

# *How was your day?*

Parent, teacher and child perceptions of communication  
about the school day with children on the autism spectrum  
FINAL REPORT

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Australian Government  
Department of Industry, Science,  
Energy and Resources

**Business**  
Cooperative Research  
Centres Program

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### The Cooperative Research Centre for Living with Autism (Autism CRC)

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# 1. Background to the project

## 1.1 Overview

Children on the autism spectrum<sup>1</sup> have known difficulties at school related to the variety of challenges these children face in language, social communication and in cognition (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; Ashburner et al., 2010; Saggars et al., 2011; Falkmer et al., 2012; Saggars, 2015). Students report that these challenges may lead to anxiety and affect school connectedness and learning outcomes (Adams et al. 2018; Einfeld et al. 2018). We know that increased engagement of parents is related to reduced issues with bullying at school (Hebron & Humphrey, 2013) and that children's capacity to effectively communicate about school experiences is important (Soironoff et al., 2011, Einfeld et al. 2018). Such communication can also provide insight into children's interests and success at school, which can be harnessed to help address challenges. However, they may struggle to converse about events at school and how to tackle them, and for parents to effectively support their child, and intervene if necessary, they need to know what is happening at school. Further, much of the existing research has focused on secondary school students, with less done in the primary school context.

Children on the spectrum are also known to have greater difficulties with narrative (Stirling et al., 2014), and in particular are known to find it difficult to progress narratives in conversation (Solomon, 2004) and to switch between their own perspective on events and that of others including other participants in a narrative (Garcia-Perez et al., 2008). Extrapolating from these findings, we speculated that they likely face challenges in considering hypotheticals and alternative courses of action (Harris, 2000). It may be that children on the spectrum are less likely to be able to effectively convey their school experiences to their families at home, and less likely to be able to brainstorm how to deal with problem situations with their parents to equip them to handle challenging or negative experiences next time they arise.

The motivation for this study was to explore the nature of home communication about school events between children on the spectrum and their parents. Its aims were firstly to investigate parent, teacher and child perceptions concerning home communication about the school day, comparing families with children on the spectrum and families with children who are not on the

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<sup>1</sup> The terms used in this report when referring to participants is in accordance with the recommendations provided by the Autism CRC.

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spectrum, and secondly to video-record and analyse actual family interactions with children after school.

The results may inform the development of approaches to facilitate conversations about school between children on the spectrum and their parents as a preventative approach to minimise the impact of negative events at school.

## 1.2 Research questions and study goals

The following research questions were established to address the goals of the study:

1. Do parents perceive there to be difficulties in communicating about the school day with their child on the spectrum?
2. What type of personal autobiographical stories do children who are and are not on the autism spectrum tell about their day after school?
3. Do parents and children engage in discussion of possible alternative scenarios in talking about school experiences?
4. Where do communication breakdowns occur in conversations between children on the spectrum and their families about the school day?

Through answering these questions, our aim for the study was to better inform potential future support programs aimed at improving communication between parents and children about the school day.

## 2. Research Methods

### 2.1 Design

Ethics approval for this project was obtained from the participating institutions: the University of Melbourne, La Trobe University, the University of Queensland, and Griffith University.

The project used a mixed methods study design including the following two methods for investigating home communication about the school day:

1. Purpose-designed surveys for parents and teachers, and structured interviews with the children (focus on RQ 1). These were analysed quantitatively and qualitatively.



2. Video-recordings of naturally occurring after school interactions between the children and their parents, carers or other members of their family (focus on RQs 2-4). Analytic techniques include Conversation Analysis and Narrative Analysis.

Parents were asked to complete a demographic questionnaire and diagnosis with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) was confirmed using the Social Communication Questionnaire (Lifetime) (Rutter et al., 2003).

The project was conducted in two parts. In Part 1, described in detail in section 2.2, families were recruited to participate in both the surveys and video-recorded after school interactions. After preliminary analysis of the data from Part 1, we decided to pursue a larger participant pool of families to complete the parent survey, and developed Part 2 of the study which was an online version of the parent survey that had been administered in paper form in Part 1.

We report on Part 1 and Part 2 of the project separately in this document.

## **2.2 Part 1 of the project**

The initial study aimed to recruit families of primary school aged children who lived in Victoria and Queensland to take part in parent and teacher surveys, video-recording of naturally occurring after school interactions between the target children and other family members, and a semi-structured interview of the target child.

### **2.2.1 Recruitment and participants**

#### **2.2.1.1 Recruitment**

Families were recruited from the greater Melbourne and greater Brisbane areas during 2016-2017, with a goal of approximately 30-40 families, evenly spread across autistic and non-autistic diagnostic categories.

Recruitment was limited to children attending mainstream primary schools and aged between 8-12, usually in grades 4-6, and who typically conversed with their parents in English.

Participants on the spectrum were recruited directly through the Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre in Victoria and via existing links of the Queensland researchers, including Autism Queensland. Participants who are not on the spectrum were recruited via contacts from the participating families in the target group. As far as possible, we sought to include participants not on the spectrum who were attending the same schools as the participants on the spectrum.

Perhaps because the study was demanding of family involvement, we had some difficulties meeting our recruitment targets. Our first recruitment drive yielded 15 participants. Under a second recruitment drive the following year, we abandoned the requirement that the children not on the spectrum should come from the same schools as matched children on the spectrum.

### 2.2.1.2 Participants

Final participant numbers in Part 1 of the project are given in Table 1. Basic demographic information about the participants is given in Table 2.

**Table 1: Participant numbers Part 1 of project**

	On the spectrum	Not on the spectrum	Total
VIC	3	4	7
QLD	8	6	14
Total	11	10	21

**Table 2: Participant demographic information Part 1 of project**

		On the spectrum	Not on the spectrum	Total
Gender	Male	7	2	9
	Female	4	8	12
Age		Mean 9.2 (8.04-12.02)	Mean 10.2 (8.2-11.6)	
SCQ		Mean 23 (16-31)	Mean 2 (0-5)	

Of the autistic participants, one had a diagnosis of “Autistic Disorder” and the remaining ten of “ASD”. All but the child with the diagnosis of Autistic Disorder were recorded as having one or two additional diagnoses other than of ASD. These included: Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Anxiety Disorder, auditory processing disorder, specific learning disability, borderline ID, global developmental delay. Five of the participants who are not on the spectrum were recorded as having an additional diagnosis other than of ASD (one specified as ADD, the others unspecified).

### 2.2.2 Procedure and data collected

Families who expressed interest in taking part in the study were contacted by a research assistant who arranged to meet with them at the start of a school week.

At the meeting, the research assistant provided the parent(s) with the plain language statement and consent forms, and took the child through a picture narrative explaining the study. Once the children understood the study, they were also asked to consent to participate.

The research assistant provided the parents with a Canon Legria videorecorder, instructions for using the camera, including how to mount the camera in a car, and a pack including information about the study, copies of the SCQ and demographic questionnaire and the parent survey. Parents were also given a copy of the teacher survey to pass on to the child's teacher. Copies of the survey instruments are provided in Appendix A.

Parents were requested to record after school interactions on two typical days in the week, at two times during the afternoon/evening: we suggested that after school in the car and at dinner or bedtime might be good times; any time that the parents thought they would normally be likely to talk about the day with their child.

Around halfway through the week, the research assistant contacted the parents to see how things were going and to provide an additional request: that the parent would use the following prompt in talking to the child about their day. This component was designed to a) ensure that at least some talk about school was recorded and b) to provide some consistency across the family interactions.

**Prompt scenario:**

Can you please set aside at least 15 minutes this evening when you can sit and chat with your child, and ask them the following questions (you can use your own words). We suggest you start with a general question (see below) and then ask some more specific questions about school. The aim is for your child to talk about school and what happened. By using the prompts below we hope your child might be interested in sharing his or her experiences.

Tell me, how was your day?

Can you tell me what you did at school?

What is the best thing you did?

Can you tell me about it?

Was there anything you did not like?

Can you tell me about it?

When the research assistant returned to collect the recordings, they engaged the child in a video-recorded semi-structured interview designed to cover some of the same topics explored in parent and teacher survey questionnaires.

All 21 parents completed the parent survey. Results were returned by 7 of the teachers who completed the teacher survey. Of the children, two declined to take part in the semi-structured interview, so we have 19 interviews in total. These are of variable quality.

Table 3 shows the number of hours of video-recorded data we collected. Participants are identified by a code. Recording time for each participant ranged from a minimum of 0:25:30 (hours:minutes:seconds) to a maximum of 7:53:39, with an average for non-autistic participants of approximately 1 hour and 50 minutes and for participants on the spectrum of approximately 3 hours and 15 minutes. In total, 50 hours and 55 minutes of video-recorded interaction was collected.

**Table 3: Video-recorded interactions Part 1 of project**

Participant	Diagnostic category	Number of discrete videos	Amount of recording in hours:minutes:seconds
011QTHO	On Spectrum	10	2:36:25
011VPET	On Spectrum	15	3:37:05
021QALF	On Spectrum	8	4:01:00
021VCHI	On Spectrum	7	0:25:30
031QFLY	On Spectrum	4	0:48:22
031VBAY	On Spectrum	15	2:33:45
041QFRA	On Spectrum	6	1:50:34
051QTEN	On Spectrum	9	3:57:08
061QSPR	On Spectrum	20	7:53:39
071QBRA	On Spectrum	13	2:13:22
081QTHO	On Spectrum	9	2:34:47
102QSNO	Not on Spectrum	9	2:32:52
102VAUL	Not on Spectrum	6	1:06:30
202QLAU	Not on Spectrum	5	1:43:05
202VPAT	Not on Spectrum	8	0:30:30
302QBIG	Not on Spectrum	6	1:55:17
302VHAR	Not on Spectrum	11	1:19:15
402QGAR	Not on Spectrum	9	0:46:04
402VMCS	Not on Spectrum	6	0:37:00
502QAQU	Not on Spectrum	3	0:28:00
602QGAT	Not on Spectrum	18	7:25:45
<b>TOTAL</b>			<b>50:55:55</b>

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## 2.2.3 Analyses

### 2.2.3.1 Survey and interview data

Survey data from parents and teachers was collected using the written questionnaires. The closed questions were analysed quantitatively. Text in the open questions was analysed qualitatively.

Preliminary qualitative analysis of the interviews with the children has been undertaken, with the aim of deriving information relative to the questions of interest. Further thematic analysis of these interviews using NVivo (QSR International, 1999) is planned, as well as analysis of the personal experience stories the children provided in the interviews.

Where possible, pair-wise or three-way comparisons of the parent-teacher-child data is undertaken.

### 2.2.3.2 Video-recorded interactional data

For the video-recorded conversational data, we were interested in Research Questions 2-4 (see section 1.2):

2. What type of personal autobiographical stories do children who are and are not on the autism spectrum tell about their day after school?
3. Do parents and children engage in discussion of possible alternative scenarios in talking about school experiences?
4. Where do communication breakdowns occur in conversations between children on the spectrum and their families about the school day?

Using the methodology of Conversation Analysis (Sidnell, 2011; Sidnell & Stivers, 2012), we took a data driven approach to the qualitative analysis of these interactions, but in order to address Research Questions 2-4 above, and further triangulate our understanding of the nature of home communication about school, we were specifically interested in questions such as the following:

- How do parents elicit information from children about the school day?
- What characteristics do the children's responses to their parents have?
- Do children initiate talk about school?
- What brings about narratives by children about school?
- What kinds of responses occur to these extended tellings?

- Do parents and children engage in future talk or hypothetical talk about school, and if so of what kinds?
- What kind of troubles arise in the interaction (e.g. misunderstandings needing conversational repair)?
- Are these problems dealt with by conversational repair? If so how / by whom?

The following analytic process was followed:

- A research assistant indexed the recordings for segments where school was a topic of discussion.
- Research assistants who were trained in linguistic transcription did broad transcriptions of the indexed segments using the free linguistic transcription program ELAN (ELAN, 2020) and adhering to standard transcription conventions as listed in Appendix B.
- The first CI on the project completed first stage analysis of the transcribed data, focusing on the following analyses:
  1. Preliminary overview of the nature of communication about school between the target child and family members. When and where does this occur in the data? How do parents elicit information from children about school? What kinds of responses do children give? Do children initiate talk about school?
  2. Identification of personal experience narratives by the children about school. Do these occur, when and to what extent? What shape do they have?
  3. Identification of segments of the conversations where future talk, hypothetical and alternative situations and actions are discussed.
  4. Identification of “trouble spots” where the communication goes awry, and how these are repaired, in the context of talk about school.

Detailed, micro-analysis of the conversational data is ongoing. Results of first stage analyses are reported in section 3.

## 2.3 Part 2 of the project

Part 1 of the project yielded 21 parent surveys, 11 from the group on the spectrum and 10 from the non-autistic group. After analysis of the surveys (reported in section 3 below), it was decided to seek the same information from a much larger pool of participants, and Part 2 of the project took place in 2017-2018.

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### 2.3.1 Study Design

Parents in Part 2 of the project completed the same instruments as used for parents in Part 1. An online survey was created using Qualtrix (Qualtrix, Provo, UT). It consisted of the purpose-designed parent survey questionnaire used in Part 1 of the project, an online version of the Social Communication Questionnaire, and an online version of the demographic questionnaire.

### 2.3.2 Recruitment

Participant recruitment for Part 2 of the project was conducted widely across Australia, in Queensland, Victoria, New South Wales and Western Australia. Project investigators made use of their own networks and contacts, including Twitter and Facebook, as well as advertising the survey through a variety of autism and health organisations.

### 2.3.3 Participants

Not all individuals who commenced the survey completed all instruments. Criteria for inclusion of participant surveys in the analysis reported here were:

- Participants met study inclusion criteria (that is, parent or carer of an English-speaking child attending mainstream primary schooling in Australia and aged 8-12)
- Participants had, at minimum, completed the purpose-designed parent survey, the SCQ and sufficient questions from the demographic survey for us to identify their location

Three participants in the non-autistic group returned SCQ results within the autism range and so were excluded from analyses. 34 participants from the autism group returned SCQ results outside the autism range and were excluded. 32 participants in the autism group reported that their child had Intellectual Disability, Global Developmental Disorder or Developmental Delay and these were also excluded from analysis.

