

Making connections

**A report on the special relationship between children
with autism and Thomas & Friends**



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Executive summary

“All the hairs stood up on my arms when I saw the survey on the NAS website. I lived and breathed Thomas for a good three or four years. Everything had to be Thomas.”

Parent of nine year old with autism

Introduction

In 2001, the National Autistic Society (NAS) conducted a survey of 81 parents and found that children with autism associate far more strongly with Thomas the Tank Engine than with other popular children's characters. In 2007, the NAS, with support from HIT Entertainment, producers and rights-owners of Thomas & Friends (subsuming Thomas the Tank Engine), commissioned a new research study into this special relationship.

The research

A survey with parents of children with autism under the age of 10 was launched on the NAS's website in April 2007 with nearly 750 people taking part.

Ten telephone and face-to-face interviews were also conducted with parents of children with autism aged between four and nine years old. Four parents in England, two in Wales, two in Scotland and two in Northern Ireland took part.

What is autism?

Autism¹ is a lifelong developmental disability that affects how a person communicates with, and relates to, other people. It also affects how they make sense of the world around them. It is a spectrum condition, which means that, while all people with autism will have difficulties in common, their condition will affect them in different ways. Some people with autism are able to live relatively independent lives but others may have accompanying learning disabilities and need a lifetime of specialist care. People with autism may also experience some form of sensory sensitivity or under-sensitivity.

Summary of research findings

Some of the main findings are:

- In a comparison with other popular children's characters, Thomas & Friends was the most popular, with nearly 90% of children liking it 'very much'.
- Many parents felt that Thomas & Friends played a significant part in their child's early learning and development – in particular numbers, colours and language.
- Some children in the study have been able to learn basic facial expressions and emotions from Thomas & Friends.
- Parents have been able to use Thomas & Friends' 'language' to communicate with their child where ordinary language has failed.
- Almost 39% of parents reported that their child's interest in Thomas & Friends lasted over two years longer than siblings' interest in the character.

- Highly important aspects of the relationship for parents were the feeling of safety and security Thomas & Friends provides for children and its calming effect.

Nature of the relationship

58% of parents reported that Thomas & Friends was the first children's character their child liked, with nearly 60% starting to like it before the age of two. According to the interviews, the typical entry age seems to be around 18 months. Thomas & Friends was frequently not only the first, but the only thing children expressed any spontaneous interest in or attachment to.

“I saw Thomas on the television by chance. He shouted out Thomas's name and became very excited. This was really unusual as most of the time he was completely silent.”

Parent of five year old with Asperger syndrome

“Thomas & Friends was the first thing I spontaneously talked about when he was two and a half years old. Before that he would speak words 'on demand' but never initiated speech.”

Parent of six year old with high-functioning autism

Our research suggests children discover Thomas & Friends through the television show, but their favourite formats are DVDs/videos and toys. The popularity of DVDs is perhaps explained by the ability to repeat play them, with over 71% of parents reporting that this was 'very important' to their child. This is indicative of the narrow, repetitive range of activities often displayed by people with autism.

Those children who used speech would often move on to re-enacting whole stories from the show using their toy trains, together with repeating the dialogue and/or narration, and sometimes imitating all the different voices.

On the whole, parents reported that their child's liking for Thomas & Friends was stronger than for any other children's characters and that it lasted longer. Some children also connected with other children's characters that had faces – for example, the equipment and vehicles in Bob the Builder and the Disney characters, Cars.

Parents often described their child's relationship with Thomas & Friends as 'obsessive'. Their child wanted everything and anything related to it – not just all the trains and DVDs but also the clothes, magazine, books, posters, bedding, curtains, plates, stickers lunchboxes, etc. Their child's

¹ Autism is a spectrum disorder and includes Asperger syndrome.

in-depth knowledge of Thomas & Friends covered not just every visual detail of all the trains but also their 'personalities' and where they came from. They watched the DVDs over and over again, lined up their toys by size and/or colour, would not share their toys, and carried them and sometimes track around with them, becoming very distressed if their Thomas products were lost or mislaid.

“I had two tiny models of Thomas and Bertie he'd carry around with him everywhere when he was about two and a half. Life just wouldn't be worth living if one had gone missing – he would have been completely traumatised and nothing else would have done.”

Parent of six year old with high-functioning autism

Learning with Thomas & Friends

Most parents felt Thomas offered educational benefits to their child, such as learning about colours, numbers, shapes, speech, language, drawing, reading and writing, with 48% reporting that their child learned 'a lot' about colours, 49% about numbers and over 34% about language/speech.

“Everything is interpreted or translated through Thomas & Friends – including language, colours, numbers and shapes.”

Parent of six year old with high-functioning autism.

“Thomas & Friends is 100% responsible for getting him talking. Thomas was his life.”

