

Expect the unexpected

Simon Baron-Cohen reviews *George and Sam: Autism in the Family* by Charlotte Moore

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How many of us would be willing to bare our souls and our home life to the world, to talk with frankness about the frustrations, the challenges, the crises, and the wonder of bringing up two sons? To talk about their eating habits, their toileting, their sleeping patterns, their obsessions?

Charlotte Moore has done the world a great service by opening up her life, her family, her home to the world, so that we can see what life is really like for a mother of two children with autism. Her book is simultaneously a tribute to her parental dedication in the face of a relentless battle, an exquisitely observed portrait of the autistic mind, a plea for greater support for children like hers, and a manifesto calling for children with autism to be accepted as essentially different.

As a father of three children without autism, I read Charlotte Moore's account with increasing astonishment: how does a parent cope, day after day, with a child that eats inedibles, runs away, blocks drains, climbs on to the roof, takes but does not give? And if that isn't enough, how does a parent cope with two such children? I was left feeling exhausted by her life, feeling that all parents of a child with autism deserved something better than a winning lottery ticket, and feeling nothing short of massive respect for their everyday challenges.

As a researcher into autism I also read the book for what parents such as Charlotte Moore can teach scientists, and - if you will tolerate such detachment - whether psychological theory makes sense of her children. I read her extraordinary descriptions of her sons through the lens of my latest theory, the hyper-systemizing theory. I wanted to see how well the idea fitted the children, and how well it didn't.

"Systemizing" refers to the brain's drive to analyse or construct a system. Systems are rule-governed. My theory suggests that people with autism are hyper-systemizers. From infancy, George, the elder of Charlotte Moore's sons, had a musical mobile of four rotating bears; he would lie on his mat watching this intently, reserving his energy for the reappearance of the red bear. Becoming fascinated by rotating mobiles is, of course, systemizing. When he was 16 months old, if his mother paused when reading a familiar story, he could supply the missing word. He could do this with any word in at least 50

stories. This suggests he had memorised the stories as a script, or predictable system.

At school, George's favourite thing was the register - a list (or system) of names that is read out in a predictable (alphabetical) sequence. At other times, his entire mental energy is focused on finding something satisfying to flap - to create a predictable, vibrating systematic motion.

What about Sam? At 16 months, Sam produced an accurate imitation of the sound of the water draining out of the bath, of washing machines, drills, microwaves, food-processors, and the like - mechanical or natural systems, and their highly predictable, law-governed sounds. As a toddler, Sam loved washing machines. Like many babies, he enjoyed being propped up in his chair to watch the spin-cycle. At four, he could draw a detailed washing machine, with lights, knobs, a door handle, clothes going round inside. He was known as the "Washing-Machine Boy". He had become obsessed with a mechanical system. Now older, Sam is transfixed by raindrops splashing on the surface of a horse trough; he stands watching the circles spread - a natural system.

Where does this hyper-systemizing come from? In her wonderful book, Charlotte Moore suggests genetic origins, and in particular describes her grandfather as a systemizer: he recorded information such as "12th February 1932: This morning I discarded my razor-blade, after 86 days of use". The genetic theory remains to be fully tested. Clearly the systemizing theory falls short of being able to say anything about many of the other features of autism that the author describes, such as her son's allergy to gluten, which seemed to make behaviour worse.

How does one wake up each day, knowing that one will face the unexpected in your child's behaviour? Knowing that your child's actions may fill you with nausea, fear, or worry, and a sense of being overwhelmed by the task of parenthood? Sam ate her friend's contraceptive pills. George ate out of the cat's bowl, and licks snails. Both sons smear excrement as a fascinating sensory activity.

Moore writes "I'd like to open my handbag without finding a bitten-off lipstick or a capless, leaking pen." But she also sends a positive message. Her two sons each need very different forms of intervention, tailored to them as individuals. In her experience the right treatment does actually make a difference.

- Professor Simon Baron-Cohen's 'The Essential Difference: Men, Women and the Extreme Male Brain' is published by Penguin.