The final participant cohort consisted of 41 participants who were parents of children who are not on the spectrum, and 234 participants who were parents of children who are on the spectrum. The very divergent participant numbers in each group were managed statistically for the quantitative analyses.

### 2.3.4 Analyses

Parallel to analyses of the survey data in Part 1 of the Project, quantitative analysis of Likert scale survey questions and inductive thematic analysis of open-ended comment questions using NVivo were conducted.

## 3. Findings

In our discussion of the findings from this project we report first on survey results from the larger survey conducted as Part 2 of the project, and then summarise findings from the surveys in Part 1 of the project. We then turn to preliminary qualitative analysis of the video-recorded conversations.

### 3.1 Survey results from part 2

Parent survey questions are given in Appendix A. We asked the parents to answer the survey questions while “thinking about your child this year at school”. Parents responded on a five point Likert scale as to how often their child talks to them about positive things that happen at school and about negative things, and how easy or difficult these conversations are.

Figures 1 and 2 below show the responses for how frequently “my child would talk about positive things that happen at school” and for how often “when something good has happened at school,

**Figure 1: How frequently my child would talk about positive things that happen at school**

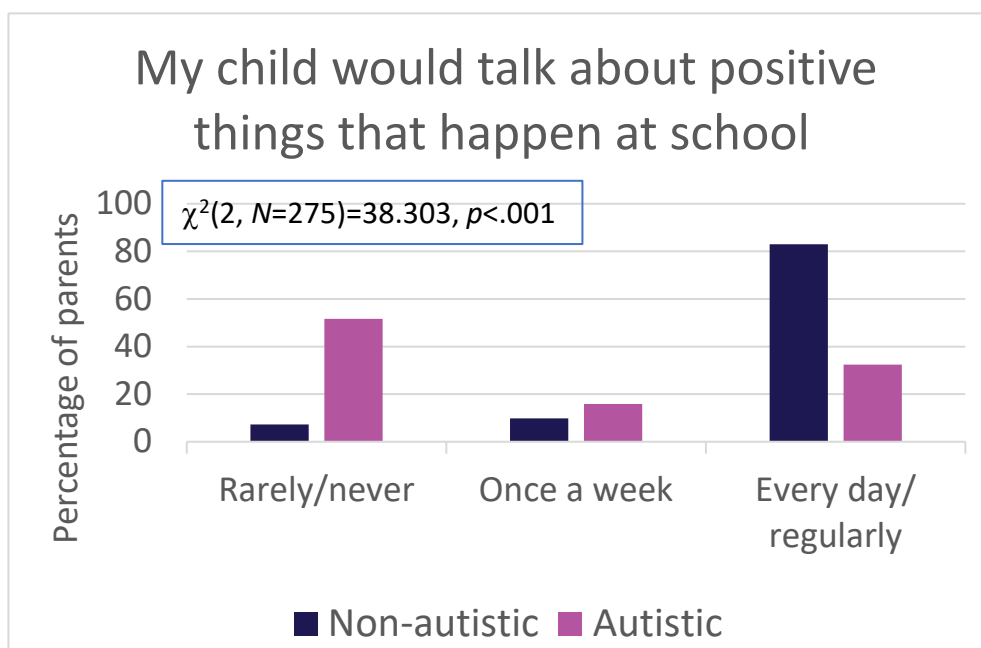
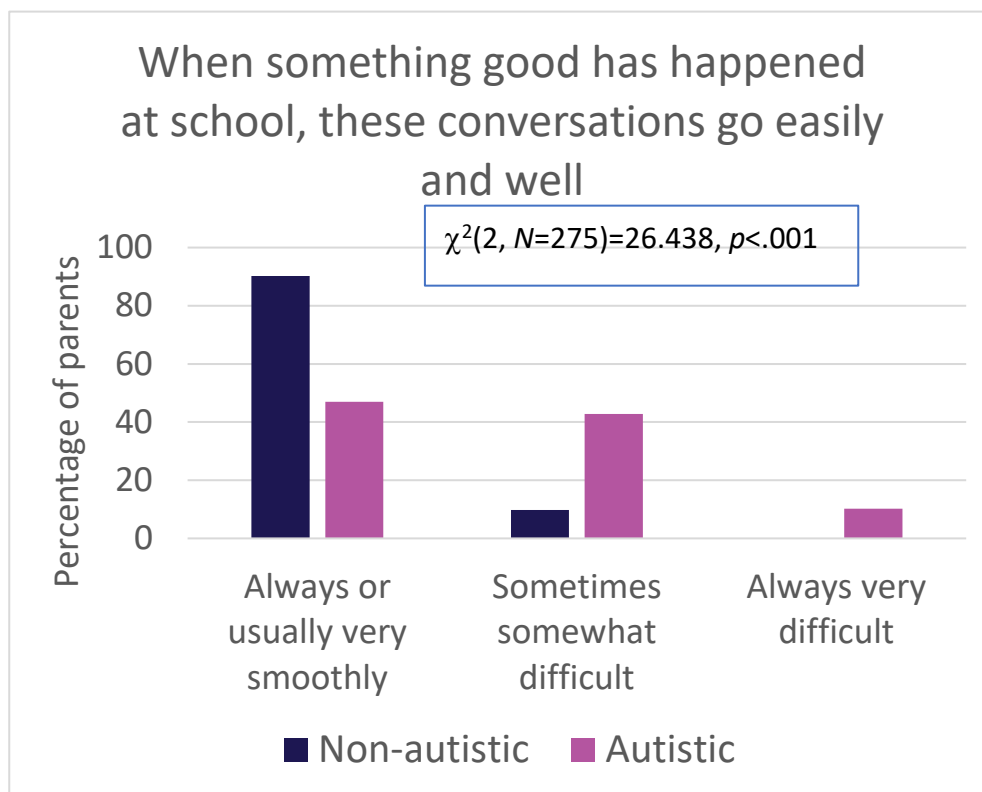




Figure 2: How frequently conversations about something good go easily and well



these conversations go easily and well". Parents of children who are not on the spectrum reported more conversations about positive aspects of school – regularly/every day and always very smooth. Parents of children on the spectrum were more likely to report a lack of talk about positives and difficulty in these conversations. These differences were statistically significant.

Figures 3 and 4 show the responses concerning how often children would talk about problems or negative occurrences at school, and for how often these conversations go easily and well. Unsurprisingly, both groups reported more difficulty in conversations about problematic topics, but with significantly more parents of children on the spectrum flagging that these conversations are always very difficult. There was less difference between the two groups of parents in how frequently children would talk about problems at school, and as we will see later, this may relate to reluctance by some children to talk about problems.

We further asked parents: if the conversations seem difficult, why do you think this is so? Eighty-one per cent (81%) of parents of children on the spectrum and 66% of parents of children who are not on the spectrum responded to this question. Thematic analysis of open-ended question answers shows that both sets of parents made reference to children's reluctance to revisit negative events and to children's worry about being in the wrong. Children on the spectrum were more likely to be said to exhibit

Figure 3: How frequently my child would talk about problems or negative things that happen at school

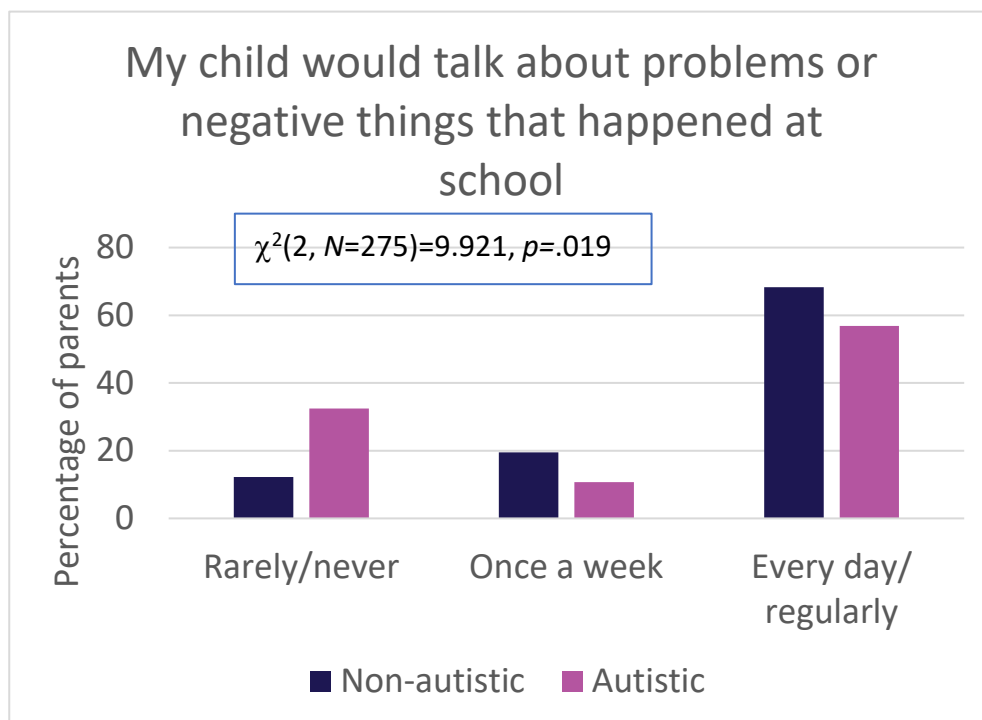
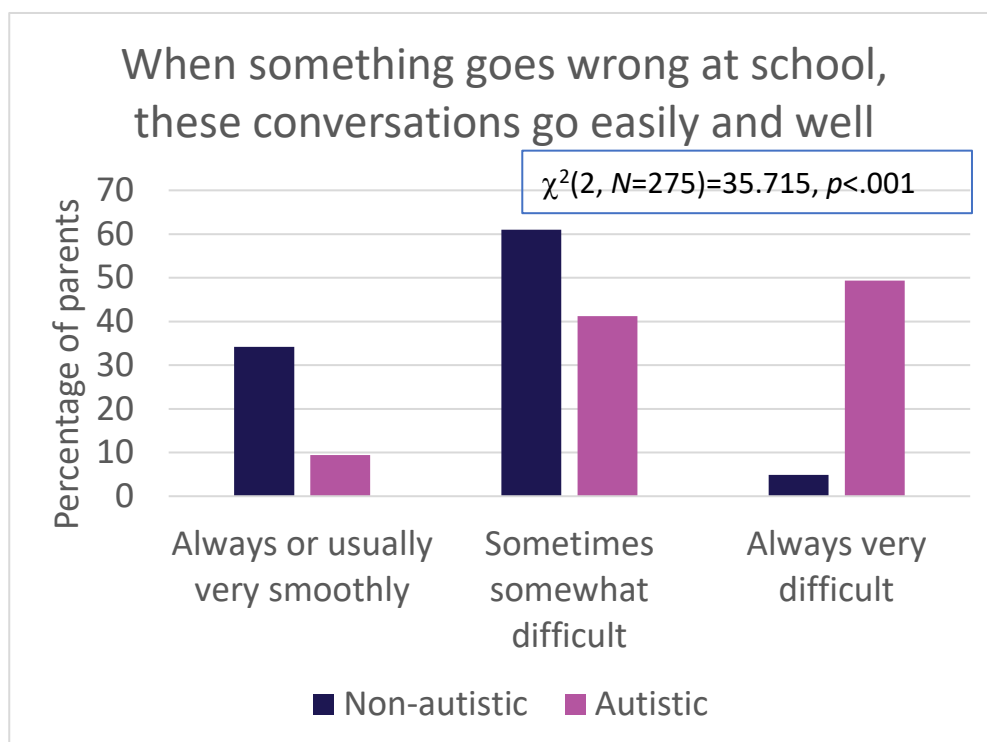


Figure 4: How frequently conversations about something negative go easily and well



painful emotions of upset, anger or frustration due to issues at school or difficulties communicating about them. Partly, this was considered to be due to a more global difficulty experienced by

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parents in communicating with these children. A sample of responses from parents of children on the spectrum is given below:<sup>2</sup>

- “If he has done something wrong, for example - been rude to a teacher or hurt a friend he is so remorseful and upset with himself that he does not even want to talk about it, even hours later. If you attempt to he starts saying he is a terrible person and shouldn't be alive, says he hates himself or starts hitting himself in the head. It is better not to push it as he already has a low opinion of himself.”
- “Doesn't want to talk about unpleasant things.”
- “Because he doesn't want to remember the feeling of being in trouble or out of sorts”
- “Hesitant to "get himself in trouble". Will avoid the facts and skim around what really happened. Doesn't always understand why he got in trouble.”
- “Reluctant to talk. I think feels shame”
- “Because she is still emotionally involved in the situation.”
- “He finds it hard to explain what has happened and if he starts to get upset or cry he tries to stop them emotion and quickly wants to move on”
- “She does not like intense emotion and does not like to have to explain what happened. She does not want to accept my suggestions if there are problems.”
- “He has trouble remembering just says it was a bad day or only tells me the worst thing of what happened. Doesn't know why it happened. Then gets upset/stressed about it and says "I don't want to talk about it any more””

Some parents of children who are not on the spectrum also comment that sometimes their child doesn't have the words to tell their side of the story or to express how they are feeling. One parent noted:

**“She doesn't want to talk about things that go wrong at school. When I pick her up at school, she will tell me she has had a bad day and will stress that I can't ask her about it until we are away from the school. Then once we are a certain walking distance away, she may tell me, but she will be in a very bad mood about it and if I don't immediately take her side or if I try to discuss it with her such as ask more questions or give her advice she doesn't want to hear, will get more moody and sullen.”**

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<sup>2</sup> Here and below, quotes from the survey are given verbatim and typographical errors are not corrected.

