The Social Magic of Facebook for Adults on the Spectrum

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The Social Magic of Facebook for Adults on the Spectrum

Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, here are the article's first two paragraphs:

When Susan arrived at the 10-year high school reunion of her son Jacob, he was sitting with a group of people he had been in contact with through Facebook. On their way home Jacob told his mother that he had a good time. A few months later Jacob attended a baseball game with his mother where he was approached by a former coworker he was friends with on Facebook. His coworker sat next to Jacob, and the two of them chatted throughout the game.

For most people these two events would have been unremarkable, but Jacob is a young adult with high-functioning autism (HFA) and casual social interaction has long been a struggle. The fact that Jacob attended his high school reunion and comfortably interacted with a group of people was a huge milestone. That he was able to carry on a casual conversation was also a tremendous step forward. As a 28-year-old, Jacob's network of friends, online and face-to-face, is now more extensive, and his interactions are more comfortable. Although some of these changes may be due to Jacob and his friends becoming more mature, Susan attributes much of them to Facebook.

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When Susan arrived at the 10-year high school reunion of her son Jacob, he was sitting with a group of people he had been in contact with through Facebook. On their way home Jacob told his mother that he had a good time. A few months later Jacob attended a baseball game with his mother where he was approached by a former coworker he was friends with on Facebook. His coworker sat next to Jacob, and the two of them chatted throughout the game.

For most people these two events would have been unremarkable, but Jacob is a young adult with high-functioning autism (HFA) and casual social interaction has long been a struggle. The fact that Jacob attended his high school reunion and comfortably interacted with a group of people was a huge milestone. That he was able to carry on a casual conversation was also a tremendous step forward. As a 28-year-old, Jacob’s network of friends, online and face-to-face, is now more extensive, and his interactions are more comfortable. Although some of these changes may be due to Jacob and his friends becoming more mature, Susan attributes much of them to Facebook.

Connecting Socially through Leisure Activities
As Jacob was growing up, his communication delays interfered with social interactions, and his social delays interfered with communication—creating a chicken-or-the-egg scenario. Both delays affect his ability to interact with others in ways that he desires, but Facebook has helped him achieve some of his social goals. Jacob explained how he feels:

“I try to talk to people, but I am concerned that I might say something wrong or make a fool of myself. On Facebook you are getting to know a person ahead of time before you face that barrier. It is easier when you are not actually looking at the person, trying to make eye contact, and you don’t have to keep track of what is going on. Then you might get to know them, and they will accept who you are once they get to know you.”

This is not unusual for an individual with HFA. As Jacob has shown us, one way to help individuals with HFA connect with others is through the use of leisure activities such as Facebook.

People use Facebook in a variety of ways, and Jacob’s experience shows that these different types of involvement can help increase individuals’ social interactions in ways that are most comfortable for them. For instance, after he first joined Facebook and entered his basic information with his mother’s guidance, Jacob’s Facebook experiences consisted of games (e.g., Farm Town and Farmville) and applications (e.g., iHearts), and accepting “friend” requests from immediate family. Through the neighbor feature in the games, Jacob was invited to join new games.

As he played games, Jacob read others’ posts and began making his own posts. His first posts consisted of game status updates such as “Sweet” in response to leveling up, as well as general posts about games (“to all Farmville friends if sending gifts please send me the Christmas tree gifts thank you”). He then began to comment on posts of other people with pleasantries such as “that’s interesting.” His interactions with others continue to expand, and now he occasionally posts his own questions (“Now that the Olympic games are almost over, I was curious as to what people’s favorite events are?”) or his wonderings (“I had an interesting thought over the...
holidays and that was why do they call both red cabbage and red onions red when they actually are purple?

**Networking in a Nonthreatening Environment**

Facebook helps people make contacts based on the education and employment information individuals enter into their profiles as well as whom a person is already friends with. These features led Jacob to connect with former friends from high school and current coworkers. He eventually branched out to individuals he knew from previous employment. Most recently Jacob moved to using Facebook Chat. This feature allows Facebook friends to exchange typed messages in real time. He also joined several sports groups.

It was his Facebook membership in his high school reunion group that resulted in his decision to attend his reunion, which was a family picnic held at a local park. Jacob was dropped off at the event and picked up five hours later. His Facebook friends welcomed him when he arrived, and Jacob told his mother that he interacted with them throughout the day. According to Jacob he also met and talked with people he did not remember from his graduating class. When Jacob was picked up, he was sitting with five of his Facebook friends. Before Facebook, Jacob had never initiated interest in such a social event. Jacob's growing comfort with social interaction is also evident in his reaction to his Facebook friend's approaching him at the baseball game described earlier. Jacob told his mother that he did not feel awkward during the exchange—even though he had not seen his coworker in over a year—because they were still friends on Facebook.

Jacob's experience with Facebook shows the potential benefits for the adolescent and young adult with HFA or Asperger's Syndrome (AS). Many of the social difficulties that individuals with HFA or AS experience are alleviated in a digital environment. Aspects of social interaction such as eye contact, personal space issues, and turn taking are virtually eliminated, and the need to read the social cues of a listener or speaker disappears. The individual's social awkwardness is no longer a factor. The stress of sensory overload and processing verbal conversation in real time also decreases. Jacob has difficulty interacting with people in real time, but Facebook lets him engage in conversation where a time lag is socially acceptable. Furthermore, the chat feature has resulted in conversational turn taking with a variety of people he would otherwise not engage in conversation, and he is growing more comfortable with face-to-face communications with people he knows from Facebook.

**Finding Common Ground**

Another aspect of Facebook that supports the interest of the person with HFA or AS is special interests. Too often the adolescent on the spectrum is told that his interests are unusual. However, on Facebook an individual is likely to find a group who shares the same interest. These groups of like-minded people help the individual on the spectrum feel socially connected. For instance, Jacob has an interest in NASCAR (National Association of Stock Car Racing) and belongs to its Facebook group. By belonging to this group, he is able to engage with other people who care as much about the sport as he does.

Facebook has complemented Jacob's personal interactions and has also increased his comfort level as he "feels he knows" the person he is interacting with "better." Facebook has multiplied the number of opportunities Jacob has for interaction, which is something Jacob has consistently expressed a desire for. Social networking has allowed him to reach out to others for social contact in a way he finds uncomplicated and stress free. The hope is that the increased comfort level with online communication will continue to move into face-to-face interactions. Given Jacob's experiences, online social networking holds promise for the individual with HFA or AS as a way of increasing interaction with others and taking steps toward developing meaningful relationships.

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Gloria E. Jacobs is a teacher-educator specializing in the role of technology in learning and social interaction. She is an adjunct instructor at Portland State University.