embark on a path to successful employment.



Barry M. Prizant, PhD, CCC-SLP is recognized as being among the world's leading scholars on autism and neurodiversity, and as an innovator of respectful, person- and family-centered approaches in supporting neurodivergent individuals. Barry has fifty years of experience as a clinician, an international consultant and researcher. He currently is the Director of Childhood Communication Services, a private practice, and an Adjunct Professor of Communicative Disorders at the University of Rhode Island. Barry's recent book, *Uniquely Human: A Different Way of Seeing Autism* (Simon & Schuster, 2022 expanded edition) has been the best-selling book on autism since 2015, with the audiobook version that he narrated. It is now published in 26 languages. Barry also co-produces and hosts a podcast, *Uniquely Human: The Podcast* ([www.uniquelyhuman.com](http://www.uniquelyhuman.com)) with Dave Finch, an autistic audio engineer and New York Times best-selling author.



Dave Finch is a New York Times bestselling author and public speaker, the co-creator and co-host of *Uniquely Human: The Podcast*, and a creative and technical consultant to Hollywood studios including Disney, Twentieth Century Fox, Sony Pictures Television, and Netflix. His book, *The Journal of Best Practices: A Memoir of Marriage, Asperger Syndrome, and One Man's Quest to Be a Better Husband*, has been featured in *O the Oprah Magazine*, *People*, *Elle*, *Marie Claire*, *The New York Times*, *The Chicago Tribune*, and NPR's *All Things Considered*, and his work as a writer and consultant has appeared on ABC, CBS, NBC, CNN, NPR, SiriusXM, *The New York Times*, *Rolling Stone*, *This American Life*, *The Howard Stern Show*, *Psychology Today*, *Slate*, *NBC.com*, and the popular television series *NOT DEAD YET* (ABC / Hulu) and *ATYPICAL* (Netflix).

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