Parents of children on the spectrum comment in much more detail and more frequently on difficulties in communication, and report having to work hard to manage the conversation and to find out what has happened. One parent commented that working out what had happened is “like putting a puzzle together”. Another said:

**“My son is emotionally charged & overwhelmed about the negative situation and I try my best to console him but he finds it difficult to see situations from a different perspective. Given his social limitations I find it difficult to give the right advice. The outcome of the conversation is usually the same, he doesn't fully grasp what I am saying and the following day he will again have a negative exchange with other kids, which will further discourage and upset him. I wish I had more tools as a parent.”**

Additional sample quotes from parents of children on the spectrum focusing on the overarching communicative difficulties are given below:

- “He doesn't offer any information without me questioning him, and sometimes I don't know exactly what questions to ask.”
- “It is always about HOW questions are asked and sometimes I have to adjust my question, or explain something about my question.”
- “He finds it hard to follow the sequence of events as they happen and he often misses out vital pieces of information that you have to know the right question to ask to understand what has actually happened and the order it happened in. Kind of like gold mining without the metal detector. You have to ask questions around the info he did think to share.”
- “You have to keep asking different questions until you ask one that he finds acceptable (safe) to answer, ie : the answer is not going to get him in trouble or the answer may exonerate him. Some times you can't get to that point, and you have to use an ultimatum or consequence in order to get any thing from him”
- “The conversation when she recalls to me usually starts at the end. "I was strangled today!" I have to tease the who what when why out and get her to start at the beginning. She thinks i know all the details what she knows already.”
- “Usually because my child is overwhelmed with emotions and mostly anger, sadness or anxiety when something has been a challenge at school. Sometimes cannot convey the whole story in detail because emotions take over or can't remember due to be being so overwhelmed. I then try to ask the teacher or class peers who are closer to my child if they are aware of the event to clarify better understanding and try to resolve together.”

- “He doesn't like me asking about his day at school because saying its good isn't exact. I have to wait for him to come to me when he's ready or ask specific questions that don't required summarising whether it was a good or bad event”
- “Our son does not always recall the specific details of what happened, as in who did what to him. He assumes that we have prior knowledge in regard to the situation and location.”
- “Reluctance to voice what happened to him, often may take a few days to find out what happened either good or bad.”
- “Doesn't always understand "what went wrong" or why it happened, details patchy and out of sequence, like putting a puzzle together.”

In response to questions about whether their child feels positive or negative (nervous or anxious) about going to school, parents of children on the spectrum were more likely to report their child was negative (nervous or anxious) about going to school while parents of children who are not on the spectrum generally reported their child to be positive about school. Figures 5 and 6 show the results for these questions. The discussion of the videorecorded after school interactions from Part 1 of the project are consistent with these findings, in that of the 21 children participating in this study, the children who are not on the spectrum as a group were more likely to speak positively about school in the interactions recorded (see section 3.3).

**Figure 5: How frequently my child feels positive about going to school**

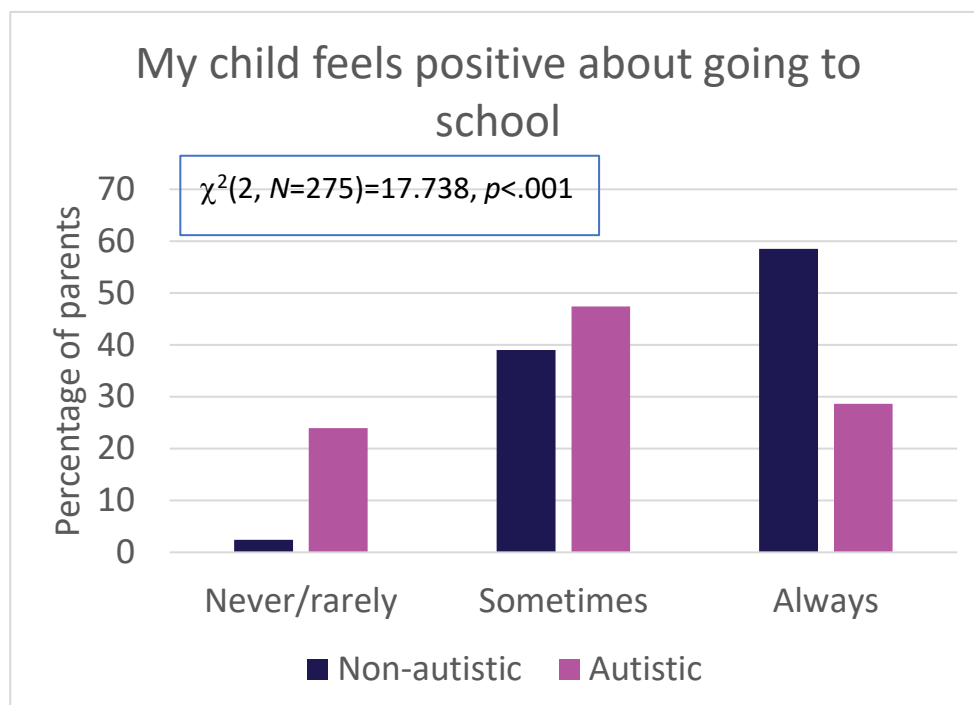
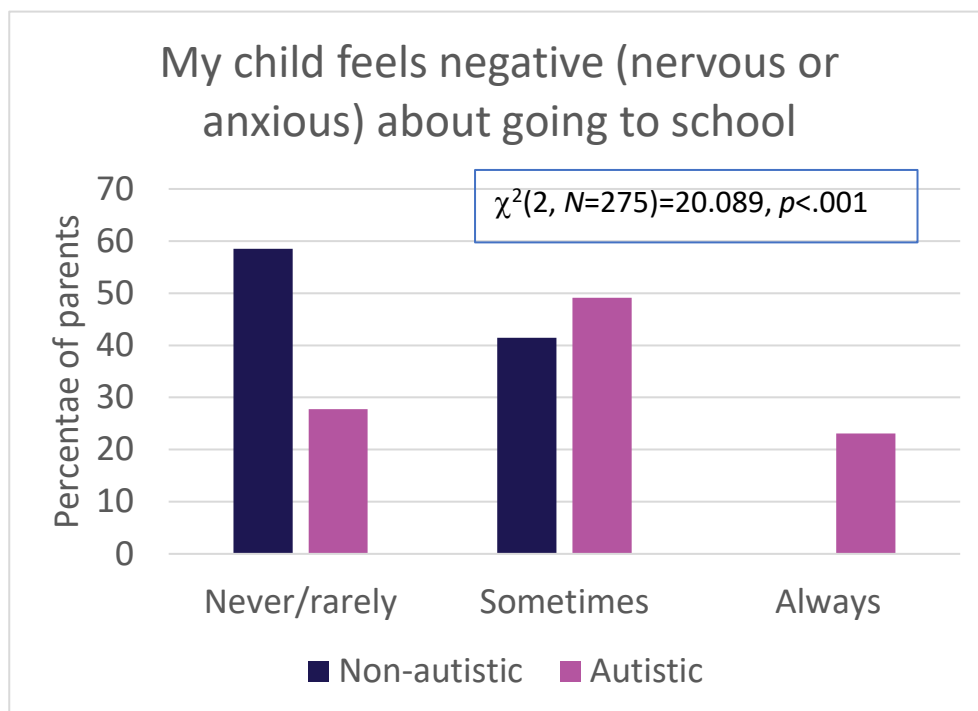
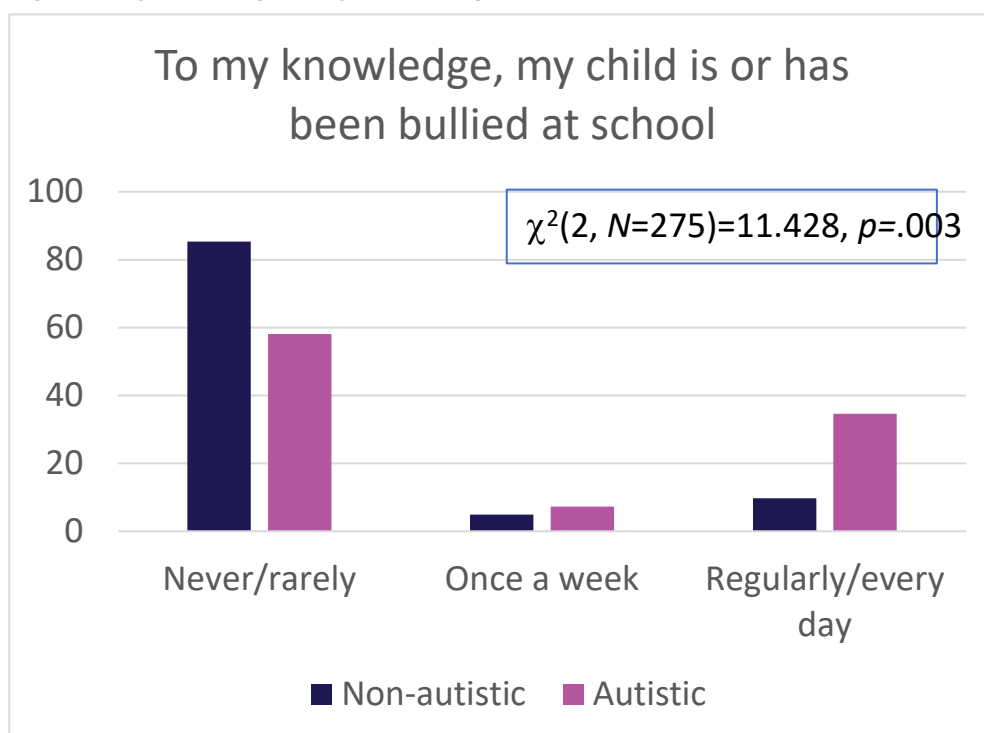


Figure 6: How frequently my child feels negative about going to school



The survey asked parents specifically about bullying. Parents of children on the spectrum indicated significantly higher frequency of bullying, and although almost the same frequency of references to bullying arose in the open-ended questions for the two groups of parents, the parents of children on the spectrum reported more serious incidents. Figure 7 shows the results.

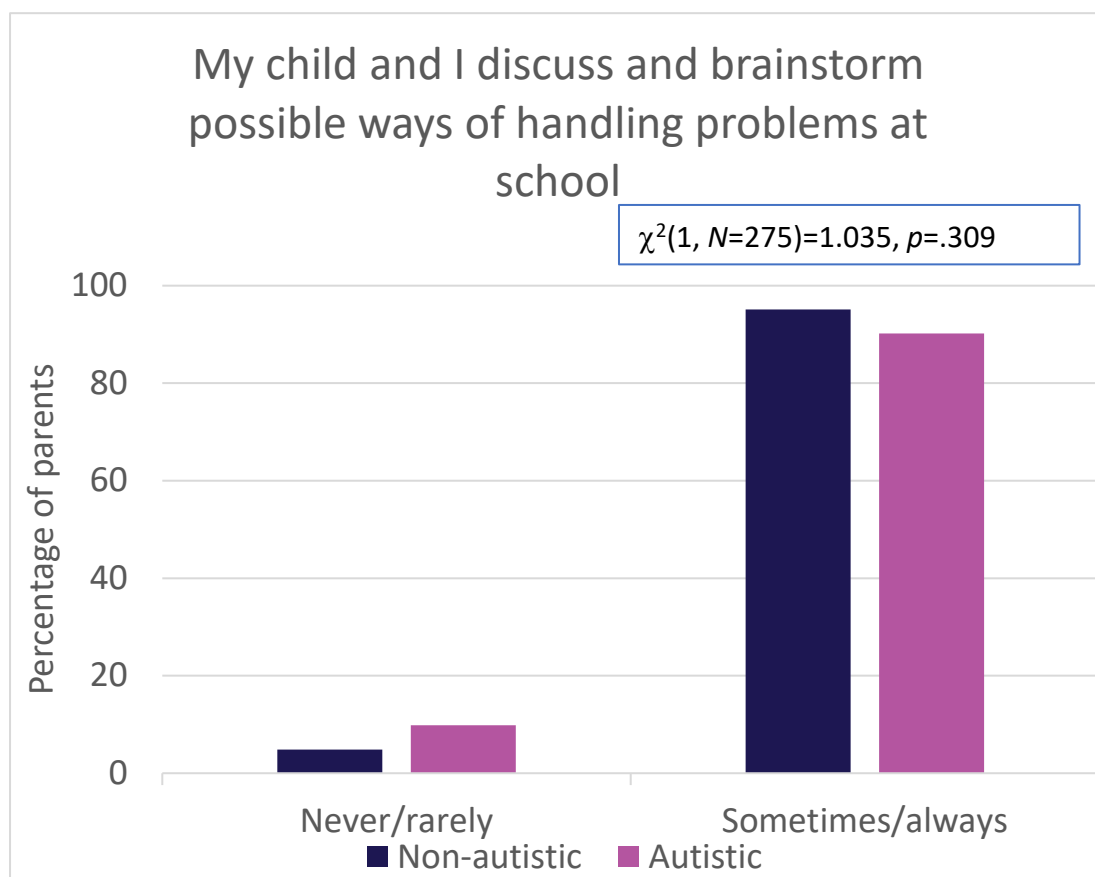
Figure 7: My knowledge of my child being bullied at school



Comments on communication about bullying included a number of parents of children on the spectrum reporting that their child might not recognise a situation as being bullied. Parents of children not on the spectrum made more reference to strategising with their child about what to do. However, both groups of parents indicated that they brainstormed with the child about school (as in the example given below) and Figure 8 shows that there were no significant differences in reported frequencies for brainstorming about problems at school – this was only one of two non-significant comparisons between the groups.

**Parent of child on the spectrum: “I ask my son if there was anyone at School that he would like aliens to abduct today? When he nominates a person we discuss why he wants that person abducted and we make Plan A, B for dealing with whatever has happened. He never requests my assistance and I then ask the same question the following days to see if the same person is nominated.”**

Figure 8: Frequency of brainstorming problem solving with my child



We also explored parents' overall perceptions of the quality of the communication they have with their child about school. We asked parents about how often communication with their child about school was easy, and to rate the overall ease / difficulty on a scale from 1-5. Here there were highly significant differences between the groups and large effect sizes. Overall, parents of children not on the spectrum reported that it was always easy to communicate with their child about school and there were no problems with this. More parents of children on the spectrum reported difficulties with communication about school – nevertheless, around 25% of these parents indicated no or few problems communicating about the school day and 34% gave a middling response. See Figures 9 and 10. These results and this range of variation is consistent with our findings from qualitative analysis of actual recorded after school conversations with children in Part 1 of the project (see section 3.3).

