

Teachable Moments

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Do you know what a “teachable moment” is? A teachable moment is a concrete way to teach someone something, such as social skills and safety, using real-life examples and situations. Teachable moments use concrete examples rather than hypothetical examples and are taught right in the moment. Teachable moments are learning opportunities that are often unplanned and can occur any time in any milieu.

Concrete thinking is very typical in people with autism. People with autism can learn abstract concepts but not in a way those without autism do. For many with autism, learning and thinking goes from concrete and specific to abstract and general. Another way to put it is that people with autism will often see the small details *before* seeing the “big picture”. (This can be an advantage or a disadvantage, depending on the situation.) Many with autism do not learn social skills naturally; it has to be taught concretely.

I was diagnosed with the high functioning form of autism, called Asperger’s Syndrome, in high school. Straight out of Montessori school, I went to an independent school for students with learning differences. I had an IEP with related services each week that included weekly group and individual sessions with the school’s own occupational therapists and speech-language therapists.

Growing up my parents used teachable moments frequently. You can use teachable moments to teach math, science, and even social skills. Multiple teachable moments can present themselves at the same time in the same milieu. In a grocery store you can teach polite behavior along with math and nutrition. While out walking you can teach street crossing safety, weather, addresses, and much more. For the sake of time, I will focus on polite behavior and safety. The following are examples of teachable moments where I learned.

At a concert. My mom was a Sergeant Major in the U.S. Army Band at Fort Myer, Virginia and retired after twenty-four years of service in 1998. She also played violin and was a freelance piano teacher. She often would take me with her when she had rehearsals to show me the hard work musicians put in to put on a great show. When she was on stage for the performance my dad or a family friend would help me with concert etiquette and point out other people who were sitting quietly. I attended many of her concerts both on and off the military base. She often took me to concerts at the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, ballet performances of one of her piano students, and concerts of her colleagues who played other instruments. I learned to return and leave in between songs, to eat snacks outside of the auditorium, wait for people to stand up when making my way in the rows to my seat, calmly leave if I felt the music was too loud, and that I should stop talking once the lights go down. I was instructed to do these things each time I went to a concert. As I got older, around fourth grade, my mom asked me to help her to be a host/usher at piano recitals for the Washington Music Teachers Association; I would help direct people at the venue to the performance area and hand out programs (which I helped her type up and copy). These experiences gave me a lot of examples of polite and helpful behavior to put in my “mental file cabinet”.

At a restaurant. Restaurants are great places to practice polite dining etiquette. When I was young (younger than 11 years old), my parents often took me to restaurants, sometimes even very fine dining restaurants, (some of them were places my mom would perform as a strolling violin player) such as Le Vieux Logis in Bethesda, Maryland, The Old Angler’s Inn in Potomac, Maryland, and L’Auberge Chez Francois in Great Falls, Virginia, for example. These were teachable moments for me for using appropriate voice volume, sharing (e.g. an appetizer or dessert with others), putting my napkin on my lap, politely excusing myself when I need to go to the bathroom, saying “please” and “thank you” to the servers, and taking turns talking in conversations of different topics. My parents often took me when going out to dinner with their friends and this helped me practice these dining manners with people other than my parents.

One summer, when I was in sixth grade, my mom and I were out west on our annual cross-country drive and stopped for lunch at a very casual restaurant. I had forgotten to say “please” when asking for more ketchup from our server; my mom told me it is important and polite to say “please” and instructed me to apologize to the server for being rude by not saying “please”. (This reminded me that polite behavior is expected regardless if the restaurant was a greasy spoon or fine dining.) When my parents and I were eating with others and someone offered to help pay for the meal or tip, my parents used that as a teachable moment as an example of being polite and helpful; that teachable moment stuck with me. (Recently, I got together with a friend from college who was in town visiting family and friends. The two of us went out to eat at a Tex-Mex restaurant; while we both paid for our separate meals, I helped by pitching in and asking the server to put the dessert on my bill. She thanked me for covering the dessert and in turn I felt appreciated.)

