

# Ryan and the Yellow Bike: Using Psychodrama in Work with Autistic Children

BY LYNLEY McNAB

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## The Teachable Moment

I am completely fascinated with the idea of living fully in each moment, and how this can be explored and played out within a classroom setting with children with special needs, specifically, children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

My colleague, Julie Quinn, and I have been working with our students with a new, cutting edge Special Education programming technique specifically designed for people with ASD. This approach, called 'Social Stories', was pioneered by Carol Gray in Michigan, USA (Gray, 1995). This involves using a strength of most children with ASD: their outstanding visual ability.

Children with ASD bring their own set of distinct difficulties. In my working model of

ASD I picture this as a triad of disorders overlaid by sensory difficulties. See Figure 1.

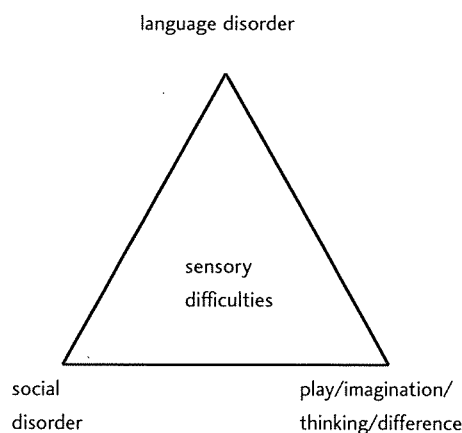


FIGURE 1: WORKING MODEL OF ASD

## *Ryan and the Yellow Bike*

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Children with ASD typically have a qualitative impairment in all three areas. Their social difficulties don't occur as a consequence of their language difficulties. These children are very unusual in that they have a social disorder as well as a language disorder. For example, for a child with ASD it is not that you can't make friends because you are not very good at talking; it is that you don't understand friendship or the meaning of anything social *and* that you are not very good at talking. These children have extreme difficulty in understanding what people, faces, interactions and relationships are all about. They also then have difficulty predicting what other people are going to say or do next. So, for example, when a child with ASD looks at a person's face, they may not understand the total meaning of what that face is expressing and what the face means socially (Social Comprehension). They may instead, when they see a face, notice the shine on a glasses rim. Children who have this much trouble understanding anything social and expressing themselves, understandably, can get very confused and frustrated. They may find themselves using an extreme form of communication such as screaming, hitting, biting or crying or maybe talking repetitively.

It has been proposed that people with ASD also think in a very different manner than we 'neurotypical' people. According to 'Central Coherence Theory' (Happé: 1994), people with ASD focus on specific detail (like the glasses frame) while 'neurotypical' people focus on the 'gist of things' or the meaning. Thus, understanding meaningful social interaction becomes even more elusive.

Julie and I have been working on developing social stories strategies using a method described by Carol Gray called 'Comic Strip Conversations'. By literally drawing what people say and do and think, things social can be slowed down and described in explicit detail. Children then get a chance to understand and explore the strange reasons why people do what they do and say what they say. The children can then understand and learn about themselves, other people and the world around them by the

presentation and integration of information in the form that is their natural learning strength, the visual format.

We present information to our students using a visual format, rather than just by talking with them. We use this method to assist with learning and understanding more about the complex and confusing world of social interaction and relationships. In Carol Gray's terms, we are developing their 'Social Comprehension' of situations. The meaning of the situation is integrally connected to the meaning of the thoughts and words.

We are also using this method to support our students towards a more full expression of themselves and their ideas. The interaction is slowed down enough for us to examine and explore visually the display of what other people think, say and do. This in turn allows time to also examine options for responding.

I wrestle with the compromises that need to be made between expected curriculum activities and making the most of exciting chances for incidental dramas and opportunities for accidental learning which arise. These offer the 'teachable moments'. Also there is a clash between the traditional behaviour modification methods and methods of managing behaviour and encouraging more adequate means of expression through the development of 'Social Comprehension'.

