

Testing times – what it's like to sit an exam as an autistic child

March 30 2017, by Rebecca Wood



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It's often said there are [too many tests and exams in UK primary schools](#). And, while there is a general sense that tests can be demanding and stressful for all children, they can be seen as particularly difficult for

autistic children.

If statistics from the [Department for Education](#) are to be believed, significant numbers of [autistic children](#) of primary [school](#) age perform poorly in tests. And according to the stats some don't even take them at all – though this may not be the full picture given the ways this type of data is collected.

Already struggling to find their niche within a school system not designed for them, there seems to be a [prevailing fear](#) that to expect autistic [children](#) to take tests is a step too far.

Concerns seem to focus on how this might be unsettling for these children and potentially disruptive for the rest of the class – especially if the child has difficulty concentrating on the task in hand.

Some experts are also of the view that rather than tackling the core curriculum, autistic children should be focusing on more important things, such as "[life skills](#)", socialisation and learning to put their hand up rather than shout out in class.

The realities of the test

My own [small study](#) suggested that autistic children can experience certain difficulties during tests. Many factors can impact on their ability to take exams: such as noise levels and other sensory onslaughts and classroom layout. The wording of test questions can also present increased difficulties.

My research also revealed that some autistic children might become "thrown" by a particular task and so be unable to leave it and move on. They can also interpret visual and written material differently and so produce the "wrong" answer. It might also be the case that some autistic

children are simply not socially motivated to do well in exams.

One parent told me that on his way to school one morning for a maths test, his son – who was something of a mathematical whizz – was making up games and rhymes around a particular number. This boy found these number games so compelling, that he carried this on into the maths test – ignoring what was on the question paper. The same boy also told me whether or not he "liked any test" would be dictated in part by which numbers featured in it.

Emphasis on facts

The problem is that even for autistic children who do excel, getting nine out of ten rather than full marks might be genuinely difficult to accept – which can then be potentially baffling or even annoying for their less successful peers.

But despite these issues, tests can in fact be a positive experience for autistic children. Some of my participants valued the simplicity of a test compared to other classroom activities which might be socially confusing.

There were also clear indications that, for some autistic children, a [test](#) can be an opportunity to show what they know more easily than in the usual classroom situation with all its complexities.

So, while some teachers fear an apparent emphasis on "facts" in [the new primary school curriculum](#), this could actually be positive for some autistic children. This is because they might appreciate – perhaps more than others – the intrinsic value of this sort of knowledge.

Case-by-case basis

My research indicates that while it might possibly benefit some autistic children not to take tests, this isn't the case for every child.

These decisions should only be taken after careful consultation with all those involved – [especially the child](#). For clued-up schools, there is already a selection of [access arrangements](#) which they can use to [help autistic](#) and other children during tests.

This is important because however painful it might feel at the time, taking tests and exams is both a right and a privilege – those of us who enjoy the rewards that qualifications bring should think carefully before withdrawing this possibility from others.

In the meantime, education professionals need to work harder to create tests which play to the many strengths of autistic children.

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