With family. When I was young, younger than seven years of age, my paternal grandparents and uncle came from Massachusetts to visit us in Maryland and my dad was videotaping parts of the visit. I sat next to my uncle and after a moment I smelled something odd and I said, “You smell.” My mom was not there at the moment and when she came home I showed her some of the tape to show what she had missed during the day. When the “you smell” comment came, my mom stopped the video and asked me if I thought what I said was nice. She helped me learn that what I should do next time is to find somewhere else to sit and keep my rude comment to myself. My mom told me that I said something rude. Then I learned an example of rude behavior and put that in my “mental file cabinet.”

Passing someone in the hallway. In elementary school teachers would sometimes do lesson plans on good manners. We would discuss hypothetical situations. In addition to lesson plans and discussing hypothetical situations, our teachers would use teachable moments whenever possible. One time, a school mate in another homeroom class had returned to school after surgery and was temporarily using a wheelchair. This student’s teacher was pushing him through the hallway. My class was walking together in the hallway and my classmate opened the door so they could get through and save the work of the teacher from opening the door. My homeroom teacher used that moment to teach us that it is polite and helpful to hold the door open for people in need of assistance. Our teacher told the class that was another act of kindness toward the class’s goal for a reward.

Different Cultures. In March 2000 for spring vacation, my parents and I went to Egypt. This was not my first time traveling out of the country. However, this was my first time in the Middle East. Due to the cultural differences, we all had to dress conservatively and modestly. I did complain about being sweaty and having to wear a hat or head covering (sensory issues). My mom emphasized the importance being respectful of different cultures. She said, “We are in a different country and we need to show respect.”

Bereavement. Growing up my parents and I went to funerals of people we knew. In 2003, a neighbor who was also one of my swim coaches on my neighborhood swim team died suddenly and under very unfortunate circumstances. She was raised in the Jewish faith. I went to school with plenty of friends brought up Jewish. However, this was my first time sitting Shiva, which is a Jewish ritual that involves visiting the bereft family at their home for conversation, food, and prayer. I had expressed my frustration to my parents in regards to the circumstances of her death; my mom validated my concerns but she told me that it would be rude of me to voice these opinions of mine when we arrived at their home. My mom also told me that the prayers and rituals will be different from a Christian funeral and that I should be respectful of these differences. With my mom giving me guidance on giving condolences and with respecting the differences in the bereavement rituals, there were two teachable moments of polite behavior.

Swimming. Beginning in second grade, my parents made me take swimming lessons during the summer and main school year. (My sensory issues with the smell of chlorine played a part in me not wanting to go.) Although I expressed my objections my mom said that it is important that I learn to swim. One night we were watching a movie and there was a scene in the movie where someone fell into a fast-flowing river and shouted “Help! I don’t know how to swim.” My mom stopped the video and said, “That’s why it is important to know how to swim.” She went on to tell me that her mom (my grandma) made her take swimming lessons when she didn’t want to. (This was another teachable moment to teach me that we all have to do things we don’t want to do every now and then.) According to the National Autism Association, near half of children with autism engage in wandering behavior and accidental drowning accounts for approximately 71% of lethal outcomes¹.

Car Safety. Growing up I had heightened tactile sensory issues with seatbelts and would often find them a nuisance up against my neck. When I was in either third or fourth grade, my dad was taking me to school on his way to work. I was sitting in the back seat with my backpack right next to me. We were three blocks from the house, not yet on the main road. We were approaching an intersection and what appeared out of nowhere a car came from our left. My dad slammed his breaks hard. My backpack flew in between the two front seats. That morning, thankfully, my dad made me wear my seatbelt. Later that night while eating dinner, my parents used that moment as a teachable moment to talk to me about safety in the car. My dad said, “You could have been like that backpack and could have flown forward. You ever know when something like that can happen.” My mom also emphasized that was an example of bad driving (the other car) and that I should be aware of other drivers when I would begin to learn to drive. I learned that seatbelts are more than a sensory issue. This was a teachable moment to learn the necessity for wearing a seatbelt and an example of bad driving. Ever since then, I remembered to wear my seatbelt whether it is in a New York City or London cab, Uber or Lyft, a friend’s car, a

¹ <http://nationalautismassociation.org/resources/awaare-wandering/>

limousine (even in a police-escorted funeral procession), or a bus or van that has seatbelts. Watch a child learn about seatbelts from a teachable moment in this video for children at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XWgtKts5KOg>.

