

# Should we question the unquestionable?

Rosie Rogers – Founder and Operational Director

*ADHD and ASD Resources with Rosie*

Why it is so difficult to change and adapt rules and processes for children and young people with ADHD and/or ASC and what has made us arrive to this point with these expectations that could be unpicked quite easily. Afterall, are most things not just a construct shaped by history?

Let's take a look at some of the practices that we ask young people to conform to and question why we are so quick to enforce them and willing to have a battle that can break relationships and confidence.

Starting with something simple such as the knife and fork we are able to see where it has come from and why they have been introduced but is it so easy to justify the pressure we put on children with sensory needs to use them?

Spoons were used in Egyptian religion as early as 1000 BC and as time went by the bronze and silver utensils were used amongst the rich<sup>1</sup>. The first documented use of the spoon in England was 1259 as an item in King Edwards wardrobe. So how has an item that demonstrated the power of an empire become an essential household tool and how has the fork which was once detested as an abomination that overtook the natural fingers become so precious. How does it have the power to make us so upset when our child refuses because of reasons they can't explain or that they can but we won't accept as reasonable?

During the 16<sup>th</sup> century when disease was rife and the risk of death was high from contamination it was better to have something to pick your food up with and the cutlery served a significant purpose (for the rich), but of course we have much better sanitation and hand washing rituals, so why do we let out devastating cries when our children won't use the stainless-steel utensil to pick up their peas and carrots? Whilst in Asia chopsticks are common and we use the knife and fork in Europe, many countries use their hands to eat with no apology and have one less argument at meal times<sup>2</sup>. In countries such as Malaysia, Indonesia, Sri Lanka and India eating with your hands is a common practice and no one would blink if you were gathering up the rice and delicacies with your fingers.

Eating with a fork is construct of behaviour that has been passed down through centuries and generations. We as adults determine what is appropriate and what isn't to eat with our hands – we have that choice. We choose as parents when a child can pick something like chicken nuggets up with their hands in McDonalds but not in a restaurant. However here is the thing.....we don't have to follow suit. We have the ability to change the way we react to the simple constructs of life.

We may question 'what will people say?', 'how will the school react?' but again, this is a worry that should be challenged. People are conditioned to think the knife and fork are key and anything to contrary is wrong – but who made that rule? We are allowed to change the path and say no. Of course we don't want the children eating soup out of their hand because that would be impractical and we wouldn't want them to pick up something extremely hot with their fingers but if it is a safe option, if we have the option of cleaning up any debris without too much fuss and if the adult and

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<sup>1</sup> <https://gizmodo.com/the-history-of-knives-forks-and-spoons-1440558371>

<sup>2</sup> <https://cultureguru.my/en/culture/dining-utensils-history-facts-people-eat-different-utensils/>

the child is happy with reduced arguments in the house, how can we refuse to listen to their sensory and individual needs.

This can be said for many other areas of our day to day lives too such as why not skip instead of walking or shout someone's name instead of speaking within decibels of acceptable constructed levels. There are also more controversial areas to question such as why should we force children say thank you? We have determined it to be polite to show gratitude which can be quite difficult for autistic people and some people with ADHD, yet in other cultures such as Cha'palaa in Ecuador there doesn't seem to be a word for thank you as research shows that transactions take place without the beneficiaries feeling like they need to say thank you or express extreme gratitude<sup>3</sup>.

Bringing this much more into the realms of our ADHD and ASC parenting journey lets take a moment to think about how parents are often called to school because the child refuses to sit. Biologically we are not made to sit still for long periods of time as this can be detrimental to our health from back pain to blood clots and yet when we are young humans we are expected to sit for long periods with just a movement from one class to another to break it up<sup>4</sup>. Companies are trying to adapt their work spaces for adults to be able to stand whilst they work due to the risks of sitting but when it comes to school, we are clear that children and young people should be sat unless it is to complete practical lessons. When a child with ADHD who can't keep still stands up, of course he/she stands out and is promptly asked to sit, often a dialogue ensues and an exit from the classroom through defiant choice or powerful exclusion but what if we changed our take on this. What if we said all children have the right to sit or stand according to their learning style providing it doesn't impact on others learning. It will be different. There will be figures as high as the eye level of the teacher, but this doesn't have to be confrontational or intimidating but an accepted learning practice, there is after all evidence that this could improve focus and outcomes<sup>5</sup>.

As parents we need to break down the constructs that have been built over time to question whether they are the dangerous entrapment we sell them as or whether they are going to cause societal chaos if we stopped doing them or changed them. Ask yourself the question as a practitioner – is anyone going to get hurt? Will this cause worse outcomes for children and young people? We hear often 'choose your battles' but we should be asking whether it is even justified to be having the battle in the first place. Just because it has been done for as long as we remember doesn't mean it has to be done like this for as long as we live. Upsetting people because their expectations are being questioned is not something to hide from but allowing a discord to happen because of constructs built on ice can be very tricky to enforce when there is no reason other than tradition to keep doing them.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://inews.co.uk/news/world/no-thank-you-in-many-cultures-research-reveals-157200>

<sup>4</sup> <https://understandingcompassion.com/articles/what-sitting-too-long-does-to-your-body-according-to-science/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://theconversation.com/letting-kids-stand-more-in-the-classroom-could-help-them-learn-53606>