



It's best to leave off the bangles and sparkles, lotions and perfumes when working with children on the autistic spectrum

Dressing for Success

We're sometimes asked if there's a dress code at Mindstretch, and there is, though it has little to do with 'business' or 'casual'. We dress to impress only one group: our learners.

With children on the autism spectrum, we need to guard against sensory overload and so ask our staff and visitors to follow some simple rules:

- ✓ Avoid clothing with strong patterns such as a Zebra-stripe print as this can overwhelm the visual system.
- ✓ Avoid perfume or strongly scented body and hand lotions that can stress hypersensitive olfactory systems.
- ✓ Remove excessive 'bling' such as jingling bangles or sparkles on clothing, which can have a negative visual and auditory impact.
- ✓ Seek soft fibres over anything scratchy for clothing (e.g., wool fibres or a harsh synthetic can be uncomfortable), in particular in instances when children are touch-sensitive or unexpectedly shy away from contact.
- ✓ Dress comfortably to be active with the children as we employ physical activities to address poor muscle tone and gross motor development.

These tips apply equally to anyone interacting with the children on the autism spectrum. Through our therapy sessions we've observed non-tactile children increase their willingness to be touched and embraced with a simple change in their parents' or care-givers' choice of clothing, accessories and body lotions.



Our teachers wear comfortable clothing that allows interaction with the children during managed physical exercises and times of free play

To learn more about our offering, visit:

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- ◆ **Preschool**
- ◆ **Training**
- ◆ **Therapy**



Accredited Training

Mindstretch's Jennifer Southgate is known as the only provider of accredited HANDLE[®] Introductory Training in South Africa — and indeed the whole of Africa. What's less well known are the SACE-accredited educator courses such as the "Overcoming Barriers to Learning" seminar that Abbotts College, Cape Town, have commissioned for later this month.

Mindstretch also provides training events tailored to our client's needs and their audience, be it medical professionals, educators, or care-givers and parents.

While the HANDLE approach to neurodevelopmental irregularities forms the foundation to our work, Mindstretch covers many other aspects of learning, ranging from overcoming behaviour and learning challenges to cognitive screening and curriculum adaptation in South Africa.

Consider Mindstretch for your training needs in 2015. Our events invariably get the thumbs up, as the Testimonials on our website show (www.mindstretch.co.za/testimonials).



Mindstretch interactive session during a training programme on behalf of FET Colleges in the Eastern Cape



THE **HANDLE**[®] Institute

Enhancing human capability through a Holistic Approach to NeuroDevelopment and Learning Efficiency



SACE

About HANDLE

HANDLE is an effective non-drug treatment for people of all ages and for a wide range of challenges, including:

- Acquired brain injury
- ADD, ADHD
- Autism and autism spectrum disorders
- Compromised motor skills and coordination
- Conduct disorders
- Down syndrome
- Dyslexia
- Reading and writing difficulties
- Sensory integration dysfunctions
- Tics and Tourette syndrome

“At Mindstretch, we believe that every child can reach their full potential if learning challenges are addressed early in development.”

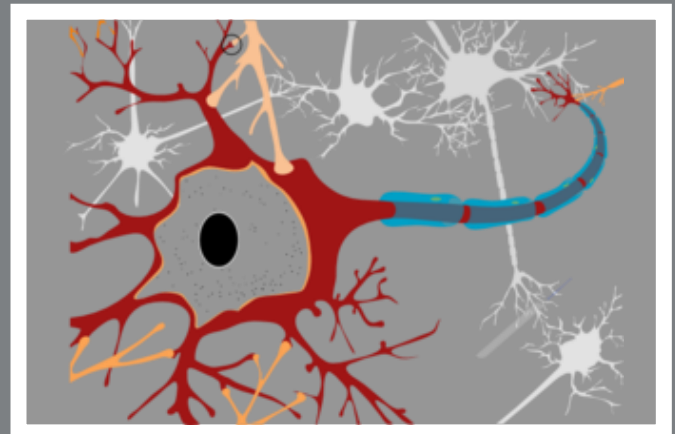
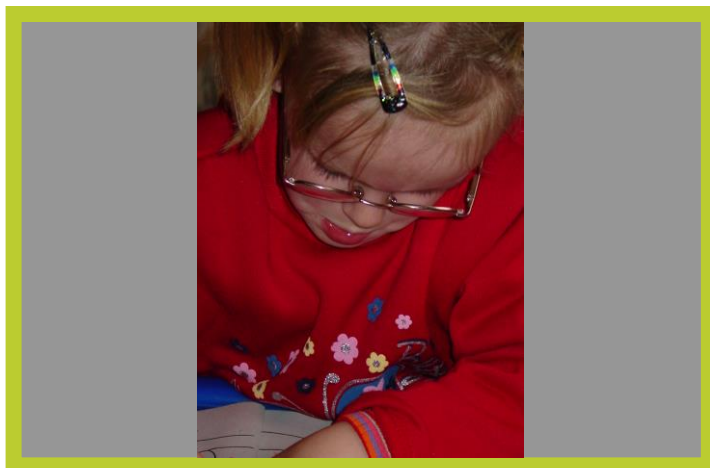
De-stress the Assessment