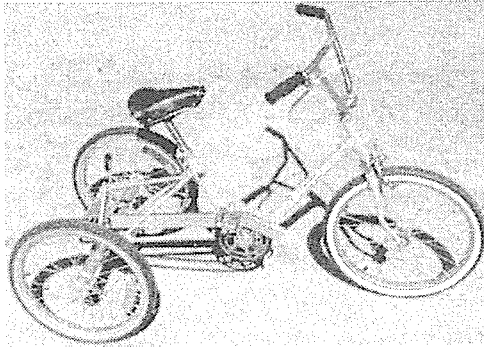
I am particularly alert to the difference between these approaches when 'the moment' is in any way social, relationship or communication-based. I will grab my pen and paper and head on over to where the action is occurring. Let me tell you the story of one such event.

### *The Yellow Bike*

There were big projects going in our school that we had been working on for most of the year. Firstly, it was the year for our school inspection by the NSW Board of Studies. Secondly, Julie and I had been extending Carol Gray's Social Stories idea by bringing it into the moment using 'illustrated interactions'. Thirdly, and most important to Ryan, our school had the good



fortune to have retired engineers especially build and modify bikes that would meet the needs of our students, and so 'the yellow bike' was born.



The yellow bike wasn't a speedster, but it was relatively fast and extremely stable. With the right rider at the helm, it could get you around our bike track at a fairly good clip. Ryan adored the yellow bike. He rode it at every opportunity. He raced around the school track with some skill and much enthusiasm. Ryan had found freedom at last, an 'exhilarated speedster'.

Unfortunately, the yellow bike proved a teeny bit too fragile for 11-year-old Ryan's very generous and sturdy body. After a long series of bent and broken parts, our engineers sadly shook their heads and informed us that, really, they had to suggest 'no more yellow bike for Ryan'. It just couldn't cope with the use, and they had run out of bike strengthening ideas. The staff had to create a rule that would make sense to all the children, not single out Ryan, nor humiliate him because of his size. We decided that the rule would be that 'only kids under 10 years' could ride the yellow bike. Ryan was devastated. Work was done to support Ryan through this. He courageously accepted the decision over time, becoming a 'resigned, sometimes petulant griever'.

### *Hello, Mr President*

Meanwhile, after months of frenzied preparation, our day of reckoning, the school inspection, has arrived. There is an air of anxiety and anticipation in the school. The children pick up on the mood of the day, and some are slightly more stressed and anxious than usual. The

group of men in their 'flash' suits walk around our school, view our programs and meet the kids. When the men enter our class en masse, one of our boys goes over, shakes one of their hands, and says, 'Hello Mr President'. It certainly is our big day!

During my break, I gradually become conscious of a familiar scream issuing forth from the playground. I sneak a look outside and feel immediate tension in my belly. The 'suits' are all lined up at our classroom window watching as Ryan screams and runs around the playground, highly distressed. The yellow bike is in the centre of the action guarded by the teacher on duty, the 'determined gatekeeper'.

The school principal approaches me and suggests that now might be a good time to show off this new cutting edge method that I have been working on all year with Ryan. I can feel the observing phalanx of suits through the staffroom wall and am aware that their report may include how we manage such a situation at our school. I pick up my now familiar wad of paper and thick-tipped felt pen and head out into the playground.

### *Creating the Stage*

To view this within the psychodramatic framework, Ryan is already very warmed up to himself and his issues. He is in an overdeveloped role of the 'cathartic expresser'. The relationships that he is most warmed up to are firstly with himself and secondly with the yellow bike. He is not directing his expression to, nor in close relationship with, another person at present.

What I will offer to him is the container and the process of the psychodramatic stage, in the form of pen and paper. This will be a place for the concretisation and expression of his present concerns and a place for an exploration of these concerns if he wishes. He will be in relationship with his director, myself, and his possible auxiliaries: the yellow bike and the teacher.

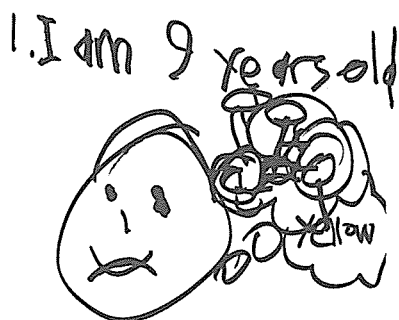
As I walk out towards him, I am warming up to my role as a director of a drama, rather than the traditional role of the 'problem solver'. I feel my

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sense of time begin to expand and lengthen. I believe implicitly that Ryan has something to say and that he knows what it is. I am warming up to my role of 'producer' co-creating this drama with Ryan. I feel no anxiety about outcomes or 'what might happen', but a deep calm and curiosity about what Ryan might show me about himself and his world. I believe in Ryan's creative genius and am ready to value his display, whatever that may be.