**Figure 9: How often it is easy for me to communicate with my child about school**

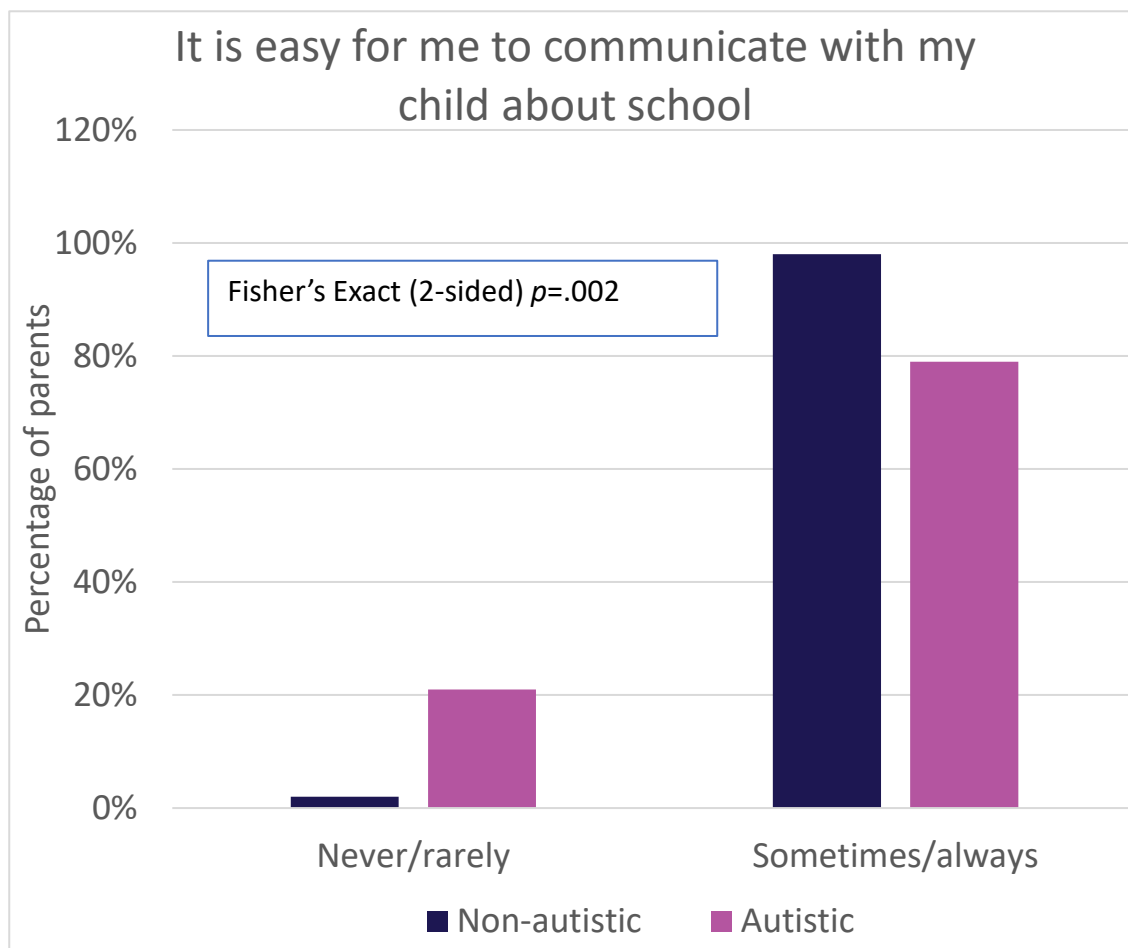
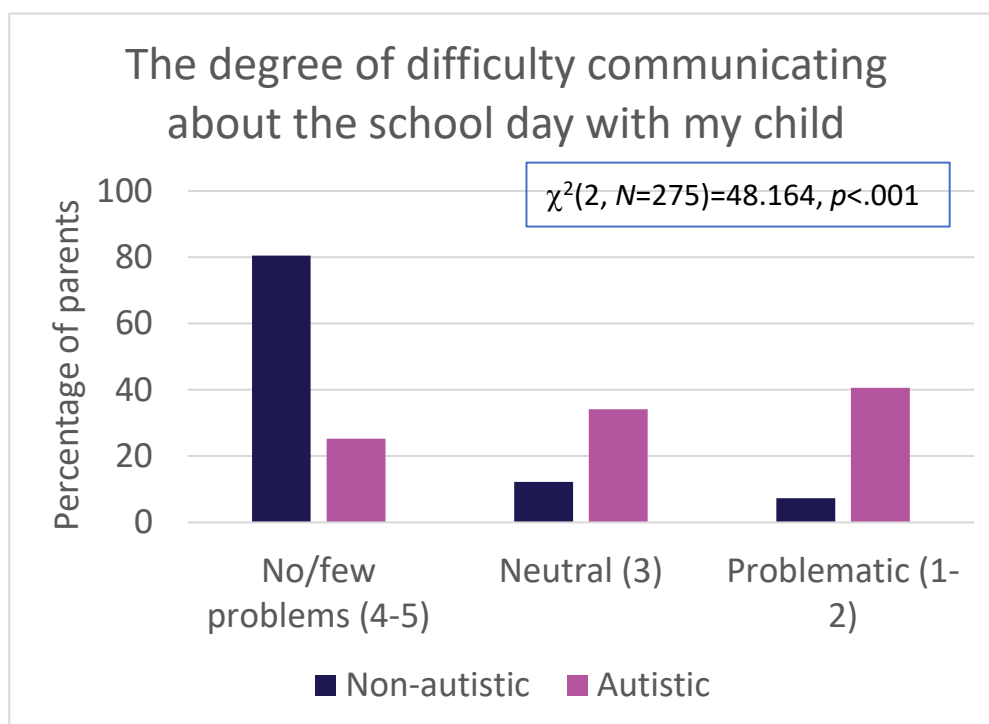




Figure 10: How difficult it is to communicate with my child about school



**Summary: communication about school - “making a conversation fluid is difficult” (parent of child on the spectrum)**

Qualitative analysis of open-ended comments on discussion of troubling events, reported above, showed that both groups of parents reported that their children could be reticent and avoid talking about troubling events, whether because these are emotionally challenging or to avoid blame if things have gone wrong. This resonated with the findings from the child interviews in Part 1 of the project, which are discussed later in section 3.2 - children from both groups expressed reluctance to share events with various categories of people. It also came up in analysis of some of the conversational data. For example, for participant 402QGAR (not on the spectrum), when the child’s mother asked the prompt question about whether the day had been good, the child first gave a “stock” positive answer (“good”), which the mother then queried and pursued – it turned out that the time period in question had been pretty dramatic with the child being very unwell and missing out on normal activities. As we shall see in section 3.3, a number of children overtly refused to talk about problems in their after school interactions with parents, or needed careful handling before they would eventually reveal what had happened.

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Parents of children on the spectrum attributed difficulties in communication about school to:

- General problems with communication
- Cognitive difficulties such as with sequencing of events
- Greater likelihood of the child exhibiting emotions of upset, anger or frustration due to issues at school or due to difficulties in communicating

Aligned with what we have already seen from the analysis of comments concerning talk about problem events, in their general comments on communication about school, parents of children on the spectrum reported that they needed to elicit information gradually and to pick their time – this was something mentioned far less frequently by the parents of children not on the spectrum, although some commented that they find it best to wait for their child to open up about school, especially with respect to particular concerns.

One theme which came through clearly from all the open-ended comments was the agency and intentionality of communication and the work put into this by the parents of children on the spectrum. These parents reported a range of strategies they had developed:

- Intensive monitoring of children's behaviours
- Designing outside school interactions so that time and place maximise the child's ability to communicate, based on their evaluation of the condition of the child
- Care in approaching topics and eliciting information
- An awareness that the child may need time to process incidents and might not be able to talk about them right away

In contrast, the agency and work required of parents of children not on the spectrum in ensuring they understand their child's experience at school does not come across so strongly.

Representative comments from parents of children on the spectrum include the following.

- "he needs to be in a relaxed environment to open up."
- "All depends on the questions asked"
- "When [CHILD'S NAME] first comes home from school no one can talk to him. He's like royalty you wait till you are spoken to before you can speak to him. I don't normally get to hear about his day from him I learn about his day from his teacher or younger sister."
- "Once my son is home he does not want to discuss school. My son says talking about it is stressful and upsetting. He thinks I should mind my own business as school is his business - my son is very private."

- “Sometimes it may take a few days for my child to share his experiences at school as he needs to process the feelings first or he tries to deal with it himself before reaching a point where he needs to talk”
- “I feel upset that I really don’t know what he does at school I feel sad that he never tells me anything about school good or bad”

Some parents reported specific strategies they had developed, for example see the quotes below.

- “Conversations about my child's day at school is always prompted by questions I've been asking since Prep.
  - Did you have a happy day
  - what was your best bit
  - what was your hardest bit
  - what was something your teacher said

If I didn't ask these questions, I wouldn't be able to know how his day was.”

- “We started a rose and a thorn each afternoon a good and a not so good part of each day he engaged well with this and is now excited to tell me what each days rose is. Last week we discovered that a thorn was some issues with friends at lunch time which gave me an opportunity to discuss with his teacher and [NAME – PERHAPS OF AIDE] the next day quickly eleviating the issue :)”
- “When my son started school talking about his day was an issue but over time (he is now in Year 6) we have practiced conversations and he is able to tell me things he has enjoyed/not enjoyed that day (emphasis on the not enjoyed).”
- “It has taken time and consistency to checking in and asking a myriad of questions to find out how their day went. Rather than just asking how was your day. I ask who you sat with at lunch time while eating? Did you play any particular type of game? Did you go to library, oval etc? Anything special happen? Anyone upset today. Did the teacher yell a lot today? So I can see how they coped with classroom noise levels? so many varied question I ask to check in with my child. Being of normal language capabilities at age 10 it is certainly easier than prior to age 5.”
- “I have also tried many different ways of asking about how the day went by asking different questions which I found online. Sometimes these might be effective....like, 'What made your teacher smile today? What made her frown?' and, 'Was there anyone missing from your class today?’”

- “Two months ago I purchased a communication book for the teachers to write in for the after-school carers and myself to read so that we could find out if my son had a “hard day” and any specifics. The teachers haven’t written in it once.”

We know that even when children on the spectrum are very young, parents work hard to become synchronous with the child – it is the parents who do the work to make the interaction work (Hudry et al., 2013; King et al., 2006). The need for this intensive work has been shown to relate to high levels of stress and distress in these parents (Maynard et al., 2016; Seltzer et al., 2001).

## 3.2 Survey results from Part 1

Results from the online survey undertaken in Part 2 were generally consistent with what we had found for the smaller parent survey undertaken in Part 1 of the project, in which the 21 parents answered the survey by hand, and we do not report these results in detail here. In this group, parents of children not on the spectrum consistently reported easier communication with their children about the school day, however parents of children on the spectrum gave relatively positive reports about school communication also, stating it was “sometimes” or “always” straightforward, despite a mean rating of difficulty several points higher on a Likert scale.

In Part 1, parents were asked to pass a teacher survey on to their child’s classroom teacher, and seven of the 21 teachers replied to this. Despite the low numbers, it was interesting to compare the views of these teachers with those of the parents. The teachers who responded reported comparatively few difficulties over communication about school and made generally positive assessments of the children’s behaviour. Both parents and teachers reported minimal bullying of the children, but teachers reported bullying less frequently than parents.

Most of the 11 children on the Spectrum from Part 1 of the project had an integration aide at school, but a majority of their parents reported that they had never met with the aide. While half these parents reported using a communication book, only one felt that it worked well – comparatively, the smaller number of teachers who responded were positive about the value of the communication book.

### Qualitative analysis of child interviews

Nineteen of the children who took part in Part 1 of the project completed a semi-structured interview with a research assistant at the end of the week of data collection. Research assistants

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were asked to use the prompts in Appendix A to get the conversation started but were instructed to avoid “leading” the children. The interviews were video-recorded and transcribed for subsequent qualitative analysis. However two of the interviews with children on the spectrum were sufficiently challenging that they were not useful for analysis.

In general, the interview data reflected aspects of what had been happening during the week of data collection.

Qualitative analysis of the interview data is still to be finalized, but preliminary analysis suggests some differences can be tentatively drawn between the children who are and the children who are not on the spectrum.

The nine children on the spectrum who were interviewed listed things they liked about school, including specific subjects or activities, and two of the nine mentioned playing with friends. Four did not articulate anything negative about school, while the remaining five mentioned noise or boredom or specific subjects or teachers or changes of teachers and being thwarted in their ability to do something; one child mentioned “a meanie”.

In contrast, of the ten children not on the spectrum interviewed, six explicitly mentioned friends as “good” aspects of school, with other positive things mentioned including special events of various kinds or specific equipment or subjects. A few of these children were extremely positive about everything about school (something not seen in the group on the spectrum). Things they didn’t like about school included “mean people” or interpersonal conflicts in four cases; most children did not report a lot that they didn’t like about school but some mentioned specific subjects or types of event.

Overall, there was a tendency for social and relational aspects of school (friends and “mean kids”) to be mentioned as both positive and negative among the non-autistic group, whereas although some of the children on the spectrum talked in the interview (as well as in their after school chat) about friends, they tended to focus more on the institutional, rule-based aspects of school as negative.

As indicated earlier, many children from both groups said they might not tell people about good or not so good things that happened at school. (Recall the comment from one of the parents in the online survey who said their child thought some things were too “private” to talk about.) Most of the children on the spectrum gave cautious and qualified answers about whether they would share either good or bad things that happened at school, and only four gave an unqualified “yes” answer to the question of whether it helps to talk about things. Several were not confident that their parents

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wanted to know. All the children who are not on the spectrum said they would tell others about good things, however some qualified this by saying that they would tell their friends only and some nominated certain kinds of things they wouldn't talk about. Asked about sharing bad things, there was more caution expressed – six of the ten children who are not on the spectrum gave a qualified answer about this and talked about it depending on the kind of thing. A number said there were things they would not talk about because they were personal or too special or too minor. However all but one agreed it was good to talk about problems and all but two agreed that their parents wanted to know about problems so they could help.

Asked who the preferred recipient of news was, the child's mother was most mentioned for the children on the spectrum, and sometimes a teacher or aide. This resonates with a comment made by a father to one of the researchers, to the effect that he would like to be more involved but that this was difficult because of the sheer family logistics of the day. Two children mentioned telling friends good things and one mentioned sharing bad things with friends. For children not on the spectrum, most mentioned quite a long list of people they would share good things with, including parents, and in some cases siblings or other family members; there was variation in whether teachers were mentioned. The children not on the spectrum were much more likely to talk about sharing bad things with their friends (because they understood and could help them feel better), with some talking about telling teachers because of their authority to act but others explicitly excluding teachers. Most mentioned parents as recipients of bad news but two explicitly excluded family.