Many of us don't like sudden change, but children on the autism spectrum are particularly sensitive to the stress of unfamiliar environments with new faces and unexpected sounds and smells and sights. It's thus little wonder that we meet children of obvious intelligence and the potential for mainstream education only to learn they have been assessed more negatively than expected.

It seems that a major issue is the children's sudden introduction to a strange place for evaluation, a place where the focus is so obviously on them with the expectation that they perform. Of course children must learn to deal with such real-world pressures but that's a lesson that sensitive schooling in a supportive environment will teach.

We advise testing be undertaken by a friendly (and, if possible, familiar) face in a tried-and-tested environment that doesn't cause stress. Indeed, we offer all our parents the opportunity for arranging evaluations at the Mindstretch Preschool, a place where our learners feel safe and comfortable.

“It was very stressful getting a fit for our son. I remember the difficulty and agony we went through. He was a misfit everywhere. Mindstretch Preschool offered hope and unconditional acceptance.”



An Over-Wired Brain

Research shows that many genes are involved in autism and that there is unlikely to ever be one clear 'marker' gene to target. Now with publication of a new study in the journal *Neuron* there is new hope that one specific effect in the brain — a lack of synapse pruning or 'over-wiring' — might be a good target for therapy.

A synapse is a connection allowing nerve cells to communicate. An infant's brain sees a massive increase in such connections. However, as the child gets older, the brain must cut back the number of synapses to allow different brain areas to develop key functions and avoid being overloaded.

The new study suggests that this system is upset in children with autism, resulting in excessive synapses in some parts of the brain. This helps explain autistic children's hypersensitivity to sound, noise, light and touch: their brains are being overloaded by an unsustainable level of input and activity.

It seems the problem is not over-production of synapses but that the brain is failing to cut back undesirable connections effectively. There's hope that a therapy may be developed to fix the brain's inability to clear extra synapses. Indeed, a drug restoring normal synaptic pruning has been shown to improve autistic-like behaviours in animals. There's a way to go to human trials but this new research is encouraging as it shows the rapid pace of discovery in autism.

Meanwhile, Mindstretch helps build strong neural pathways: brain 'super highways' supporting learning. We do this with carefully crafted activities — for example, learners navigate an 'obstacle course' most mornings — and by giving HANDLE therapy daily.

The Helpful Handheld

Digital overload is a concern for some parents, but in the case of our children with ASD, the tablet is proving only a tool for good. We share here some of our key impressions:

- **Clear cause and effect:** Inclusion of the keyboard on the tablet screen means that the child doesn't have to move their eyes between screen and keyboard, as with a computer. The touchscreen also helps: for those with coordination difficulties there's no need to manipulate a separate mouse. All of this means that the learner can quickly see the outcome of their action, helping them understand cause and effect.
- **A customisable option:** The handheld and its apps can be tailored to an individual child's needs. Autistic children tend to be highly visual with a world rich in imagery rather than words. The handheld can be used to describe thoughts and ideas and even stories using images.
- **A portable friend:** A tablet is easy to carry around. There's the opportunity for it to become a vital friend that a child can use to calm themselves and create focus, or to continue learning outside the classroom.
- **A universally 'cool' object:** It's also true that handhelds are cutting-edge and not some special tool clearly signalling the child as experiencing learning challenges.
- **Apps galore:** Excellent apps targeting autistic behaviours provide a massive educational forum. *Autism Speaks* — a leading autism science and advocacy organization — lists autism apps at www.autismspeaks.org/autism-apps. Particularly useful is their rating of each app's benefit: look out for the 'Evidence' classification indicating that there's good scientific evidence that the app is indeed helpful.



We've noted how well our learners do with our iPads, LeapPads and other tablets. So, if you have an old tablet that you are upgrading please consider donating your used item to Mindstretch. We would greatly appreciate it and so too will the children.

We Welcome Feedback and Subscriptions

- Email jen@mindstretch.co.za with comments or suggestions for the newsletter, or to receive more information on the Mindstretch Preschool, Training and Therapy.
- To receive the newsletter, please subscribe online at www.mindstretch.co.za/newsletter.