### 9 Years Old

As I walk out into the playground, Ryan sees me approach and comes running over, still yelling. I tell him to sit down. He does so. I sit alongside him on the small hillock in our playground and immediately offer him both the pen and the paper. Ryan grabs the pen and now in total silence draws quickly and furiously, the 'passionate expresser'.



Ryan draws a happy smile, and then changes it to 'sad' with a tear in his eye. He tells me that he is only nine years old (and therefore within the yellow bike-riding age bracket) and that he is thinking about the yellow bike. As he draws, he settles and becomes calm and focuses on the page.

Ryan is warmed up to himself and to his concerns. He shows immediate trust in the now familiar method and in me. I am taking Ryan seriously and he warms up to his power to act rather than simply reacting. He has open-heartedly and passionately entered into this drama.

Ryan begins to concretise and express himself while in relationship to his director. I delight in

the emergence of a thinking component to his expression. The 'self-righteous rule-bender' is present. Ryan hands the paper and pen to me. As we sit side-by-side, I am aware that our joint attention is focused on the page, that we have oriented to our stage.

I find responding to Ryan very easy. I like the clarity that he has brought to his expression. Ryan leans over and watches with great interest as I write.



### Freed Up From Outcomes

I find this an extremely freeing and exciting method. Naming what is there. Living purely in the moment with Ryan being so present with me. I am freed up from having to create outcomes. I trust that the next moment will emerge if I can live fully in this moment.

This is in direct contrast to a traditional special education behaviour modification approach. My overall priorities are to build trust, relationships and learning (including social comprehension and role development) with my students. Right now, I am in an active listening role, co-creating a drama with Ryan.

This is a very different role than that which a teacher would assume within a more traditional task- or outcome-oriented approach. Such an approach would focus more on the behaviour and how to manage it where the teacher might be in some form of the role of 'authoritarian controller'. Outcomes that may be targeted in such programs could include: Ryan must stop running around or yelling, and keep his hands down.

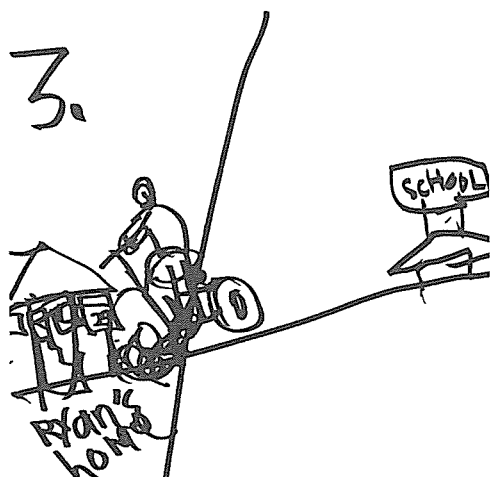
The behaviour management plan would also include communication goals. For example:

- Ryan learning how to request the yellow bike with appropriate language, rather than demanding the bike by yelling or screaming; and
- Ryan learning how to express his disappointment in a socially appropriate manner, rather than smashing or hitting.

It is reasonable to consider that if everyone expressed his or her distress and disappointment in our society by running around, screaming, yelling and hitting, we would not have an easily workable system. However, I find that supporting the work to be done in this psychodramatic fashion, the children do change their means of expression over time as they are heard, mirrored and extend their role development and role systems. The outcomes flow from an integration of the work, rather than imposition from adult decision-making.

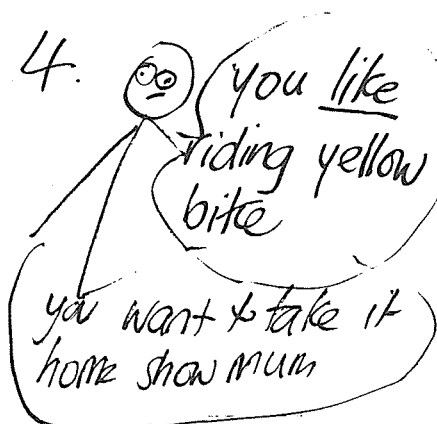
### All To Himself Forever

I have mirrored Ryan in words and invited him to take up the stage. Ryan responds with this:



Don't I get it yet? Ryan loves this bike. Ryan longs for this bike constantly. Ryan must have this bike. Riding this bike feels great. It is a wonderful feeling that Ryan wants to experience as often as possible. He is out of here and home to his world with his rules. 'The daring escapee'.

