

Autism expert: 'It's never too late to make a difference'

On the occasion of World Autism Day, Walter Solomon tells how bringing up an autistic son set him on the path to promoting and practicing a cutting-edge method for treating the disorder.

By [Judy Maltz](#) | HAAREZ Apr. 2, 2014 | 10:29 AM



When he was two years old, Walter Solomon's son was diagnosed with severe autism. The prognosis was not good.

"They told us that there was no hope," recalls Solomon, "and that when things get too difficult at home, we should put him in an institution and get on with our lives."

Today, that child is married, the father of two young daughters and gainfully employed. His father credits his miraculous turnaround to a little-known form of therapy developed by the late British neurologist Dr. Geoffrey Waldon, who took the child under his wings. Known in professional circles as the Waldon Approach, this cutting-edge therapy focuses on helping autistic children learn how to learn.

“Waldon’s major insight was that all early understanding comes from movement,” explains British-born Solomon, who is in his early 70s and moved to Israel in January of last year.

“Just think of the baby in the womb punching and kicking, the newborn on his back waving its arms around, the baby in the highchair, picking things up and dropping them. The problem with children with special needs is that they very often have missed the early movements. And if the early movements are missed, then everything that grows out of those early movements is also missed. So what the Waldon Approach does is take children back to their earliest movement stages.”

The treatments involve an hour or so a day of work by a practitioner or specially trained parent, teaching the child these basic movements. Once those movements – like waving, banging and moving objects on demand – are mastered, the child moves on to more advanced movements and skills, such as separating and matching items.

There is a special emphasis, Solomon explains, on mastering sequences of movements by which basic activities are performed, such as getting dressed. “Many of these children have difficulties with sequencing,” says Solomon, who rather late in life has become an authority and practitioner of this method.

It doesn’t promise a miracle cure, he continues, but the Waldon Approach offers an alternative to the prevailing view that autism is a lifelong, and often hopeless, condition. The main premise of this therapy is that through active intervention, it is definitely possible to improve the quality of life of people with autism and make them contributing members of society – and his son is a perfect case in point.

Waldon, who began working with the Solomon boy when he was a toddler, died before he could publish any of his vast research or findings on the topic of autism, and before laying out the basic principles of his approach in writing. As a tribute to the man who had such a profound effect on his son, Solomon decided to pick up where Waldon left off.

‘No training’

Two years ago, Solomon's book "Autism and Understanding: The Waldon Approach to Child Development" was released by Sage Publications, the prestigious American academic publishing house. Written in collaboration with Chris Holland, a psychiatrist, and Mary Jo Middleton, a special-needs educator, the book starts out with Solomon's personal experiences raising his own autistic child before delving into Waldon's philosophy and its application in numerous cases.

Only after becoming a recognized expert on the subject through his well-received book did Solomon actually become a practitioner himself.

"I have no professional qualifications for what I do," he confesses, "no training in medicine and no training in psychology. My degree is in economics, and I've spent most of my working life marketing surgical lasers. But after I wrote the book, I began volunteering with autistic children, and I discovered that I loved doing it and that I'm good at it."

Over a year ago, after spending many years in the United States and France before moving back to England, Solomon picked himself up and moved yet again – this time to Israel, where today he works with autistic children and adults at three different centers, in addition to training other therapists in the Waldon Approach.

The decision to move to Israel was made almost on a whim, as he explains: "By chance I heard there was a conference on autism taking place in Jerusalem in August 2012, so I came. When I was here, I asked around whether people thought it would be a good idea for me to move here, they said it would, so I moved."

What began as volunteer work eventually turned into paid positions, and today, Solomon divides his time between the Feuerstein Institute in Jerusalem, a treatment and research center for the mentally disabled; Ma'on Roglit near Beit Shemesh, a home for mentally handicapped adults; and Wolfson Medical Center in Holon, where he works with special needs children.

The Waldon Approach, he explains, is helpful with autistic people of any age, although it is most effective when begun early. "It's

clearly better to start as young as you can, but it's never too late to make a difference,” says Solomon.

He estimates that there are only about 25 practitioners of the Waldon Approach in the world today, based mainly in the United Kingdom and Slovenia. He’s the first in Israel.

On the occasion of World Autism Awareness Day (April 2), Solomon points out that Israel is no different from the rest of the developed world when it comes to the dry statistics. “The incidence here is about one boy in 80 and one girl in 150,” he notes.

However, based on his experience, Israelis distinguish themselves in their approach to new ideas and treatments such as the one he promotes. “People here are far more open-minded and willing to look at something different and see whether it works,” Solomon concludes.