

Ask Me First: What Self-Assessments Can Tell Us about Autism

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Just moments earlier, the teenager had been laughing so hard he was in tears. He had spent the day doing improv and other drama-based activities—part of a six-week summer camp in Boston designed to help children with autism build social skills. But when his mother showed up and asked about his day, the boy clammed up.

“Do you mean you just sat in a corner and stared at the wall all day?” psychologist [Matthew Lerner](#) asked him. It was the summer of 2006 and Lerner had launched the program with a colleague two years earlier. He had witnessed the boy’s giggle fit and hoped to prompt more of a response. “Yes,” the boy replied.

As Lerner soon realized, this teen wasn’t the only camper with autism to react that way at pick-up time. “There were a couple of kids who I remember very vividly,” he says. After a day of smiling and playing with peers, they would respond with silence to their parents’ queries. Lerner saw these teenagers having a good time, but they seemed either to not know it themselves or to be reluctant or unsure how to share that experience with their families.