I respond:



I look at this now and think that I could have used this opportunity to mirror back just how big Ryan's wanting and yearning is for this bike more fully, particularly as Ryan's warm-up has now deepened. Ryan doesn't want to just take it home to show mum; he wants to have it all to himself forever. He wants to immerse himself fully in the experience of totally having this bike. (However, remember the suits? I am working intermittently to maintain my spontaneity and warm-up and not worry about how it is all looking).

Ryan gives me yet another chance to get what he is trying to tell me; the 'persistent communicator' is present. Ryan wasn't fully mirrored in intensity, so he has to do it again.



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As we continue with this, other children have gradually approached the stage. The sociometry of the group has shifted. We now have an obvious audience. I become aware that a child is leaning on my back looking at the paper. Another is over my outstretched leg.

### A Sense of Group

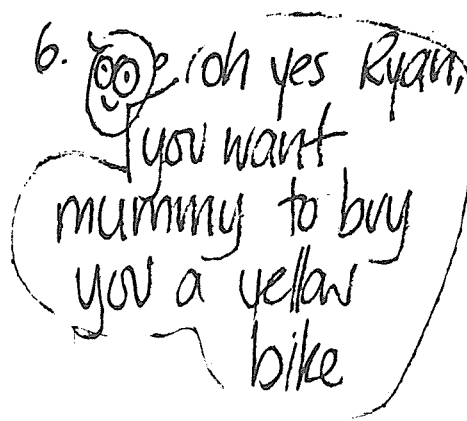
I have experienced this phenomenon over and over again. The children move in. They do not look at each other, but intensely focus on the page in close proximity to each other. What is the attraction? Is it the concretisation of someone's inner world? A world that is presented in discrete, non overwhelming chunks. It is in the visual format which they find the easiest to interpret. It allows them to begin to build a picture of what might be going on here (Social Comprehension again).

Does Ryan's concretisation somehow mirror something that is in them, that they recognize but would struggle to express themselves? Or is it the side-by-side relationship and dynamic between Ryan and myself that also attracts them? Is it that someone is valuing Ryan as they may wish to be seen and valued? Whatever is the case, the children all jointly focus on the unfolding drama.

The process has a powerful influence on the sociometry of the group. I notice that over time these children do display a higher awareness of each other and a wish to connect with each other in some way, and a development that feels to me like a sense of 'group' emerges. The children are aware that they are members of that group. A boy in my present class, who showed no obvious interest in his peers, now won't leave the classroom until everybody comes, and another boy wants to have 'runners like James'.

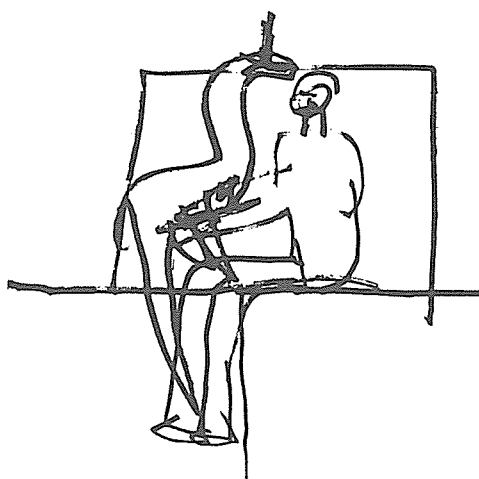
### Meeting the Gentle Friend

I make a guess based on past experience with Ryan's 'insatiable demander':

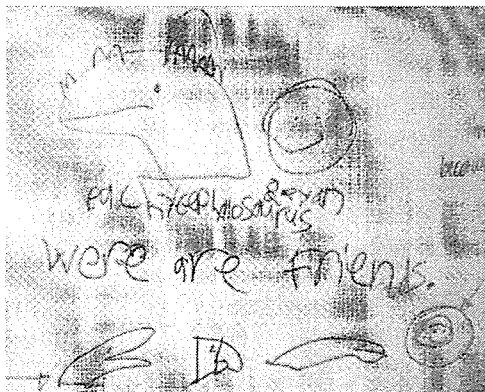


Ryan responds:

7.



