

**An**

**Interview with**

**Donna Williams**

**Parenting Autism:** Can you explain in a paragraph what it is like to be autistic in a majority non-autistic world?

**Donna Williams:** It's been different at different times.

Up to age 9 I didn't know there was any difference.

After age 9 I felt like a freak, a weirdo, broken goods and desperately wanted to be 'like other people'.

After age 13 I wanted to blend in and copied everyone, anyone, just so I wouldn't stand out as different – but I always did.

After about age 16 I felt the non-autistic world was dangerous, false and often felt life in this world was a prison sentence.

After age 25 I began to understand I was equal in spite of being different and by age 30 I began to understand non-autistic people weren't intentionally intolerant, false, judgemental.

By 35-40 I came to understand the great diversity among non-autistic people and that mine was merely part of the very broad diversity, just further out to the fringes.

**Parenting Autism:** What are the 5 most important things that you think parents must know about their autistic child to better understand them?

**Donna Williams:** 1.) No two children with autism are the same in personality nor in what makes up their 'autism'.

Autism is like a fruit salad so the combinations of what makes up that fruit salad will vary, sometimes greatly, from person to person.

2.) People who don't work by interpretive meaning can be very good at mapping pattern, theme and feel as part of an intact 'system of sensing'.

3.) Having Exposure Anxiety, Social Phobia or an avoidant or solitary personality is no reflection on whether someone likes you or not, so don't ever take it personally.

4.) If someone is avoidant like a cat-person and treats their own space as a sacred island, you won't improve this by chasing them like a socially invasive watching, waiting, wanting, eager dog-person.

5.) People with autism are still just people, children with autism are still just children.

**Parenting Autism:** What are the 5 most important things that you think every teacher should know for teaching an autistic child?

**Donna Williams:** 1.) We are not all visual thinkers, some of us have severe visual perceptual processing disorders and are kinaesthetic, hands on learners for whom watching is as futile as listening.

2.) Those who don't speak may still be able to use typed communication even though some may have to begin by typing 'as you' before they find their own 'voice' through typing.

3.) Never assume lack of intelligence, sanity or potential by appearances.

4.) Many challenges are information processing ones and not an absence of learning so the best way to help them may be to teach them self advocacy and adaptation; not keep drumming some one size fits all idea of 'normality' into them.

5.) When you break a soul you destroy all motivation to develop, to try and learn so work on each person's natural motivations and don't assume forced conformity is always proof of ability unless you are seeking to prove your ability to control and prompt someone.

**Parenting Autism:** What is your opinion when people refer to autism as a "disease" that can be "cured"?

**Donna Williams:** Aspects of autism for SOME PEOPLE can be conditions such as co-morbid attention deficits, mood, anxiety or compulsive disorders which can be highly disabling.

They can even lead to self injury and suicide if untreated in some people so we have to be realistic and those without these features can't speak on behalf of those who have these.

Having oral dyspraxia or selective mutism requires help if not treatment for people to reach their potential so claiming this as an aspect of culture is going too far if it withholds help for those who needs it.

Serious gut, immune or metabolic disorders common in SOME people with autism aren't things to be glossed over as cultural.

Severe receptive language processing disorders and agnosia can be extremely difficult to function with or reach independence with without significant help to adapt.

But other aspects of autism may be accepted as perceptual differences, learning styles and personality differences and a valid part of autistic culture.

**Parenting Autism:** What is your happiest and saddest memory of being a child with autism?

**Donna Williams:** Wow, as a rather bipolar person with autism my life has been a rollercoaster so that's a very hard question.

Saddest... falling into severe OCD followed by a psychotic depression around age 9-11 during a 'regressive phase'....

Happiest... would have to be mania episodes getting blessed to oblivion under the sensory experience of pink street lights (generally ended in extreme agitation, distress and self injurious impulses but the bliss felt worth it).

**Parenting Autism:** What positive skills and strengths do you think that autistic children bring to the world?

**Donna Williams:** They're all so different so each has their own strength.

Some are incredible at sensing pattern, theme, feel,... Others at the high end of the spectrum seem proud of their fierce intellect and high IQ.

I see visual patterns as though I'm hearing music.

I feel people's movement patterns like a cat might so I'm very aware of shifts in people's bodies.

I can be alone without loneliness for days, weeks, perhaps even months without too much trouble.

I experience the world as a big bunch of ARTism.

I can't help but believe pretty much anything I'm told, see all people and animals and objects as real, feel in company without humans, have an emotional relationship to color and form and symmetry I don't think many people have... those things are pretty good.

**Parenting Autism:** What are the 5 most common mistakes that you see adults making when dealing with an autistic child?

**Donna Williams:** 1.) Assuming forced conformity is the only way.

2.) Assuming one-sized fits all programs suit all people with autism.

3.) Blame themselves or blame the child rather than seeing the systems as two interacting languages of behaviour.

4.) Think meaning deafness/meaning blindness is misbehaviour and don't allow these people to use kinaesthetic discovery learning to get to grips with the world.

5.) Assume people aren't intelligent or sane if they don't speak, speak in idiosyncratic (sensing-based) language or if they have tics, self stimulatory behaviours, OCD, bipolar, a lack of processing of simultaneous self and other, meaning deafness/meaning blindness or catatonia.

**Parenting Autism:** What is your opinion on treatment programs and their claims that they can cure autism?

**Donna Williams:** They, like the militant culturalists who claim all is culture, are both assuming their own beliefs to fit all people completely.

In other words, they each have their own vested interests, their own self-righteous extremist views and are not looking at individuals in their own right.

**Parenting Autism:** What would be the 1 most important piece of advice that you would give to an autistic child to help them cope better with the world around them?

**Donna Williams:** There is no one normality so different can be equal

**Parenting Autism:** What would be the 1 most important piece of advice that you would give to a parent of an autistic child to help them do a better job of parenting their autistic child?

**Donna Williams:** Learn the system, learn the language. If you assume your own to be the only one worth having, you can't build bridges of mutual respect which are the foundations of trust from which springs curiosity for what is a foreign system.

**Parenting Autism:** Thank you Donna for taking the time to answer these questions and provide such insightful information.

### **Contact Details for Donna Williams**

Donna's website is <http://www.donnawilliams.net>