Some representative quotes from the children are given below.

- “cos I like to keep things a secret”, and asked if mum would like her to talk about things – “not really” [girl, on the spectrum; 10 years old]
- Mother (present at interview): “would you tell me if you went on time out?” – Child: “no” [boy, on the spectrum; 10 years old]
- “eh Mummy I only just tell Mummy about the good things and the hard things” [girl, on the spectrum; 8 years old]
- Do they share something good?: “well? Unless they were there when it happens but I just keep it a secret sometimes”. Why? – “I don't really know” Asked for an example of something good that they wanted to keep a secret – “I can't remember”. [girl, on the spectrum; 8 years old]
- “sometimes I would tell em about it but depending on what it is. Sometimes it might be a bit TOO special to me and I don't want anyone to find out I have it otherwise they might try n steal it” [girl, on the spectrum; 9 years old]

- “I’d keep it to myself unless if I’m like at school with crutches n someone asked me how it happened” [girl, on the spectrum; 9 years old]
- Does it help to talk?: no, he would prefer to keep things to himself, “some things might be personal” [boy, not on the spectrum; 10 years old]
- sometimes “I just don’t tell anyone” Why? “I dunno; not relevant; doesn’t really matter; not a big thing” [girl, not on the spectrum; 11 years old]

#### Summary:

- Both the surveys in Part 1 and in Part 2 of the project indicated significant differences in the perceptions of parents of children who are and children who are not on the spectrum concerning the ease or difficulty of communicating with their child about the school day.
- The studies also painted a picture of clear differences in the lived experience of the two groups of parents.
- The child interviews from Part 1 were informative about the children’s views on who they were happy to talk to about school and what types of events they felt comfortable sharing – but more work needs to be done here. In the interviews, children who are not on the spectrum were more likely to mention social issues as problematic at school; children on the spectrum were more likely to mention institutional issues and procedural fairness. This aligns with some of the discussions that children were observed having in their after school conversations with parents (see section 3.3).
- From the limited data available from Part 1, there was some indication of differences between parent and teacher perceptions, however the numbers of respondents are too small to be meaningful here.
- There is further scope for comparison of the actual communication recorded for families who took part in Part 1 of the study with what the parents and the children report about it in the survey and interview data.

### 3.3 First phase analysis of video-recorded conversational interaction

All 21 families participating in Part 1 of the study recorded after school interaction on at least two separate days in the school week, and over at least two distinct periods of time. A number of families recorded much more interaction than this, up to six days during the week. Family interactions occurred in contexts including car trips home from school, after school snack time or



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homework time, family dinners, and pre-bedtime conversations. In addition to the target child and at least one parent, siblings, other family members such as grandparents or aunts, and occasionally other children, were also present in a number of conversations. In total, approximately 50 hours of recordings were collected, providing a rich repository of information about how families interact after school.

As indicated in section 2.2, the first phase of analysis of these data involved indexing which segments of the videos included talk about school, and linguistic transcription of those segments. Table 4 shows the amount of video-recorded data judged to be “about school” and therefore transcribed for analysis, from each family. In total, ten hours and fifty minutes of data were transcribed.

Unsurprisingly, given the context of the study, we found that all the families did talk about school at the end of the school day, and all the target children participated in such conversations. There was, however, a very wide range of variation in how easily these conversations flowed, in the amount of talk about school which occurred during the recorded interactions we had access to, and in the quality of information which parents and carers were able to glean about the school day from their interactions with the child. Below, we comment on a number of themes which arose from our preliminary qualitative analysis of the data. Although we have a large amount of data in terms of the amount and variety of conversations recorded, the relatively small number of participants (11 in the autistic and 10 in the non-autistic group) and the wide range of variation within each group means that our observations are necessarily exploratory and it is difficult to make generalisations. First pass coding and analysis of the conversational data was done by the first CI on the project and the initial coding was done blind to the child’s diagnosis.

#### *Factors favoring or disfavoring easy conversation about the school day*

**Car trip and technology.** Many parents opened the topic of school on the car trip home in the afternoon, and were perhaps encouraged to do so by our suggestion that they might use this as one recording context. On some occasions the children talked a lot about their day during these trips home. However many children were relatively unresponsive in this context, even if they were more talkative later in the day. The presence of multiple children in the car, the children’s access to electronic devices (which had perhaps been set aside during school) and the distribution of after school snacks all interfered with conversation. One observation to be followed up in future analyses was the unusually long pauses tolerated between adult questions and child responses on these car trips. It is generally considered that pauses of longer than about 1 second are treated as problematic in everyday conversation (Jefferson, 1989; Gardner & Mushin, 2015), but there were



**Table 4: Amount of video-recorded interaction and transcribed segments about school**

Participant	Total video recordings in minutes	Video data about school transcribed in minutes	% of Total video recordings transcribed
021VCHI	25.5	25	98.0
502QAQU	28	11.5	41.1
202VPAT	30.5	30.5	100.0
402VMCS	37	28.15	76.1
402QGAR	46	15	32.6
031QFLY	48.25	17.25	35.8
102VAUL	66.5	50	75.2
302VHAR	79.25	49.9	63.0
202QLAU	103	18.5	18.0
041QFRA	110.5	38.75	35.1
302QBIG	115.25	46	39.9
071QBRA	133.5	11.5	8.6
102QSNO	153	59	38.6
031VBAY	153.75	25.5	16.6
081QTHO	154.75	15.5	10.0
011QTHO	156.5	9.25	5.9
011VPET	196.5	50.5	25.7
051QTEN	208	18	8.7
021QALF	210	15	7.1
602QGAT	445.75	26.25	5.9
061QSPR	473.5	89	18.8
<b>TOTAL</b>	2975 (49 hours 35 minutes)	650.05 (10 hours 50 minutes)	21.9%

numerous instances in these interactions of substantially longer pauses. The fact that the parent was simultaneously engaged in driving may have impacted on this. An example is given in extract 1 below.<sup>3</sup>

**Extract 1** – girl on the spectrum, 10 years old, in car after school with mother and sister

067 mother: so how was y'day?  
068 child: (0.2) me::h,  
069 mother: (0.8) really?  
070 child: uh huh  
071 mother: (0.6) what's me::h?  
072 child: (1.1) ((makes joo [joo noises]))  
073 mother: [what does ] that? mean.  
074 child: (10.5) ((does not respond, playing with iPad))  
075 mother: Does that mean there were cows in your classroom?  
076 me::h,  
077 child: (5.4) ((target child does not respond, playing with  
078 iPad))  
079 mother: ((sings along to song on the radio)) (14.5) ((no  
080 interaction)) are you tired today.  
081 child: (4.4) ((target child does not respond, playing with  
082 iPad))  
083 mother: You're both very quiet.  
084 child: (3.3) ((target child and sister do not respond,  
085 playing with iPad))  
086 mother: did I give you enough food in your ↓lunch-box. (1.0)  
087 is that why you're both so quiet.  
088 C8hild: (9.2) ((target child and sister do not respond,  
089 playing with iPad))

**Siblings.** For many families, the presence of more than one child meant that easy informative conversation with the target child was complicated by siblings interrupting, playing up or the need for the parent to deal with interactions with more than one child at once. Often, when the parent

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<sup>3</sup> Names have been replaced. In speaker attributions, "Child" always refers to the target child in the project. Transcription conventions are listed in full in Appendix B. Figures in brackets, e.g. (0.2), refer to length of silences in tenths of a second. Transcriber comments are given in double brackets (( )).

was able to set aside a space of time with just the target child (often in the context of the prompt questions session), the conversation flowed much more freely.

**Prompt questions.** A number of parents commented either on tape or in feedback to the researchers that use of the prompt questions led to a much greater and freer exchange of information about school than usual. This may have been because they set aside quiet time with just the target child to undertake this part of the task. An example of such a comment made by the child's mother after the prompt session with the child and the father is given in Extract 2.

**Extract 2** – boy on the spectrum, 9 years old, day 3 of recording, mother and father at kitchen table with child, having just completed prompt question session

```
828    mother:      alright cool. (1.1) that was really good, (1.3) you
829                      answered lots a questions about school. (0.9)
830    father:      °m(h)m°
831    mother:      (0.3) that's the most we(h)'ve e(h)ver ta(h)lked
832                      abou(h)t schoo(h)l heheheheh (1.1) ((rubs child's
833                      head))
```

**Mood and emotion.** It was very evident that many children were reluctant to talk about what happened at school if this related to negative experiences or incidents, and it is possible that the presence of the video-camera may have exacerbated this in some cases. This applied to both the autistic and non-autistic groups. Parents were very aware of their child's mood and highly sensitive to when to stop the discussion before the child became too emotional. There were a number of instances where the full story of something upsetting only came out over time, and in some cases an incident was discussed over multiple days.

Some examples are illustrative here. Extract 3 shows how it gradually emerges on a car trip home that something bad has happened in P.E.

**Extract 3** – boy on the spectrum, 10 years old, day 1 of recording, in car with mother and grandfather after school

```
068    mother:      [it'll cool down. ] (0.5) what did you do
069                      in f in P E.
070    child:      (1.4) I: °s° (.) we did some stuff? like some stuff,
071                      and stuff and [°some stuff°]
```

072 mother: [ and stuff great. (0.6) would you  
 073 wanna be a bit clearer on what the stuff is? coz I- in  
 074 P E I think you can do lots of stuff  
 075 child: (1.5) ((playing with seatbelt)) °I° (0.3) I [( )]  
 076 mother: [what  
 077 sorta] stuff like (0.4) rope (.) jumping, running,  
 078 child: (0.9) I: am not clear. (0.5) °(I'm not) really clear.  
 079 a[bout it° ]  
 080 mother: [you're not] clear because you're hot and you're  
 081 bothered?  
 082 child: (4.2) ((sits up in seat and seems to look out back  
 083 window)) ((trills lips)) (2.9) ahhh. (1.7)

((section omitted – talk about other things and lots of silence))

174 mother: [was there a]nything about your day today that you  
 175 didn't like? at all?  
 176 child: (0.4) .t (0.3) P E.  
 177 mother: (0.6) which one?  
 178 child: (0.5) P E.  
 179 mother: ↑P E. heh haw (0.2) or is that why. (1.1)  
 180 grandpa: ((coughs))  
 181 mother: why didn't you like P E what was happening.  
 182 child: ((leans back in seat and faces window)) °er just  
 183 classified please I don't [like to tor° ]  
 184 mother: [what was that I] can't hear  
 185 you.=  
 186 child: =CLASSIFIED I DON'T WANT TO TALK ABOUT [IT ]  
 187 mother: [↑class]ified.  
 188 you don't wanna ↑talk about it  
 189 child: ( ) [( )]  
 190 mother: [why. becau:]se (.) becau:se  
 191 child: ↑I JUST DON'T=  
 192 mother: =[you jus]  
 193 child: =[FEEL LI]KE I:T  
 194 mother: because you got hot? (0.4) or because it was tricky.  
 195 (0.7) or did you have a spack attack. (1.5)  
 196 child: [(I di-) ]

197 mother: [usually when] you don't wanna talk about it it's  
 198 because you've had a meltdown. did you have a bit of a  
 199 meltdown about something. (1.5) did you [meltd-]  
 200 child: [CLASSI]fied.  
 201 mother: (0.3) .t haw °haw° (0.6) didja °m° (.) did[ja ]  
 202 child: [(I'm] this  
 203 time [( )]  
 204 mother: [I ↑know] you're saying classified (.) but [I'm °( )°]  
 205 child: [this time  
 206 I'm] never going to tell you thi[s time.]  
 207 mother: [ I kn]OW. but you know I  
 208 [normally]  
 209 child: [ since I]'ve grown up (0.3) ↑I'VE (0.5) I:=  
 210 mother: =I've lear- I [know you've]=  
 211 child: [°I've° ]=  
 212 mother: learnt to say classfied. (0.5)  
 213 child: yes. (0.7) but [I'm plan ]=  
 214 mother: [here's [NAME OF SIBLING]]=  
 215 child: =that you I can never talk. (0.4) °to-° (0.4) about it.

Extract 4 is another case where the full story of what happened at school on a Monday comes out and is talked through by the child and his parents over the course of a number of days. The events related here are an example of the “social vulnerability” described by Sofronoff et al. (2011).

#### **Extract 4 – boy on the spectrum aged 10**

[1] *Day 1 of recording: it becomes clear from the discussion in the car after school that he is very angry and upset because he believes he has been given a formal behavioral sanction by his teacher (the child uses a distinctive name for this sanction; we refer to it as FBS here). It turns out that he has gotten into trouble after his friends have dared him to do something problematic on a school trip.*

001 child: ((camera being set up in car)) mum (0.4) what do you  
 002 think I should do to her first. (0.4) stab her in the  
 003 head or deep fry her.  
 004 mother: ↓mm well I don't think any of those are very good  
 005 ideas are they.

006 child: (0.4) no one of them will be good. (2.7) ((camera  
007 facing child playing on phone, brother in backseat of  
008 car and mother in driving seat, both partly visible))  
009 mother: †so do you wanna tell me what happened at school?  
010 child: (0.4) †why would I.  
011 mother: (.) s (.) well (0.3) coz you're really angry, (1.0)  
012 and (0.5)  
013 child: ah I've got an FBS? (0.3) for one, (2.5)  
014 mother: you've got an FBS.=  
015 child: =yes.  
016 mother: what she said you've got one,=  
017 child: =YES=  
018 mother: =†okay, †alright? (1.7) so how did that (.) how did  
019 you get it. like what happened.  
020 child: (0.4) at the end of school, (0.4) and then I got told  
021 off again because all my lunch box fell out, and then  
022 I was like (0.7) °eh for° (0.3) °f:or F° sake.  
023 mother: (.) °aw° (.) °right° remember language, (0.9) I know  
024 you're really angry, (2.1) so (0.6) how was the trip.  
025 child: (0.4) terrible. (0.7)  
026 mother: (was [it.])  
[lines omitted mainly concerning interruption by  
brother]  
041 mother: heh yeaheheheh (1.8) so the trip wasn't good at all?=  
042 child: =NO. (2.4)  
043 mother: do you wanna tell me what happened on the trip?=  
044 child: =NO:WAH  
045 mother: alright? okay. (12.6) so your friends were daring you  
046 you said.  
047 child: (0.7) YES.  
048 mother: (3.4) and was this on the trip or when you got back to  
049 school.  
050 child: (0.9) TRIP

*Mother and child continue to talk about the incident as mother tries to establish exactly what trouble the child has gotten into, the child continues to talk angrily about the teacher and to make threats as to what he will do to her, and the mother tries to talk him down.*

[2] Later, in the kitchen at home, the discussion continues along the same lines.

