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Short articles (around 600 words), news, tips, quotes, cartoons and other contributions of particular relevance to students are most welcome. Send to: Nicola Hills, c/o the Society's Leicester office. E-mail: Nicola\_Hills@hotmail.com

# Tutoring a child with autism

## (and the unexpected opportunities it can bring)

**W**HEN I first decided to reply to the e-mail entitled 'Autism Tutor Required', I could not have guessed it was going to result in my travelling all the way round the world to raise money for charity. But that is just what happened.

Elliot is 10 years old and lives in north London, a 15-minute bike ride from me. I knew very little about autism when I decided to apply for the job as his tutor; we had covered it briefly in lectures on theory of mind, but that didn't really tell me what an actual person was going to be like. So, like any good student, I got out my text books and scoured the internet.

'Dislike of being touched', 'lack of eye contact', 'no speech' – these were some of the phrases I read about people with autism. So when I met Elliot for the first time and he ran up to me, grabbed me by the hand and said 'Come see my room', I was a little taken aback.

Autism is a spectrum disorder, meaning that different people have it to varying degrees. Elliot is quite high-functioning – he can talk to me, he laughs, smiles and cries just like any other kid; but another child might be completely mute and unresponsive. Everyone is different, and you won't know what to expect until you actually meet them.

I have been working with Elliot for about six months now. I see him twice a week for a couple of hours at a time. I help him with his homework and we also do extra work to keep him up to speed with the rest of the children at his school. It brings a lot more variety than just working behind a counter and it is far more rewarding. I have already learnt a lot from the experience, and it is another thing to

BY TIM MOSS

put on my CV. I won't lie; it's not all good all the time – the last thing I want to do at the end of a busy week is to go and explain to a 10-year-old why he should be doing extra maths work when he's been doing it at school all day. But every job has its downsides, and in this case the benefits far outweigh the costs.



TreeHouse®

So how did tutoring a boy with autism lead to travelling around the world? Well, Elliot's mum is involved with a charity called the TreeHouse Trust. TreeHouse is based in north London and provides specialist education for children with

severe autism. I visited TreeHouse and was amazed at what they do there. They need charitable donations to help run and develop the centre and I decided to make a contribution.

This summer, with two friends, I will be attempting to travel round the world in six weeks using 80 different methods of transport to raise money for TreeHouse. We have a list of well over a hundred means of transport on our website, [www.80ways.co.uk](http://www.80ways.co.uk), but I challenge you to come up with any that we don't have listed. And if you would like to make a donation to TreeHouse, then you can do that online too.

Now, I am not suggesting that if you become a tutor you will end up travelling around the world, but I am saying that it is a thoroughly worthwhile experience that could lead to all sorts of unexpected opportunities. You will learn a great deal, you will meet new people and you will get a lot out of it.

There are lots of children with autism (perhaps almost 1 per cent of children) and many of them are in need of help from psychology students like you and me. If you are interested in becoming an autism tutor then visit [www.treehouse.org.uk](http://www.treehouse.org.uk) for more information.

■ *Tim Moss is an undergraduate at University College London. E-mail: [tim@80ways.co.uk](mailto:tim@80ways.co.uk).*

### USE THE FORUM

Don't forget that you can use the new discussion forum at [www.thepsychologist.org.uk](http://www.thepsychologist.org.uk) to seek work experience, participants and information, or to discuss articles you read in *The Psychologist* or any other psychological issue.

### BEHIND THE NAME

by Noel Sheehy

A Nobel Prize winner, **ROGER SPERRY** devised ingenious experiments to examine the organisation of the brain and the effects of breaking the connections between the left and right hemispheres. He completed his early education in Elmwood, Connecticut where he establishing an All State record in the javelin. After graduating with a degree in English literature he took a decisive turn to neuroscience while completing the two-year MA programme in psychology. He attended Raymond H. Stetson's lectures in psychology, and it was during one of those that he got the idea for one of his more influential papers – 'On the neural basis of the conditioned reflex' – which he wrote up and published some 20 years later.

**Further reading:** Voneide, T.J. (1997). Roger Wolcott Sperry. *Biographical Memoirs of Fellows of the Royal Society*, 43, 463–471.