My parents taught me multiple examples of polite behavior and safety across multiple settings. Over time I was able to generalize the concept of polite behavior and safety from these (and many other) teachable moments. Teachable moments are often unplanned moments to teach your child. In this article I addressed using teachable moments for teaching polite behavior and safety. I encourage you to use teachable moments to help your children with social skills among other things. When using teachable moments be sure that you are constantly finding teachable moments again and again for teaching the same thing; this will help the child gather many examples and put those many examples in their “mental file cabinet” and soon will be able to generalize the concept. Again, there can be multiple teachable moments in one moment in any milieu. So go forth and teach.



Pictured: Elizabeth Graham (left) with Temple Grandin, Ph.D. at the Future Horizons Autism and Asperger's Syndrome Conference in Baltimore, Maryland in September 2016. Dr. Grandin is Professor of Animal Science at Colorado State University and a recent inductee to the National Women's Hall of Fame. The Emmy-winning HBO film "Temple Grandin" (2010) starring Claire Danes tells the story about her life with autism and her love for animals. Dr. Grandin has written several articles and books on autism and animals.

About Elizabeth Graham

Elizabeth Graham, a Washington, DC area native, works at The Arc of Prince George's County where she is a Service Coordinator for the Maryland Home and Community Based Services Waiver for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Administered by the Maryland State Department of Education, this Medicaid waiver provides direct support services to children with severe autism to develop skills to live in their homes and their communities. Prior to working at The Arc of Prince George's County, upon college graduation she worked two years as a direct support professional in Montgomery County, Maryland, providing community-based residential support to adults with developmental/intellectual differences.

Elizabeth has her B.A. in Psychology with a minor in Counseling from Marshall University in Huntington, WV. Her academic area of focus was bereavement in people with autism; this was influenced by her Mom's death to melanoma at age 54 years in December 2004 and her later diagnosis of Asperger's. During college, she volunteered with hospice and bereavement camps for families and children. She has presented on the topics of autism and bereavement at various conferences and events. In the summer of 2007, she attended the Georgetown University School of Continuing Studies College Preparatory Program. She is a 2008 alumna of The Lab School of Washington in Washington, DC and a 2009 post-graduate alumna of The Perkiomen School in Pennsburg, PA. She has been published by The Arc of the United States Autism Now blog.

Helpful Links

What is a teachable moment?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JdgMulLtBy4>

Parents, Here Are Your 6 Teachable Moments!

<https://positivelyatypical.com/2013/09/29/parents-here-are-your-teachable-moments/>

Temple Grandin, Ph.D. on teachable moments

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a9Z5CCvGiZ4>

Teachable moments road trips by Scholastic

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IB9QagG9-6U>

Teachable moments in a restaurant by Scholastic

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4JE-L3N6YNk>

Teachable moment at the doctor’s office by Scholastic

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kPREvqNsOYo>

Teachable Moments: The Grocery Store by Scholastic (teaching math and literacy)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZtFlrBqBIVw>

Teachable money moments from Bank of America

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9NQ8gEORPL0>

Seatbelt Safety videos (can be used as visual teaching aids)

Video for children <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EuPuTewPJEc&t=106s>

ABC News https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aiAPx9Adl_Q

The Hartford Informer https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2a93m_jMJ18

UK Road Safety ad <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mKHY69AFstE>

North Dakota Dept. of Transportation <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GLpcrr1cMb8>

Irish seat belt ad <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=epTdI-9V6Jk>

WPRI Eyewitness News <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=crUUr7FnBMI>

Tactical Seat Belt lesson by FAAC Inc. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EeqDYNXy49M>

Seatbelts and Sensory Processing Disorder

<http://peaceautismandlove.com/seat-belts-and-spd/>

Swim School from RealLifeAutism.com

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qqjIYfG55ic>

Benefits of Swimming for Children with Autism

<http://texasswimacademy.com/the-key-benefits-of-swimming-for-children-on-the-autism-spectrum/>