[3] Later, Father comes home and the story is told again, with Father taking a stronger line about the child's behavior.

321 father: [how was your trip]  
322 brother: [ I winn:]ed. (0.4) ((runs into room holding a  
323 device)) I  
324 child: [↓terrible ]  
325 brother: [winned thi]s game.  
326 father: I won this [game. ]  
327 mother: [°you won this g]ame.°  
328 father: how was it?  
329 child: ↓terrible.  
330 mother: °right° [[NAME OF SIBLING] ↑do you wanna take it out  
331 there]=  
332 father: [why was it terrible. ]=  
333 mother: then so you can (.) [listen to it ]  
334 child: [I don't even wanna] talk about  
335 it's so bad. (0.7) ((brother walks out of room))  
336 ↓°(worst thing.)°  
337 father: (1.4) ((mother and father look at each other, father  
338 shrugs, mother tightens lips)) hhh (0.3) °(alright)°  
339 (0.9)  
340 mother: do you wanna tell dad now you're a bit calmer?  
341 child: (.) ((shakes head, lips pressed together)) [mm mm ]  
342 mother: [dad's not]  
343 gonna be an[gry. okay?]  
344 child: [mm mm: ] mm ((nods, then shakes head))  
345 father: what happen:ed (.) [you got told ]=  
346 child: [((shakes head)) mm]=  
347 father: off, (1.3)  
348 mother: but you (ge) [CHILD'S NAME] you gonna have to tell dad  
349 [okay, ]  
350 child: [((shakes head)) ↓mm mm]  
351 father: well one of ya's gotta tell me, so what (0.5) ((child  
352 accidentally knocks drink bottle onto floor)) is it.  
353 child: (.) °↓mm (forgots)°=

354 mother: =↑pick your drink up (0.9) he (0.5)  
 355 brother: ((from other room)) BAH hoo. (0.6)  
 356 mother: miss [TEACHER NAME] said °h° she gave him an FBS but  
 357 (.) we're not sh (.) I'm not sure if sh:e definitely  
 358 has, or not. but (1.1) I'm not really sure (0.7) why  
 359 she gave him (1.0) an FBS, (1.2) because um (0.3) m not  
 360 sure [CHILD'S NAME] said that (0.6) his friends were  
 361 daring him: to do (0.6) I don't e- (.) I don't know  
 362 what  
 363 child: (0.4) ↓rolling around on the  
 364 [floor and stuff ]  
 365 mother: [rolling around on the floor:] so- (.) did you get an  
 366 FBS for that? (0.3) or was it a number of things.=  
 367 father: =°he was just° probably [acting silly. ]  
 368 child: [(every number)]  
 369 father: (1.1) °well° (.) just don't act silly.  
 370 child: this morning I had a bad mood, °↓in the° school I had a  
 371 bad mood (0.2) [and after school ( )].  
 372 father: [I know you're in a bad mood,] but (0.4)  
 373 if you're going to act [silly at school, ]  
 374 child: [I'VE BEEN IN A BAD MOOD] (0.9)  
 375 ((chewing food)) all time. (1.0)  
 376 father: °yeah° but you wasn't in a bad mood when you was acting  
 377 silly to get told off, (1.3) you know? (0.6) how many  
 378 times do we tell you. just (0.7) if you're gonna act  
 379 like that at school you're gonna get in trouble. (4.7)  
 380 ↓(you know) I have to tell you when we play football or  
 381 an<sup>y</sup>thing. we have [to tell you ( )].  
 382 child: [I'm gonna be a w- ] (.) u:m (0.3)  
 383 next Monday I'm gonna be a one man stabbing machine.  
 384 father: (1.7) ((looks at mother)) eh<sup>h</sup>h. (2.8)  
 385 child: now you brou<sup>g</sup>ht it up again. n I have to be angry about  
 386 [it again. ]  
 387 mother: [nah you're] calming down. you're a lot  
 388 [calmer than you were.]  
 389 father: [you are calming down.] (.) but I: had to say  
 390 something, (2.9) ((child walks over to shelf and grabs  
 391 a texta))



392 mother: until we hear from mrs TEACHER[NAME ]  
 393 child: [get ready] to be drawn.  
 394 (0.8)  
 395 mother: don't draw on me, (0.3)  
 396 father: don't. °be°cause it's permanent marker. (0.6)  
 397 child: ((monotonous and nasal)) I don't care if it's permanent  
 398 marker I'll say (0.4) I'll say (0.4) I ruined [CHILD'S  
 399 NAME]'s life. (1.0) [nah I'm gonna]  
 400 mother: [who ] ME,  
 401 child: no. (1.0) well you did tell dad but (0.3)  
 402 mother: I I have to tell dad. (0.4)  
 403 child: I'm gonna (0.4)  
 404 mother: o[kay? ]  
 405 child: [( ) this per]manent marker and say (0.3) you  
 406 ruined my life. (0.6) my life, (0.6) is completely  
 407 stupid. coz I have a teacher (0.6)  
 408 father: so (0.5) you're blaming your teacher, (0.3) for (1.4)  
 409 telling you off for acting silly,  
 410 child: yep.  
 411 father: (0.5) yeah? (0.8) [but whose f:]  
 412 child: [hmm hmm. ]  
 413 father: (1.0) but if you wasn't acting silly what would've  
 414 happened.  
 415 child: (0.4) she would a still told me off=  
 416 father: =I: don't know. (1.6) when we moan at you for shouting  
 417 or acting silly, (.) we do it because that's what  
 418 you're doin (0.8) when you're not doin it we don't moan  
 419 at you do we. (0.7) same goes for school and teachers.  
 420 (1.0) when you're AT SCHOOL, it's just the same with  
 421 being at HOME, (0.4) but your tea[cher's in charge.]  
 422 child: [no it isn't ]  
 423 father: yes it is. (0.2) but (w) stead of us (.) tellin you  
 424 (0.6) ((leans over and picks up shoes)) how to do stuff  
 425 and what to do? you (0.4) teacher does. (0.8) it's just  
 426 the same at home. you gotta listen to them just like  
 427 you lis: listen to us. ((walks into other room, puts  
 428 away shoes))

[4] *Two days later, the topic comes up again as child, Father and brother are eating dinner at the kitchen table. At this point the child has done the punishment involved in the FBS and has calmed down about the incident – his parents are still working to help him to process it.*

614 father: so the big question is (3.7) °what was° PBS.  
615 child: (0.5) huh? ((while drinking))  
616 father: (0.4) what was PBS.  
617 child: (1.7) just writing down piece a paper in a room.  
618 father: (0.9) yeah?  
619 child: (0.7) mm: ((while drinking)) (0.8)  
620 brother: ((growls)) mm(gh) (1.7)  
621 father: hm so all that worrying, (1.8) (sore bellies) you were  
622 getting last night,  
623 child: er I literally did, (7.3)  
624 father: ((with mouth full)) make (0.8) sure you don't get  
625 another one.  
626 brother: ((referring to toy dinosaurs sitting in front of him))  
627 these three dino[saur]s are [=]  
628 father: [otherwise I'll]=  
629 brother: =bad g[uy]s. ]  
630 father: [give you PB]S when you get home.

[5] *When the mother comes in, the same discussion is had about what exactly happened, and the mother tries unsuccessfully to draw a moral (additional contributions from sibling have been removed).*

719 mother: so did you have to do your PBS today?  
720 child: (.) mhm.  
721 mother: what wh (.) what happened.  
(brother comment - omitted) (1.3)  
723 child: I write a piece a paper,  
724 mother: (1.4) you wrote on a piece a paper.=  
725 child: =mhm  
726 mother: (1.2) what did you have to ↑write. (1.1)  
(discussion about table manners - omitted)  
736 mother: so (0.7) was you on your own? or was you with um  
737 (0.3) .t (0.4) [OTHER CHILD 1] and [OTHER CHILD 2].  
738 child: mhm

739 mother: (0.4) oh dear. (0.3) so you guys didn't get another  
740 one though did you? (0.3) did you [behave?]  
741 child: [OTHER CHILD 1] did,  
742 (0.5) .t (0.3) [OTHER CHILD 1] got another one the  
743 [same day. ]  
744 mother: [he got ano]ther  
745 PBS  
746 child: (0.9) mhm  
747 mother: (.) what (0.4) ↑mm. (0.3) okay (2.1)  
748 father: for what.  
749 child: (2.8) ((eating)) oh. (0.9) back talking in class and  
750 stuff.  
751 father: (.) today,  
752 child: (0.4) yeah and shouting out (0.4)  
753 father: so you got an R n:other one  
754 child: (0.2) ( ) who?  
755 father: (0.8) you got another PBS.=  
756 child: ↑n[o:.]  
757 mother: [no.]  
758 father: (0.5) who did.  
759 child: (1.0) [OTHER CHILD 1]. (4.0)  
760 mother: so (0.5) you had to write on a piece a paper what  
761 about yesterday? or:, (0.2) ((with mouth full)) what  
762 did you have to (0.3) ( ) on it.  
763 child: (2.7) had to do like an apology thing on the back,  
764 mother: (1.0) ((with mouth full)) mrs [TEACHER NAME 1],  
765 child: (.) °yeah,° (0.9) (and then you) (1.1) then (3.7)  
766 ((eating)) and then we saw her (.) break (1.4)  
767 mother: °aw and you gave it to her.°  
768 child: (1.4) no we saw her at break and she was like (6.0)  
769 ↑now (0.6) ↑mr [TEACHER NAME 2] said that (0.3) ↑aw:  
770 that now (1.0) ((with mouth full)) ( )  
771 (certain) future excursions (for three and fours) are  
772 now cancelled because of us.  
773 father: what  
774 child: (1.3) ↓the hell. (1.3)  
775 father: what? (0.5) did he say?

776 child: (1.3) he said now the (.) future excursions (have to  
 777 be)  
 778 ( ) ruined. (0.9) like they're not  
 779 happe[ning anymore.]  
 780 mother: [who said that] mr [TEACHER NAME 3],  
 781 child: (0.2) mr [TEACHER NAME 2].  
 782 mother: (0.3) who's that. (0.5) he's a new teacher?  
 783 child: (1.6) °never heard of him° (0.5)  
 784 father: °what because a you,°  
 785 child: (1.5) yeah.  
 786 father: (0.7) [( )]  
 787 mother: [I doubt it] (.)  
 788 father: hm (4.6)  
 789 child: I bet he was just saying that to idiminate (0.2)  
 790 intimidate us (0.3) which was not working, (2.7)  
 791 father: heh (1.2) it only works at (0.5) ((looks at clock))  
 792 nine o'clock at night. (.) doesn't it.  
 793 child: (1.2) what does that mean (0.6)  
 794 ((brother comment - omitted))  
 795  
 796 father: [coz that's the only time you think about it,] and  
 797 get upset by stuff like that. (0.6)  
 798 ((brother comment - omitted)) (4.6)  
 799 mother: so has it taught you a lesson? (0.2) to (0.3)  
 800 child: nope.  
 801 mother: (.) start thinking? (0.4)  
 802 child: if it was to mrs i if to (.) was to mrs (.) coo (.)  
 803 [TEACHER NAME 4], (0.5) I'll be like (0.2) yep.  
 804 that's a lesson. (0.2) to mrs (.) [TEACHER NAME 1],  
 805 (.) yn:ah I didn't learn anything. (0.4) ((gets up  
 806 and leaves kitchen))

### *Questions about school and how they were responded to.*

All after school conversations included questions by parents of the target child. In some cases the child was voluble, and initiated and drove highly elaborated accounts of their day at school, with little need for prompting by the parent. This was the case for instance for two girls in the non-autistic group, aged 8.8, and 10.2, who both talked a lot in the video-recordings collected for us.

Another non-autistic girl, aged 10.06, was very voluble on one of two days of recording and quite shut down on the other, for reasons not apparent from the recorded interactions. At the other extreme, one 8 year old boy on the spectrum was hard to understand and his mother made many guesses for him to respond yes or no to. An example from this interaction is given in Extract 5. In between, there were many family interactions where there were extensive question and answer sequences during which parents attempted to gain and clarify information about school.

**Extract 5 – boy on the spectrum aged 8, in car with mother on the way to school**

079 mother: (0.6) n' who're you gonna play with ↓t'day.  
 080 child: (1.2) I dont- (1.2) know.  
 081 mother: (.) you don't ↑know?  
 082 child: (0.4) I- I- I- I-, (.) .hhhh ((holds breath making  
 083 small noises)) hhhh. (2.5) .hhhh ((holds breath  
 084 making small noises of effort)) hhhhh aaahhhh::..  
 085 mother: what's wrong.  
 086 child: (0.3) .hhhh ((holds breath making little noises of  
 087 effort)) k-hhhh hh. (1.3) hhh aahhhhhh.  
 088 mother: what' that big sigh for?  
 089 child: (0.4) hhaawwhhh::..  
 090 mother: you ri:ght?  
 091 child: okay, (.) go. (.) ((whispers under breath  
 093 unintelligibly. Begins making noises.)) dwee:: ↑you  
 092 (.) mhuh mhuh mhuh mhuh huh huh (.) chhff (.) ↑woo  
 095 ↓woo ↑woo ↓woo ↑woo? ↓chff chff chff (.) ne:u::, (.)  
 096 woo:↑oo:↑oo: .hh ↑neu::, ↑neuh  
 097 mother: (0.8) what movie's that ↓from.  
 098 child: (.) I don't. think. ↓so.  
 099 mother: (.) you don't think so.  
 100 child: (12.3) ((speaking to self)) (skid it a↑round).  
 101 (0.6) .hhh  
 102 mother: so who're your friends at ↓[NAME] school.  
 103 child: (1.1) ugh- ↑Dai↓sy.  
 104 mother: (.) Daisy's your ↑teach↓er. (.) who's your friends.  
 105 child: (0.5) e- ah- ah- ah- ahh:: my goodness (incs).  
 106 mother: (1.9) ↑who're your friends?  
 107 child: (0.6) °I can'°T (.) .HHHH  
 108 mother: can you remember? (5.7) ((child does not respond))

109                    what abou::t, (1.0) ((coughs)) (.) umm::, (1.1)  
 110                    fred.  
 111    child:            (1.1) no.  
 112    mother:          (1.2) what abou::t, (0.2)↑henry.  
 113    child:            (1.0) no,  
 114    mother:          (1.0) what abou::t, (0.6) wa↑lter.  
 115    child:            (0.4) no.  
 116    mother:          (0.4) ↑no? walter isn't your friend?  
 117    child:            noo:,  
 118    mother:          ((high voice)) who's your friend?  
 119    child:            umm:: no. no (1.7) ((talking to self)) °I can't-,°  
 120                    (.) I didn't, (.) do anything, (.) come on .  
 121    mother:          (1.3) what about ↑geoff↓rey?  
 122    child:            (0.9) noo::.  
 123    mother:          (0.2) noo:..? (3.3) ((child does not respond)) I  
 124                    thought you played with geoffrey?

