

Section 2: Going through the education system

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Surviving at school

Christopher in conversation with Kate Mee

This chapter is based on a conversation between Christopher and Kate Mee. However, Kate's contributions have been removed, as the focus is on Christopher. Christopher was taking his A-levels at the time when this account was recorded. He has had constant battles throughout his time at school. He does not really understand the problems that neurotypicals have with him. He is just 'him' and does not understand the autism label at all.

A quotation from his account was used at the start of the Introduction to this book.

The thing about autism, if you suffer from it, is that you can't tell the difference between yourself and someone who doesn't. You can't think any other way. You only have one perspective, and from your perspective you can't tell that anything's wrong. Other people say you've got it. You're different. There's something wrong with you. They give you this label. There's nothing you can do about it. It doesn't matter what your perceptions about yourself are; it's other people who define you. I wouldn't know I was autistic if people didn't tell me I was. So it's not what I think that's important; it's what other people think. No matter how much you hate it, no matter how much you try to change yourself, it doesn't go away. It's like the scars left by a hot iron brand; you can't run and you can't hide. You're autistic and there is absolutely nothing you can do. You have no idea how soul crushing that is.

I worry about upsetting people. Treat people as you wish to be treated yourself – that's the categorical imperative. People don't treat me like that. Some people are careful, some people aren't. Some people try to use empathy, whereas others don't. You can usually tell who is doing what because the people who don't try to use empathy just try to piss you off because it is funny. People have done it all through school. I'm year 13 but I can remember them doing it in year 7 and 8. They used to try and wind me up deliberately.

Why do I believe certain things? I don't know. From experience I like to think I've learned about the world but when I think back all I've got is a belief and justification of what's behind it. For example, you know Mrs X's son? In my opinion he's a right bell-end and I'm glad I haven't seen him in two years. When he was in year 11 he was trying to piss me off and

he was doing it consistently. I can't remember how, and that's part of the problem, I can't remember what he was doing. So I avoid him even though I can't remember what he did, I just know he pissed me off. It's like a set belief. It's like Brian Jones in year 11 – he joined in with Mrs X's son.

I don't know why they pick on me. Maybe it's because I'm sensitive and think in a different way. Maybe it's because I get pissed off easily. I honestly don't know. But for as long as I can remember, I have been beaten up, annoyed and pissed off by all sorts of people.

I can remember two things about the first primary school I went to. The first thing is being in a little side room with a support teacher, playing with some Lego bricks or something. The other thing is lying on the floor in the playground being kicked repeatedly. I don't know why and I don't really care any more. The two people who generally beat me up didn't really get on very well with each other, or at least their families didn't. I think, due to some sort of problems between their families, they got bullied themselves by the other family members. Someone told me about it while I was still at that school about nine or ten years ago. I ended up getting a kicking off these two. I don't think it was because of their family conflict. It was because of me and the way I acted. I think I was a little shit. With hindsight, I think that because I was bullied I got a bullying mentality into my own head. I didn't know that at the time but people have told me. That's when I had to go to another school.

I spent the best part of a year at the pupil referral unit in town. It's a temporary school for children who have problems, while they are waiting to be moved onto a different school. They don't teach you much. I remember one lesson where they taught you how to use a compass. I learned about northeast and north-northeast! I'm not sure what happened. I know I used to read a lot of books because people have told me I did. I don't think the lessons taught me much.

Then I went to another primary school and I was still violent. I don't know how many people I hit, and it was sometimes for trivial reasons. One time I feel particularly bad about was with a lad who kicked a pigeon that had an injured wing. I thought that was cruel, and I picked him up by the throat and threw him. In hindsight I don't know why I did it but it made me so angry at the time. It was spur of the moment. At that school I managed to break a sink. I broke a lock on the door; because the door was locked I pulled it and the lock in the middle stayed firm but the bolts at the top and the bottom ripped off. I caused quite a lot of damage at that school before I left! I was probably a bit better by the time I left, to be honest.

I left and went to senior school. I almost went to the grammar. If there had been a choice of going to the comprehensive as a second choice and I had the chance of taking the exams

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for the grammar I might have tried going. My sister had that option, which pissed me off. Pretty much all of my friends from the primary school went to the boys' grammar so I was pretty pissed off about that too. My best mate went, although I haven't really spoken to him since his mum died about four years ago. It was when I was in year 7 or 8, his mum died of cancer. I think I saw him once after that and I haven't seen him since.

