

EXPERT OPINION
МНЕНИЕ ЭКСПЕРТА

«If you don't Expose Children, they are not Going to get Interested»
Temple Grandin interview

Temple Grandin

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Present interview of Temple Grandin, PhD in animal science, professor of Colorado State University, given to guest editor of the Journal Stephen Edelson discusses person's with autism perception of changes in lifestyle associated with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. During the interview, Professor Grandin gives advice on the schooling of children with ASD during the transition to distance learning. The questions of employment of people with autism are also proposed — what positions are best for people with ASD, how to get the employer interested in hiring a person with autism.

Keywords: autism, COVID-19, perception, employment, distant learning.

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«Если вы не откроете детям мир, они ничем не заинтересуются»
Интервью с Темпл Грандин

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В интервью тематическому редактору номера Стивену Эдельсону профессор Университета Колорадо, доктор сельскохозяйственных наук Темпл Грандин рассказывает о восприятии человеком с аутизмом изменений в жизненном укладе, связанных с наступлением пандемии COVID-19. В ходе интервью профессор Грандин дает советы по образованию детей с расстройствами аутистического спектра (РАС) в период перехода на дистанционную форму обучения. Были затронуты и вопросы трудоустройства людей с аутизмом: какие позиции лучше всего подходят для людей с РАС, как заинтересовать работодателя в найме человека с аутизмом.

Ключевые слова: аутизм, COVID-19, восприятие, трудоустройство, дистанционное обучение.

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Stephen Edelson:

– What things are the most difficult for you?

Temple Grandin:

– For me and many others, I have had great difficulty multitasking and remembering long verbal sequential information, especially with projects involving a series of tasks. I remember when I was in graduate school, and I had to work on a milking machine. It involved many steps to start up the machine and then clean it afterward. Fortunately, there was a checklist on the wall with all of the tasks listed in order. Basically, I need a checklist of keywords to describe each step. These keywords trigger my memory. Learning a sequence does not happen to me instantly.

Edelson:

– What happens after you perform the same tasks over and over again? Do the tasks become easier to remember?

Grandin:

– Eventually, I create a videotape in my head. This would take a few weeks or possibly longer. I would then no longer need a written checklist to look at.

Edelson:

– I know that you think in pictures. Do you also think in videos?

Grandin:

– Yes, but I have to do the tasks many times before I can remember the entire sequence in my mind's video. I remember when I first went into a large meat plant. I thought this place was very complicated, and I wondered how does the manager understand everything. So I started focusing on the most interesting details in each task. After visiting the plant for an hour every Tuesday afternoon for several weeks, I was able to create a videotape in my mind of the entire plant. It was then easy for me to start at the beginning and walked through the entire video.

Edelson:

– Can you start in the middle of your mind's video?

Grandin:

– Yes, I can start anywhere I want to. Again, this does not happen overnight. I have to literally videotape a lot of small details in my head.

Edelson:

– How has your life changed during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Grandin:

– Since early March, my travels have stopped. When I had an opportunity to do a Zoom meeting with someone, I jumped on it. I wanted to learn so I could both see and hear other people. As a visual thinker, it is better for me to see someone when I talk to them; the telephone is only audio and not visual.

Now when I do a Zoom meeting, I give a 20-minute presentation and then allow lots of questions. I find that this works well because people will type in many questions.

The other thing that I have learned during this pandemic is to get on a schedule. I get up in the morning, shower, and dress for work by 8 every morning.

I also looked up the lifestyle on the international space station because they are living in very tight quarters. Through the years, they have learned that they need to be on a schedule. They get up in the morning, get dressed, do their chores and experiments, exercise, and have a midday meal, all scheduled at specific times throughout the day. They also schedule free time.

I found a copy of a space station schedule. If you examine the schedule over an entire week, the midday meal is always at the same time throughout the week, and everyone must be together for the midday meal.

Edelson:

– Do you have advice on schooling?

Grandin:

– Given the pandemic crisis, families, especially those with young children on the autism spectrum, will likely have a difficult time having their young children do their school work while on the computer. Teachers need to watch and coach parents on how to work with the children.

With regard to mask wearing to protect them from the COVID virus, give them some choices. Let them try some different ones.

Autism is such a big spectrum, and these children need very different services. For early intervention,

everything is pretty much the same for most or all of them. But once the kids get a little older, it's not all the same because autism is a spectrum. A smart Asperger kid should probably learn computer programming, and someone like me, a visual thinker, should go into art or some high-end skilled trades. And for those with more severe challenges, such as those who cannot dress themselves, they need totally different services.

Edelson:

— Do you have any advice for some of the challenges faced by individuals on the autism spectrum?

Grandin:

— I have an important suggestion on how to deal with sound sensitivity. For those sounds that the child hates and runs away from, such as a vacuum cleaner or a hairdryer, give them some control over them. Let them turn the machine on and off. Let them play with it. Many of them can better tolerate the sounds after they have control over the source. Sometimes these hated things can actually become one of their favorite things.