As indicated earlier, Conversation Analysts have shown that preferred responses to a question include an appropriate answer delivered promptly. While what is considered a “prompt” response varies between languages and cultures, it is generally considered that a response to a question should come within 1 second of the question, and no response, a delayed response, or an inappropriate answer will result in attempts from the questioner to fix the problem (Stivers et al., 2009; Gardner & Mushin, 2015).

Preliminary analysis of the conversations considered here included a qualitative coding for each question asked of the target child as to whether the child responded appropriately or inappropriately or not at all, and an overall qualitative coding for the child’s interactions about school as to whether they generally responded fine, or whether they notably often responded with no answer or with problem answers to questions about school. We also noted degree of elaboration of responses - whether children often responded with minimal answers only, or sometimes with more elaborated answers, or exhibited a lot of elaboration.

Of the 11 children on the spectrum, three (including two girls and one boy) generally responded fine to questions, while eight (including two girls and six boys) notably often did not respond to questions about school or responded with problem answers. In terms of the degree of elaboration of their answers, the two girls who responded fine were also noted to respond with an appropriate degree of elaboration; the remaining nine children were noted to often give minimal responses.

In the non-autistic group, eight of the ten children generally responded fine with one girl noted as notably often not responding or responding problematically and another girl (mentioned above) unresponsive on one of two days (and responding fine and highly elaborative on the other). Five of the girls were highly elaborative in their responses, and four of the children (male and female) provided some elaboration of their answers; only one child (a boy) consistently gave minimal answers to questions. Extracts 6 and 7 are examples of minimal responses where the parents work hard to achieve any kind of response to their questions.

**Extract 6 – boy on the spectrum, 9 years old, day 4 of recording, in kitchen with mother and father**

1081 father: (0.4) that's ( ) wants to hear, and  
 1082 what else. (0.7) anything else happen at school today?  
 1083 (0.9) what did you have any specialist (.) classes,  
 1084 (7.6) ((gazing at child, child stamping feet and  
 1085 chewing food)) (2.2) ((leans head forward to catch  
 1086 child's gaze and waves))  
 1087 child: what?  
 1088 father: heh (0.3) £did you HAVE ANY spe(h)cialist classes  
 1089 today.  
 1090 child: (6.1) mm (1.2)  
 1091 father: ↓uh.  
 1092 child: no.  
 1093 father: ↓no. (0.8) so what did you do. did you ha:ve maths?  
 1094 child: (1.2) mhm?  
 1095 father: (0.4) aw you're good at maths: normally aren't you.  
 1096 (2.4) do you know do you remember what you learnt about  
 1097 during maths (5.8) ((child staring straight  
 1098 ahead)) [CHILD'S NAME]? (.) hell[o:..]  
 1099 child: [mm ]  
 1100 father: are you listening?  
 1101 child: (0.3) directions.  
 1102 father: (0.6) directions.  
 1103 child: (0.3) mhm,

**Extract 7 – girl on the spectrum, 8 years old, day 1 of recording, with other in kitchen/living room**

256 mother: ((flicking through a book, child out of camera shot))  
 257 ↑how come you pick all the picture books. why don't you

258 pick some of the bigger books with more words [CHILD'S  
 259 NICKNAME]. (2.8) [CHILD'S NAME]? (0.2) how come you're  
 260 picking all these old picture books. (0.9) (not novel  
 261 grade) books. why don't you pick some of the ones with  
 262 more words. (0.4) like your friendship (fudge) book and  
 all that.  
 263 child: (1.2) yes (0.5) but I don't really want to (be in a)  
 264 big books.  
 265 mother: (0.4) why,

Another kind of communicative problem which arises in the question-answer sequences is the need for parents to clarify information. While for the most part this succeeds, Extract 8 is an instance where a child's hard to interpret response does not provide sufficient information for his mother to work out who he is talking about, and he is not able or willing to effectively "repair" the problem by providing more information.

**Extract 8 – boy on the spectrum, 8 years old,**

067 mother: (0.2) OHH:: did you read a story about a crocodile.  
 068 child: (0.7) nn: (.) no.  
 069 mother: (0.6) no:?  
 070 child: (0.5) they did.  
 071 mother: (0.5) who did.  
 072 child: (0.6) they did.  
 073 mother: (0.4) who did. (2.0) Miss [TEACHER'S LAST NAME]?  
 074 child: (4.5) ((covers face and turns away from mother))  
 075 mother: ((whistles))  
 076 child: (1.5) ((turns back to mother))  
 077 mother: who read about a crocodile.  
 078 child: (7.1) ((turns away again))  
 079 mother: d'you wanna read about the very cranky bear?  
 080 child: (0.2) nyeh.  
 081 mother: (0.2) yep. (0.3) okay.

Most questions about school were asked by parents or carers, but in some cases children asked their siblings something about school. We looked carefully for examples of children initiating talk about school. In general the children not on the spectrum were more inclined to volunteer information, often in the context of a previous question or discussion, and in some cases to ask a



question or initiate a topic. However some children in the group on the spectrum also initiated some discussion or volunteered some information. Extract 9 is an example of a short interaction between two brothers about school.

**Extract 9** – boy on the spectrum aged 9 talking to his brother about a book prize the brother has been discussing with their mother

040 child: did you get that book  
041 brother: (1.1) that three D one,  
042 child: (.) book club magazine?  
043 brother: (1.7) yeah? (0.6) [(that's why.)]  
044 child: [okay. ] (0.8)  
045 brother: and it had (0.3) [goose bumps ( )]  
046 child: [I got it too. ] (1.0)  
047 [I HAVE NO idea what I'm going to get. (.) mm]

### *Stories about school*

We also investigated whether the children told stories about school during their after school interactions, and many of them did. Again, these varied from fairly short and prosaic sequential accounts of events which occurred, to highly colored tales with drama and moral import. We did not count as “stories” the lists of timetabled activities children often related in response to a parent’s question “what did you do today?”, however we did note in addition to specific narratives, generic accounts of what usually happens at school in a particular context.

Four of the children on the spectrum produced no narratives about school, four produced a small number of short narratives, and three produced quite a number of accounts. In the non-autistic group, most children produced a range of short narratives about school with only one child not telling any. Some of their stories are seen in the extracts given above and below. A detailed examination of the stories is for future research.

### *Talk about the future and hypotheticals*

Children and parents sometimes engaged in talk about future events relevant to school. This occurred with all the children not on the spectrum, but for three of the children on the spectrum there was no real discussion of future events in the interactions recorded.

We were more interested in whether children and their carers engaged in hypothetical discussion about school including potential discussion of how to handle difficult situations. We found that in

each group of participants, some children and their parents engaged in such discussions. In the non-autistic group, seven of the ten children took part in some hypothetical discussion; for the other three either such discussion did not arise or in two cases, the child's mother tried to raise some hypotheticals but this was not taken up by the child. For the group on the spectrum, similarly eight of the eleven children took part in some interesting hypothetical discussions, but three participants had no such discussion. Extract 10 is an example of some hypothetical discussion between a mother and son about the relationship between his sleep patterns and ability to cope at school.

**Extract 10 – boy on the spectrum, 12 years old, with mother in bedroom**

126 Mother: (0.9) ↑oh. (0.8) so what sorta things were making you  
 127 ↑sad today.  
 128 Child: (0.3) like I don't know? jus- (0.6) .hhh I feel like  
 129 I just have the ordinary just annoying (0.8) annoying  
 130 thing what happens like, (0.7) I get a nightmare,  
 131 Mother: (0.6) m?hm.  
 132 Child: then after that I go on dad's bed?  
 133 Mother: (0.3) mhm?  
 134 Child: (.) then after that I just, (.) I don't know. umm  
 135 (1.1) t. .hhh (0.5) wake up, I get lazy, (0.9) then  
 136 after that I go: (.) t. school. (0.6) then after that  
 137 I just have no (idea) about work, (0.3) [at the en:d  
 138 t..]  
 139 Mother: [t. o::hh::.] (0.8) d'you think maybe (.) if y'don't  
 140 sleep well you can't work well.  
 142 Child: (0.7) yea::h  
 143 Mother: (0.3) okay (0.4) are you starting to feel [sleepy now? ]  
 145 Child: [it's hard for me t.] (.) i jus have a hard time  
 146 sleeping?  
 147 Mother: (0.3) did you have a hard time last night [did you?]  
 148 Child: [ye:ahh ]  
 149 Mother: (0.2) ooh. darling.  
 150 Child: well I jus happens ↓all the time mainly.  
 151 Mother: (0.7) mm (.) well (.) ↑well sometimes you have a good  
 152 sleep

153 Child: (1.4) [we::ll I was just mainly ] completely normal=  
 154 Mother: [d'you think maybe after doing]  
 155 Child: = but I just,  
 156 Mother: (.) well d'you think [after having]=  
 157 Child: [I just ]  
 158 Mother: =some exercise this evening? you'll sleep better?  
 159 Child: (1.6) °maybe I just have a bit of some exercise  
 160 tomorrow,°  
 161 Mother: yeah, (0.2) ↑okay. (.) is that enough talking about  
 162 school?

A more extended discussion occurred between an eight year old girl on the spectrum and her mother. In the parts of this given in Extract 11, the mother has brought up the topic of a school club and has asked if the child is happy that she talked to the teacher as mother had suggested, about another child who had been kicking her legs under the table. The child says she feels a bit better and they embark on a discussion of the situation during which a lot of sense-making and some hypotheticals occur. A few highlights of this discussion giving the flavor of the talk are provided here.

#### Extract 11 – girl on the spectrum aged 8

802 mother: (.) but sometimes ya gotta say something cause people  
 803 don't know (.) that you're (0.4) y'know that you're  
 804 getting upset or that (0.3) they're doing something  
 805 that's up- bothering you. (1.3) that's why you have to  
 806 use your words and tell them. (1.5) are ya happy (.)  
 807 mummy (.) insisted that you go back and talk to mrs  
 808 [TEACHER NAME] about it there and then? (0.3) otherwise  
 809 you'd still be angry. Wouldn't you.  
 810 child: (3.4) (I don't think) so.  
 811 mother: (0.2) would you still be angry?  
 812 child: (0.5) mm but mummy. [also]=  
 813 mother: [mm. ]=  
 814 child: =another thing she always touching me and I didn't like  
 815 it.  
 816 mother: (0.6) well what do we do if someone's touching you and  
 817 you don't like it. What do you do. You've got to say  
 818

819 something. What did you- (1.6) how was she touching  
you.  
(lines omitted))

825 mother: (0.4) well you've gotta say something darling.

826 child: (2.8) I know I said for a couple of times I said (0.3)  
827 I didn't wanna play with you anymore.

828 mother: (0.9) you've told her that.

829 child: (0.6) yes. (0.8) I didn't really mean it until then  
830 when I got real upset that's when I told you.

831 mother: (0.6) well that's when y- (.) when you first say it?  
832 (0.3) that you don't wanna play anymore? (0.3) then  
833 that's when you need to talk to mrs [TEACHER NAME]  
834 about it. (0.9) you don't wait until you get very very  
835 upset and angry like- and then you were crying. (0.6)  
836 you need to say it. Soon as you start feeling that way,  
837 (1.0) start feeling upset [CHILD'S NAME]? (1.5)  
838 otherwise you're gonna just keep getting more upset and  
839 more angry and it doesn't help you does it. (1.6) hey!

840 child: (0.4) mkay (.)  
(excerpt omitted - about filming))

860 child: [lemme just say] for  
861 exa:mples, (0.3) and this- (0.3) and this is me and this  
862 is [OTHER CHILD'S NAME],=  
863 mother: =mm?  
864 child: (0.5) (then) (0.4) first of all um she and- (0.3) and  
865 touches me,  
866 mother: (0.6) well that's where you would say (0.2) that you  
867 don't like it and that they need to stop.

868 child: (1.3) ye[s-]  
869 mother: [ y]ou know how to say that. You've done that  
870 before. Haven't you?  
871 child: (.) ye:s I have done it before, (.) we[ll ]  
872 mother: [well] why didn't-  
873 child: (.) (only.)  
874 mother: well (.) it doesn't matter when you are! (.) even mummy  
875 (.) if someone was touching mummy now as an ad- (0.5)  
876 I'd be telling 'em to stop if I don't like what they're  
877 doing.

878 child: (1.8) ye:s I know what I should say and (0.3) and this  
 879 is (.) um me when I was (sitting up) and this is (0.6)  
 and this is when: she was kicking my feet. (0.7) and  
 880 kicking me.  
 881

### *Was talk about school positive or negative?*

In a number of families, parents and children had a system for talking about the school day, for instance assigning it a score out of 10 and in one case, talking about it in terms of colours based on a behavioral chart in use in the classroom for this child on the spectrum. Similar strategies were also reported by some of the parents in the online study. Preliminary qualitative analysis shows that for the group on the spectrum, three children were generally negative about school in the interactions recorded here, while the other eight had mixed reactions. For the non-autistic group, more than half the children (six out of ten) were generally positive about school, and four had mixed responses; none were predominantly negative about school although some significant negative events and concerns came up in discussion. Extract 12 shows a discussion of how good the day was in the car coming home.