I recently had another problem with someone I thought was my friend. I try to avoid him now because I piss him off. I'm not entirely certain how I pissed him off but he was shouting at me. What happened was I was explaining something to him about dates. When you are talking about the date 1776 that is the 18th century right? But I said to him that it was the 17th century. He said 'No it isn't. You've got that wrong.' I didn't really understand what he was saying and I was thinking about it but it must have been my expression or something. He snapped at me. I told him I was just thinking about it. I didn't know what had happened. Then he shouted at me so I left. I'm not completely sure why he shouted at me but I know really; it is because of me. I pissed him off. If I could change it I would.

There might be other reasons he was fed up with me. He is sensitive at the moment but it was me who pissed him off so it is justified. He is a bit unreasonable but in the end it was justified. I don't want to piss him off any more so I avoid him.

I have tried talking to him about it in the past but it has made it worse. I can't remember what I said. Have you ever had a conversation but you can't remember a single word that's been said but you can remember the general message? But if someone was to turn round and say to you afterwards, 'Could you repeat what I just said?' you would just not remember.

All through school, my friends stayed away from me when I was violent. It was an absolute nightmare trying to make friends. It was one of the reasons I was shit scared about coming to this comprehensive. I haven't really made many friends. The only two people who I really spent time with, well, I just used to follow them around. I was accepted by these two in the end. This was in year 7 and 8, although, well, it might have even taken longer than that, perhaps up to the end of year 9. I'm not sure if I would call them friends, but I don't know what else to call them. And then I changed populations in year 10 which was the best thing that happened to me because I met new people. It was a fresh start, meeting people like you [Kate] and your friend.

Up until changing populations, I had still been violent. In year 7 I had four isolations. In year 8 I can't remember whether I had any isolations but I was still in trouble for being violent. I was really aggressive right up until that point, and I changed. I'm not sure what happened, or why I changed, whether something snapped or whether it was a more gradual thing, I

don't really know. I started thinking about life and really started to regret it. I suppose I am a violent person but I try to suppress it as much as possible and stay away from violence. I just try and avoid conflict.

There is another odd thing about me. I hate to say it but I'm doing what I want but I don't really want to! I love being the centre of attention but I hate the fact that I love being the centre of attention. It's drawing attention to myself and I kind of figure that is why people try to piss me off so much. Because I draw attention to myself I mark myself out a little bit, and people grab that, do something and realise that I get pissed off easily and carry on doing it. I know I should keep a low profile and that attention-seeking will get people trying to piss me off but I still do it and I hate the fact that I do it.

It's a bit like the debating society. I'm not very good at debating; I think about a point and then shout it out from the other side of the room. I've been in two debates in the sixth form. I lost the first one and won the second one about the United Nations. I still feel really guilty about that. Literally the day before, I had almost nothing prepared. My first speech was crap and the teacher told me I ought to try doing this. He suggested I should propose that people should be asked to pay an extra dollar on an aircraft flight and that would go towards helping people. It's only a small increase in the price but think how many people would make a fuss about having to pay an extra amount on their fare.

I looked at an article and I based my speech on that, pretty much; small things make a big difference. So it was the teacher's idea really. And then I was up until 12 o'clock the night before and I'd got my first speech done and I was happy with that, but the second speech I hadn't started and so the teacher effectively wrote it. I changed a few little bits around but the second speech was effectively written by the teacher and it was just me acting. The teacher said I was doing a good job, going over the top with all the emphasis, the movement, keep doing it. It made me put a bit more into it. I think that's why I won, I connected more with the audience than everyone else. Even though everyone else fit the brief better. It was my presentation, not the actual content.

I don't like saying I won it; it was the school that won it. It was a little bit me but a lot the teacher. I know if I was the teacher I'd be thinking 'I helped him win that'. I haven't spoken to him about it. I feel like I should but I can't bring myself to. The reason I like debating is that half of it is acting. It's putting the emphasis on the right bit. For example, just moving a comma in a sentence you can completely change its meaning. You can play tricks with numbers, but with words you can really make them bounce.

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Reflections

Christopher finds the label 'autistic' hurtful, like the searing of a hot iron. Have you ever labelled someone as a result of carrying out an assessment? How did that person respond to the label? Might you have done things differently?

Whilst at senior school, Christopher changed significantly from someone who was regularly aggressive towards his peers to someone who managed to keep himself out of trouble. He cannot remember what caused this to happen. Those of us who work with people with autism should always remember that change is possible; people are no more fixed by their autism than the rest of us by our neurotypicality. Do you manage to work with the possibility of change in mind?