This is a critical moment in the drama. I sense the role shift for Ryan. He moves from the belief that he can only be satisfied by possessing the bike or by being the 'self-involved speedster forever', to being satisfied by being in relationship with a friend. I know that he is starting to think and talk about friends because he recently drew this in the classroom:

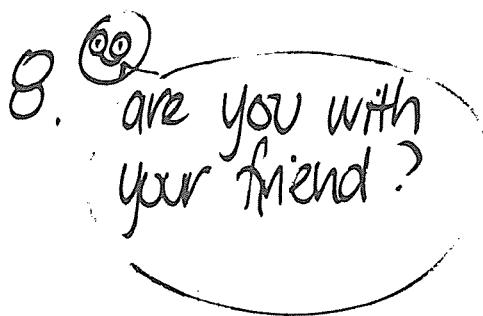


Ryan says, 'Here are some of pachycephalosaurius' friends.'

When I asked Ryan why he had a circle around him, he said, 'Because I'm not a dinosaur.'

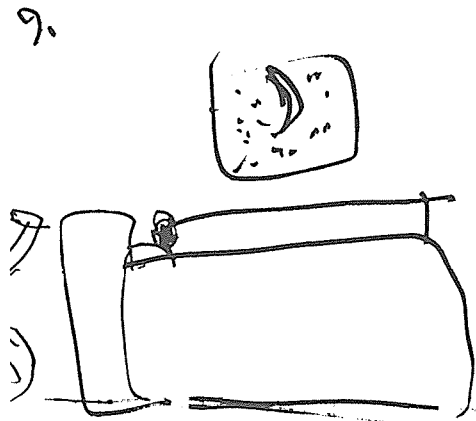
Ryan has displayed a role shift from 'insatiable demander' and 'insatiable yearner' to 'needing a friend', 'gentle friend' or maybe 'welcoming companion'.

Ryan may be doing fantastically, however, my grip on my warm-up is slipping. I can feel myself panicking and getting conscious of the audience of suits. As I move from 'open-hearted valuer of the display' and 'calm mirrorer' to 'nervous questioner' and 'solution finder'. I say:



On reflection, I could have brought the drama to an end here by mirroring back to Ryan the wonderfully intimate feeling of sitting quietly with a friend. For example, 'sitting beside a friend feels good', rather than asking a nervous and self-evident question.

Ryan responds with this:



He is now at home, in bed, it is night time and the yellow bike is parked at his head. 'Thank you very much, we'll just pause there and clear the stage.'

Some children have wandered off, some are still here. Ryan is calm and at peace with himself. He has made a small but courageous step from 'having' to 'sitting beside a friend'. I chat with him quietly about what he might like to go and do now. He stands up and wanders off by himself. I sit with the other children for a while.

As a director, I feel mixed emotions. I am elated that something so dear to my heart turned out so beautifully in the face of such intense scrutiny. The sense of 'there is always enough time' is marred by the feeling that I rushed at the crucial moment. However, Ryan was able to move forward from the intoxication of 'I want' to have to an emergent intimacy with a friend. There is no need for me to bother with giving my 'harsh critic' an airing at this moment.

So, we've arrived at our outcome! Ryan came to his own decisions about resolution and outcomes. Ryan is not yelling. Ryan is not running around. And Ryan's hands are down. This has happened by using a highly visual method allowing Ryan to take the stage and explore the situation in strong relationship with his teacher. Ryan has maintained his warm-up to his power to act. He came to his own

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conclusions through his own role shifts. He explored his own and my sense of the social situation.

I find myself back in the staff room, ravenous, eating my cold pasta out of an old takeaway container. I hear that the suits are in the Principal's office discussing their inspection. I hope that they saw the profound shifts that Ryan made as they watched through the looking glass of the classroom window.

I value the pure producer and believer in the childrens' creative genius and their willingness to enter into such an adventure with me. The 'righteous and cathartic demanders' give way to 'clear communicators' and 'dream claimers'. It is a great privilege and experience for me to walk some of this journey with these extraordinary children.

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### Further Reading

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### Acknowledgments

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