Edelson:

— Employment for people with autism is a topic which excites parent community as well as professionals and employers. In which professions can people with autism be most successful?

Grandin:

— First, one should learn how to work before graduating from high school because academic skills and work skills are very different. Little kids should start out with chores, 10- and 11-year-old kids should have a volunteer job in their community, and teenagers should find a part-time job, also in their community. Basically, they have got to learn how to work.

Multitasking is difficult for most on the autism spectrum. Working at a busy McDonald's would not be the best choice.

Another important issue is driving. If I did not learn to drive, I would not have had a career in the livestock industry. Let me tell you one thing that helped me. I did 200 miles of driving on dirt roads before I drove in traffic. Driving involves multitasking, and this can be a problem. Those on the autism spectrum need a lot more practice in a safe area to get driving skills into their motor memory. Once it is in motor memory, they no longer need to think about steering, pressing on the brakes, and stepping on the gas.

Every day for 6 weeks I drove 5 km to my aunt's mailbox and then another 5 km back, for a total of 10 km. I drove only on a dirt road without traffic.

I then gradually began driving in traffic. It was a smooth transition. I don't have to think about steering, or breaking, or putting my foot on or off the gas. I actually learned to drive using a manual shift, and I no longer had to think about shifting gears. It is all in my motor memory.

Unfortunately, many students with autism are told to drive into traffic before their driving skills are developed in motor memory. This makes it very difficult when trying to learn to drive safely.

Like me, I suggest that parents have their children drive in the middle of a large empty field or parking lot where there is nothing to hit. I suggest they drive about 20 minutes a day for at least six weeks in a really safe place before going into traffic.

Again, I could not have a career without driving.

Edelson:

— Can you list the most common jobs appropriate for those on the autism spectrum.

Grandin:

— Let's start with visual thinkers like me. They can learn about art, graphic design, and computer-aided drafting. Skilled trades are also important to consider such as welders, machinists, and fine carpentry work. A good auto mechanic can visualize how the engine works and where it needs to be fixed.

Math thinkers can learn about computer programming, physics, statistics, and data analytics. Word thinkers will likely be successful writing for a living.

Edelson:

— How we make employers interested in hiring people with autism spectrum disorders?

Grandin:

— I started out as a freelancer. I simply showed customers my portfolio of drawings and photos of completed projects. If you watched the scene in the HBO movie about me (Mick Jackson, 2010), you probably remember when my drawings were placed on the desk and animated cattle walked on them. That was actually a copy of one of my drawings.

My advice: learn as much as you can about programming. Or make yourself really good at art and then show off your drawings. This is what I did and it worked.

In the area of computer science, a very good job is software testing website evaluation and programming. There was a company and their sales were down 20% after they upgraded their website. They could not figure the reason why and they hired an autistic man to test the website. Guess what? He

found that the contact phone number was off by one digit. It took a detailed-oriented person, like someone on the autism spectrum, to find it.

Edelson:

– What is important to consider when organizing an accessible environment in public space for people with ASD?

Grandin:

– Sensory is very important. Noisy spaces are not good. Visually, a lot of stripes and checkerboards can be difficult on the eyes. Thank goodness fluorescent lights are going away. But some on the autism spectrum can see a flicker in LED lights, especially with the cheap ones.

I was on a committee at school, and they wanted to make a space for people who had various sensory issues. They asked me about lighting. I told them to find someone who sees letters jiggle when reading print in a book. I suggested that this person walk around campus and identify lights that bothered him or her. For people who see the print jiggling, printing the book pages on pale colored paper such as tan, light gray, light blue, or lavender may be helpful.

Edelson:

– What is happiness for you?

Grandin:

– I am very happy when I design something and my client is very pleased that it is working. I am also very happy when a parent thanks me for the advice I gave them when their child was little. One parent

wrote to me and said that I instructed her to push her child to do a lot of things. He now has a job, married, and lives in a house. I put this email on my wall. A good concept is to “stretch” and the child just outside their comfort zone. It is important to not force them into a situation where they will get overwhelmed.

A big problem I see is that some parents are over-protective. They are not letting their son or daughter go out and learn stuff. They get too much into a disability mindset. I once spoke to a mom whose 16-year-old teenager had never shopped. I suggested that he go into a store by himself and buy something. The mom started crying saying “I can't let go.” The kid was overprotected and going nowhere.

I am also seeing some kids where their total identity is autism. Recently, an 8-year-old walked up to me, and all he wanted to do is to tell me about his autism. I would have preferred that he told me about the telescope he built, or a piece of artwork he had created. My mother had a very good sense about how to stretch me. She always gave me choices. But if I had not gone to live at my aunt's ranch, I would not have had a successful job working in the cattle industry. Children need to be exposed to many things so they can figure out what they are interested in. If you don't expose them, they are not going to get interested. It's that simple.

Edelson:

– Thank you Temple for your insight and advice. ■

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