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One man's story reveals the dangers of not fully understanding autism

A man considered autistic as a child is to outline his unique insight into the condition to an Irish audience this Thursday.

Fiona Tyrrell reports

Stephen Shore was diagnosed with "strong autistic tendencies" at age two and a half, and recommended for institutionalization at the age of four.

Luckily for him his parents said "no way" and now, in his 40s, Stephen is married, employed as an educator in the US, working towards a doctorate and on of the world's leading advocates in the field of autism.

On Thursday, some 200 parents, health and education professionals will hear Stephen Shore share his unique insights into life on the autism spectrum in Dublin.

With 20 out of every 10,000 children in Ireland diagnosed as autistic in 2001, a four-fold increase in six years, significant interest in Stephen and his life story is expected.

Autism is a developmental disorder, which usually becomes apparent before the age of three. It effects language, communication and behavioral skills.

Autism, however, is not a narrow condition. It covers a wide range of development disorders, from severe autism to Asperger syndrome.

Stephen, however, sees it differently: "Autism involves

perceiving and processing information from the environment in a way that is different from others. We focus on different things because our sensory receptors are set up differently."

Groups, such as the Irish Autism Society (ISA) and the Irish Autism Alliance (IAA) have been working to promote the importance of early treatment.

Early intensive education intervention, diet, and bio-medical therapy are making a difference in the lives of people on the autism spectrum, according to Commac Rennick, chairman of IAA.

For Pat Matthews, ISA executive director, the importance of early intervention cannot be stressed enough.

Every child, even the most profoundly autistic, will benefit from it. The problem with autism is that the longer you leave the child unstimulated the more the shell of autism hardens and the more difficult it becomes to reach the child."

Stephen Shore's life story is a textbook illustration of this. "I developed typically until I reached 18 month and had started talking. Then I was hit

with the autism bomb and lost the ability to speak, started having tantrums and became increasingly withdrawn. I became autistic.

His parents were advised to send him to an institution but they said "no way".

In their home in Newton, near Boston, his mother refused to give in and employed music, sensory stimulation and narration therapy to treat him.

For Stephen, rehabilitation was gradual. At the age of four his parents taught him how to speak again. At sic, he attended a regular public school, which he said was a "social and academic disaster: because his teachers didn't understand how to deal with him.

"When I was in first grade I was told that I would never learn maths and another teacher told my parents I would always have difficulty reading. Socially, I was a child who was different and I experienced a lot of teasing and bullying. It was only at the age of 13 that I began to figure out how to get along in the school environment."

Having battled with autism Stephen is keen to share his life story and to promote the importance of early diagnosis and early intervention, which he says can help people on the autism spectrum lead normal lives.

"The potential for someone on the autism spectrum is

limitless. With early detection and the investment of proper therapy some people will be able to participate in competitive employment, contribute to society, live and independent life and get married.

"Others who are more seriously affected won't live independent live but will be able to live in a support-living environment. That is much better than being put in an institution and forgotten about."

Stephen finds the lack of knowledge about autism frustrating and speaks of the "terrible waste of life" and the "travesty in terms of human rights."

He adds: "For anybody on the spectrum there is always a great possibility to improve and move to a lighter end of the spectrum. The challenge is to move them as fast and as far as we can."

• *Stephen Shore will speak in the Conrad Hotel, Earlsfort Terrace, Dublin on Thursday, April 8th at 2.15 p.m. The lecture is hosted by Dublin-based organisation New Life Learning who present educational courses by Stephen Shore and other experts on their website (www.newlifelearning.com). Tickets £25 available online or by ringing 01 4934958.*