### **Extract 12** – boy on the spectrum, 9 years old, Day 1 of recording, in car with mother and brother

001 mother: hey [CHILD'S NICKNAME] how was your day. (.) [CHILD'S  
 002 FIRST NAME]? (1.1) [CHILD'S FIRST NAME]. (1.8)  
 003 [CHILD'S FIRST NAME].  
 004 child: (.) what.  
 005 mother: how was your day.  
 006 child: (3.7) °mm(gh)° (0.8)  
 007 mother: [°a-°]  
 008 child: [ fi]ve out of ten.=  
 009 mother: =↑aw just five out of ten today. (1.4)  
 010 brother: what was the [(mine.)]  
 011 child: [↑coz I ] w had to stay in to do my maths  
 012 work (1.8) °that I didn't finish in maths groups°  
 013 (1.3)  
 014 mother: °aw okay,°  
 015 brother: [guess what]  
 016 child: [ ↑A:]ND WE HAD TO DO P E and it was too  
 017 mu[ch. ]

018 brother: [guess what] I have ho[mework. ]  
 019 child: [so it's a fi]ve out of [ten.  
 020 ]

### *How were problems and negative experiences dealt with?*

We have seen examples above of children and their parents talking through and processing the events of the school day, including in particular negative or problematic experiences. However children had told us in their interviews that there were some things – generally negative things or personal things – that they did not want to talk about, including in some cases to their parents. This was borne out in the recorded interactions we analysed also. As indicated above, children quite often cut off discussion about such incidents. In addition to examples like Extract 3 above, we have examples such as Extracts 13 and 14 which show one child closing off discussion and their parents sensitively accommodating to this.

#### **Extract 13 – boy on the spectrum, aged 9, talk over dinner on day 1 of recording**

229 mother: [well that was] a good idea,  
 230 (2.6) hey (.) um (0.8) you know this morning how I put  
 231 that folder in your bag, at the lineup, (1.8) did you  
 232 have a little issue with it, (0.6) was it too much to  
 233 put in your bag,  
 234 child: (0.4) mhm  
 235 mother: (0.3) did m- (.) did the teacher help [you?]  
 236 child: [ m]hm  
 237 mother: (1.3) how did you cope with that. were you okay in the  
 238 end?  
 239 child: m aw yes. (0.6)  
 240 brother: [STICK IT IN YOUR FREA:KY BUTT.]  
 241 child: [ mm ↑I don't wanna about thi:]s anymore.  
 242 father: ((wiggles eyebrows up and down at brother))  
 243 brother: [I I said stick it in your freaky butt. ]  
 244 mother: [°okay.° (.) you don't wanna talk about it anymore.]  
 245 father: I heard you say that.  
 ((topic changes))

#### **Extract 14 – boy on the spectrum, aged 9, in car with mother and brother on day 2 of recording**

343 mother: (1.2) [CHILD'S NAME]. (0.5) how was your day today.  
 344 (1.1) at school. (2.2) out of ten. (0.6) what would you  
 345 rate it out of ten. (2.6) yesterday was five,  
 346 child: (1.3) teh (0.9) nine (and) (1.2) nine.  
 347 mother: (0.5) .t nine. (0.3) well that's a lot better than  
 348 five? that's pretty good  
 349 child: (0.9) four more.  
 350 mother: (0.9) four more. (.) yeah. (0.9) what was the minus  
 351 one.  
 352 child: (0.7) mm: (1.0) because I u:pset °me° (1.4) °lots of  
 353 times and I:° (3.5)  
 354 mother: what did you get upset about.  
 355 child: (0.4) ↑mm I don't wanna talk about it. (0.3) makes me  
 356 even more upset.  
 357 mother: (0.6) °kay.° ((8:18 pause, topic changes, no more  
 358 discussion about school))

### 3.4 Summary of findings

Solomon (2013) and Maynard et al. (2016) have highlighted what Solomon (p. 134) has called “the work of families as the organizing force” for individuals on the spectrum, with Maynard et al. noting the need for improved understanding of the structures of interaction in family settings (p. 421). The “How was your day?” project aimed to explore the nature of home communication about the school day in families with children on the spectrum compared with children not on the spectrum, asking the following research questions:

1. Do parents perceive there to be difficulties in communicating about the school day with their child on the spectrum?
2. What type of personal autobiographical stories do children who are and are not on the autism spectrum tell about their day after school?
3. Do parents and children engage in discussion of possible alternative scenarios in talking about school experiences?
4. Where do communication breakdowns occur in conversations between children on the spectrum and their families about the school day?

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These questions have been addressed through a mixed methods design, considering parent, teacher and child surveys or semi-structured interviews, and analysis of actual recorded conversations after school.

Analysis of 275 parent responses to an online survey indicated that parents of children on the spectrum were somewhat more likely to perceive problems in communication about school with their child, and preliminary analysis of actual interactions between parents and 11 children on the spectrum and 10 children not on the spectrum suggests that while there is a large amount of variation, there are differences in the interactions. All the children on the spectrum in this study did talk about their school experiences with their families. Some conversations “flow” and are informative in both groups, but the group on the spectrum are more likely to give rise to conversations where the parent has to work hard and the child is less likely to provide elaborated responses. In general, the parents taking part in the recorded interactions in Part 1 of the project were relatively positive in reporting in the parent survey that communication with their child about school worked well: in fact, in considering their actual interaction with their children, we found that these parents often worked very hard to communicate with them.

Viewing the recordings and reading through the transcripts made the everyday experience of parents in their endeavor to gain some insight into their children’s school lives very clear. When children are forthcoming and the interaction is lively and flows well, parents clearly more easily feel connected to their child’s school life and confident about whether this is going well and that they are on top of any issues. The kinds of questions parents asked indicated that in many cases they kept a close eye on issues which they had already flagged for themselves with “watch” markers: relationships with teachers and with other children; habitual issues with subject content or the school routine; friendships and playground problems.

With children in this study, those on and not on the spectrum, we observed parents exercising significant levels of sensitivity in their communication with their children about school, and in particular, clearly making decisions as to when to back off to avoid melt downs. In some cases, parents put in substantial amounts of work to get answers to their questions about what was happening at school. This has been clear from the extended examples discussed above.

While children in both groups sometimes tell stories about their day and parent-child dyads in both groups do engage in problem solving and hypothetical discussion, this occurs in more limited ways for the group on the spectrum. Factors which work against high quality interaction about school include timing, the child’s mood, distraction by electronic devices and other children in the family, and whether the topic under discussion is upsetting. A number of families found the use of the



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prompt scenario supplied assisted with communication about school, perhaps in some instances, because this was a time set aside in a quiet place without the other distractions of family life going on.

## 4. Limitations

It was difficult to recruit large numbers of participants to take part in Part 1 of the project, perhaps because of perceived challenges surrounding the video-recording of home interaction.

Nevertheless, we were able to collect a sizeable amount of video-recorded naturalistic family interaction, of which further analysis is possible. The limitations of sample size for the parent survey data were addressed in Part 2 of the project, in the additional online survey.

Parents included in Part 1 of the project addressed the task of video-recording after school interactions in different ways from one another, making the data collected somewhat less strictly comparable. For example, some parents recorded many more interactions over more diverse time periods and settings than others.

Due to the fact that the study was advertised to potential participants as concerning after school talk about school, it is not clear to what extent the talk about school recorded for this study is representative of what would happen in a more typical week within the households included.

## 5. Future Research

The video-recorded conversational data produced by the project is a rich resource and many additional analyses of the data are likely to be rewarding in addition to the basic analyses we were able to complete within the time and resourcing constraints of the project. These include further more detailed analysis of the conversational patterns including the flow of turn taking and the pattern of questions and answers, as well as narrative analysis of the personal experience stories the children tell, including the children's linguistic performance at lexical and sentential levels as well as the structure and sophistication of the conversational narratives.

A projected next step in this research is the development of provisional guidelines for facilitating after school discussions, and outline of a trial support program targeting conversational interaction between parents and children after school, based on the answers to the research questions.

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## Appendix A – Survey instruments

### Parent survey questions

#### Thinking about your child this year at school:

- Please indicate on the scales below the type and frequency of communication you have with your child's school about how they are going and any issues which might arise.

*I have a face to face conversation with my child's classroom teacher:*

Every day      Once a week      Regularly      Rarely      Never

*Does an integration aide/teacher aide support your child in the classroom? YES / NO*

*I have a face to face conversation with the integration aide/teacher aide who supports my child?:*

Every day      Once a week      Regularly      Rarely      Never

*Do you currently use a "communication book" to pass messages to and from classroom staff and home?*

YES / NO

*If so, this works effectively as a communication tool:*

Always/frequently      Sometimes      Never

- *It is easy for me to communicate with my child about school:*

Always      Sometimes      Rarely      Never

- *My child would talk about positive things that happen at school:*

Every day      Once a week      Regularly      Rarely      Never

- *My child would talk about problems or negative things that happen at school:*

Every day      Once a week      Regularly      Rarely      Never

- When something good has happened at school, these conversations go easily and well:

*Always very difficult*

- Always or usually very smoothly Sometimes somewhat difficult*

*Always very difficult*

- *My child and I discuss and brainstorm possible ways of handling problems at school:*

In every case that problems arise

## Sometimes

Rarely

Never

- Always

## Sometimes

Rarely

Never

- Always

## Sometimes

Rarely

Never

- Every day

Once a week

Regularly

Rarely

Never

- The degree of difficulty of communicating about the school day with my child is (please rate from 1-5):

1 ..... 2 ..... 3 ..... 4 ..... 5

(very problematic)

(no problems at all)



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## Teacher survey questions

Please consider the descriptions contained in each of the following items and rate the extent to which each of them applies in your experience as classroom teacher / classroom aide for [CHILD'S NAME]:

- *Please indicate on the scales below the type and frequency of communication you have with this child's family about how the child is doing and any issues which might arise.*

*I have a face to face conversation with a member of the family:*

Every day      Once a week      Regularly      Rarely      Never

*Does an integration aide/teacher aide support this child in the classroom ? YES / NO*

*I have a face to face conversation with the integration aide/teacher aide who supports this child:*

Every day      Once a week      Regularly      Rarely      Never

*Do you currently use a "communication book" to pass messages to and from classroom staff and home?*

YES / NO

*If so, this works effectively as a communication tool:*

Always/frequently      Sometimes      Never

- *This child talks about problems that arise at school with me:*

Frequently      Sometimes      Rarely      Never

- *To my knowledge, this child is or has been bullied at school:*

Every day      Once a week      Regularly      Rarely      Never

- *If so, can you give an example of how this has been handled and whether the problem was resolved:*

.....

- 
- *This child is easy to manage*

Always      Sometimes      Rarely      Never

Please add further comments if you wish:

- *This child seeks reassurance from me*

Always      Sometimes      Rarely      Never

Please add further comments if you wish:

- *This child is confident at school*

Always      Sometimes      Rarely      Never

Please add further comments if you wish:

- *This child is “tuned in” to the classroom*

Always      Sometimes      Rarely      Never

- *This child likes to come to school*

Always      Sometimes      Rarely      Never

Please add any other comments you have:

---

## Child survey questions for semi-structured interview

**NOTE:** The child is taken through the questions by the research assistant.

### Script for Research Assistant:

Hi X, my name is [NAME OF RESEARCHER] is it okay if I sit and talk with you for a bit? I would really like to hear your ideas about some things if that's okay. This will just be between us so I won't tell anyone else unless there is something serious that we need to do something about, okay?

So first of all, how old are you? That means you're in grade X at school is that right? What is your school called? What is your teacher's name?

- *Tell me a bit about your school. What is it like to be at your school? Is it a big school? Are there a lot of children in your class?*
- *Tell me about some of the good things about being at school. What do you like best about school? (prompt for activities if the child is not forthcoming)*
- *Tell me about some of the not so good things. What don't you like? Does this happen a lot or just sometimes? [have some examples on hand e.g. some children don't like when there is a lot of noise at changeover]*
- *What happens when something good happens at school? Do you let other people know? Do you like to share good things that happen? Can you think of a time when you did that? Who did you tell? What was it about?*
- *Do you like talking about good things that happen at school?*
- *What is the best way to share news about good things at school – draw, write, talk?*
- *Who is it easiest to talk to about good things that happen at school? [boxes tick one or more]*



---

Mum

Dad

Brother or sister

Friend

Teacher

Someone else – please tell us who?

I don't talk to anyone about school

- *What happens when something not so good happens at school? Do you let other people know? Has that ever happened to you? Can you tell me what it was about? Were you able to tell someone?*
- *Who is it easiest to talk to about problems at school?*

Mum

Dad

Brother or sister

Friend

Teacher

Someone else – please tell us who?

I don't talk to anyone about school

- *Is it helpful to you to talk about problems at school?*
- *Do you think your parents want to know about these things?*

## Appendix B – Transcription Conventions

### Pause

pause, timed in seconds	(1.2)
pause, short (less than 0.2s)	(.)
latching	=
lag, lengthened sound	wor:d

### Sequence

overlap	speaker 1: words [word word] speaker 2: [word ] more words
---------	---

### Disfluency

cut-off word	wor-
--------------	------

### Vocalism

inhale (loud)	.hhh
exhale (loud)	hhh
click	.t
laugh pulse	heh
laughing word	wor(h)d
creaky, glottalised word	wor <sup>h</sup> d
other vocalism	((coughs))

### Manner/Quality

quiet speech	°words°
loud speech	WORDS
audible smile quality	£words

### Metatranscription

unintelligible	( )
uncertain	(word)
comment (including gesture, facial expression, movement)	((smiles)), ((nods)), ((points))

### Participation

speaker/turn attribution	child:
unidentified speaker	( ):
uncertain speaker	(child):

### Boundary/closure

terminative (falling intonation)	.
continuative (flat intonation)	,
appeal (rising intonation)	?

### Prosody

accent (extra or unusual emphasis)	w <u>o</u> rd
high pitch	↑words
low pitch	↓words

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## Our values

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Working together with those with the lived experience of autism in all we do

**Innovation**

New solutions for long term challenges

**Independence**

Guided by evidence based research, integrity and peer review

**Cooperation**

Bringing benefits to our partners; capturing opportunities they cannot capture alone



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