Parent of nine year old with autism

Children with autism can find people confusing and frightening because they struggle to understand their complex facial expressions, body language and speech. Nearly a third of the parents in the survey felt Thomas & Friends had helped their child with learning facial expressions and emotions, as did those interviewed. Some felt this learning had gone even further with their child generalising from the trains to recognising facial expressions and emotions in humans.

“Thomas & Friends has definitely been one of the elements that has helped him to recognise human facial expressions and to label his own emotions.”

Parent of seven year old with autism

“He definitely uses the train faces to distinguish between different emotions. Thomas has helped him to get into the world of not just language but also how people feel.”

Parent of nine year old boy with autism

Parents reported that Thomas & Friends had also motivated their child to learn new skills, such as using a computer and the internet, which enabled them to find out even more about their favourite subject. Some parents had also been able to

use their child's interest in Thomas & Friends to expand out into other subjects – for example learning about how different types of trains work, how the track works and about electricity.

Most children with autism seek to understand and categorise the world in a way that makes sense to them. The calm, gentle world of Thomas & Friends with its simple storylines, bold colours, clear facial expressions and recognisable characters that behave very predictably appears to be one they can understand and relate to, and which has great appeal. In addition, the characters in Thomas & Friends are very suitable for identification, listing and collecting – all common behaviours of many children with autism.

“A is very literal so people can be very complex and confusing. So the non-human nature of Thomas with no social interaction involved makes it possible for him to learn from it. In Thomas, what they say is what they mean – there's no hidden plots or 'extra' unspoken language to understand.”

Parent of six year old boy with high-functioning autism

Importance for families

The most important quality of Thomas & Friends for parents was that it created a feeling of safety and security, with 56% of parents rating this as 'very important'. The calming effect that Thomas & Friends created was also 'very important' for nearly 54% of parents, and helping their child to understand feelings and emotions was rated 'very important' by 50%. These qualities were also valued by the parents who were interviewed.

“At times we just didn't know what to do with him, especially when he was having a screaming tantrum. But Thomas always calmed him down.”

Parent of six year old with high-functioning autism



Many of the children in the study liked Thomas & Friends at an earlier age and for a longer period of time than their brothers and sisters, with almost 39% liking Thomas & Friends one or two years earlier, and for over two years longer, than their siblings.

Their intense interest in Thomas & Friends seems to have been of some help in enabling children with autism and their siblings to interact, even if this is only that they watch a Thomas & Friends DVD together.

“R will play alongside his brother and sister with the trains and tracks. His sister will tell a story with the trains and sometimes R will join in but I don't think he really understands. He prefers to go over the same stories from the DVDs. He does like to crash the trains into each other with his brother though!”

Parent of seven year old boy with autism

Communication connection

Interestingly, some parents have found that they can communicate with their child and manage their behaviour using Thomas & Friends' language and terminology, where 'ordinary' language has failed.

“We use lots of Thomas language to communicate with B and get him to do things, such as a 'wash-down' for a bath, telling him he's 'really useful', 'chugging up' to bed, and 'red light' or 'the signal is up' for no or stop.”

Parent of four year old with high-functioning autism

Being able to project feelings onto a train was another example of children using Thomas & Friends to communicate and handle difficult or threatening emotions:

“J couldn't talk about emotions unless it was through Thomas & Friends. When he was naughty he'd say he was like Diesel 10 and when we wanted to find out how he was feeling we'd ask him how he thought Thomas felt today.”

Parent of nine year old with autism

Time with Thomas & Friends

Unsurprisingly, in view of the very strong interest shown in Thomas & Friends, many (42%) of the children in the study spent time with Thomas & Friends in some format every day, with nearly 11% spending over three hours most days.

Most of the children in the interviews still have a strong or very strong association with Thomas & Friends; those who have moved on to other interests still retain a liking for it. With varying success, some parents have deliberately tried to move their child on to more age-appropriate interests, as they fear their child will be teased or bullied. Other parents have not sought to move their child on, feeling that their child will develop and move on from Thomas when they're ready to.

Conclusion

Our study indicates that Thomas & Friends is very popular with children with autism and that many parents feel it has played a significant role in their child's early learning and development of important skills. For many children with autism, this intense and special relationship with Thomas & Friends lasts much longer their siblings' relationship with the characters.

Parents reported that the simplicity and predictability of the characters and storylines appealed – and provided comfort – to their children and enabled them to learn about basic facial expressions and emotions in a non-threatening way.

Thomas & Friends has clearly had a beneficial influence on the lives of children with autism in our study and their parents, not only in children's learning but also in facilitating manageable child-parent communication.

There are over half a million people in the UK with autism – that's around one in 100. If you include their families, autism touches the lives of over two million people every day. The National Autistic Society is the UK's leading charity for people affected by autism. We were founded in 1962 by a group of parents who were passionate about ensuring a better future for their children. Today, we have over 17,000 members, 70 branches and provide a wide range of advice, information, support and specialist services to 100,000 people each year. A local charity with a national presence, we campaign and lobby for lasting positive change for people affected by autism.

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