

Scientists who study the brain add another **perspective** on the topic of autism. They are beginning to learn more, but much remains a mystery. What do you already know about autism? What are you curious about? Spend two minutes free-writing about these questions.

✱ Circle two topics in your free-writing that you are most curious about. As you read about autism, see if your questions are answered. In the **Response Notes**, make note of any information that is new to you. Also note connections to what you know about Christopher from Lesson 16 and 17.

from **Understanding Autism** by Geoffrey Cowley, Donna Foote, and Heather Won Tesoriero in *Newsweek*, 136.5 (July 31, 2000)

Autism stalks every sector of society, and its recognized incidence is exploding. In California, the number of kids receiving state services for autistic disorders has nearly quadrupled since 1987, rising 15 percent in the past three months alone. Nationally, the demand for such services rose by 556 percent during the '90s. Some experts see a growing epidemic in these numbers, while others believe they reflect new awareness of an existing problem. Either way, autism is now thought to affect one person in 500, making it more common than Down syndrome or childhood cancer. "This is not a rare disorder," says Dr. Marie Bristol Power of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD). "It's a pressing public-health problem."

And a profound mystery. Nearly six decades after autism was first formally recognized, the big questions—What causes it? Can it be prevented or cured?—are still wide open. But the pace of discovery is accelerating. Scientists are gaining tantalizing insights into the autistic mind, with its odd capacity for genius as well as detachment. And though the suspected causes



Response
Notes

range from genetic mutations to viruses and toxic chemicals, we now know it's a brain-based developmental disorder and not a result of poor parenting (accepted wisdom as recently as the 1970s). The condition may never be eradicated, but science is making autistic life more livable, and enriching our whole understanding of the mind.

Until fairly recently, neuroscientists thought of autism as a single, utterly debilitating condition. . . . People with the classic form of the condition lack normal language ability, and they seem devoid of social impulses. A classically autistic child may tug on someone's arm to get a need met, but he (four out of five sufferers are male) won't spontaneously play peekaboo or share his delight in a toy. Nor will he engage in pretend play, using a banana, say, as a pistol or a telephone. What he will do is fixate on a pet interest—doorknobs, for instance, or license plates—and resist any change in routine. A new route to the grocery store can spark a major tantrum. Three out of four classically autistic people are thought to be mentally retarded. A third suffer from epilepsy, and most end up in institutions by the age of 13. . . .

As it turns out, though, autism has more than one face. During the 1940s, a Viennese pediatrician named Hans Asperger described a series of young patients who were somewhat autistic but still capable of functioning at a fairly high level. These “little professors” had quick tongues and sharp minds. They might stand too close and speak in loud monotones, but they could hold forth eloquently on their pet interests. Asperger's work went unread in the English-speaking world for several decades, but its rediscovery in the early 1980s started a revolution that is still unfolding. Experts now use terms like “Asperger disorder” and “pervasive development disorder” to describe mild variants of autism. And as the umbrella expands, more and more people are coming under it.

What, ultimately, makes autistic people different? How do they experience the world? Twenty years ago no one had much of a clue. But a burgeoning body of research now suggests that the core of all autism is a syndrome known as mindblindness. For most of us, mind reading comes as naturally as walking or chewing. We readily deduce what other people know and what they don't, and we understand implicitly that thoughts and feelings are revealed in gestures, facial expressions and tone of voice. An autistic person may sense none of this. . . .

It's not hard to see how mindblindness would derail a person's social development. If you can't perceive mental states, you can't show empathy, practice deceit or distinguish a joke from a threat—let alone make friends. Sharing becomes pointless when you can't see its effects on people, and conversation loses much of its meaning because you miss the unspoken intentions that hold it together. . . .



Romance is predictably difficult for autistic people, but many do brilliantly in certain lines of work. Only rarely does an autistic savant come along who can memorize a phone book in 10 minutes or measure the exact height of a building by glancing at it. But one autistic person in 10 shows exceptional skill in areas such as art, music, calculation or memory. . . .

People can build lives around these talents. Thirty-one-year-old Eric Spencer of Flemington, N.J., started reading when he was 18 months old. His autism has always confined him to well-controlled environments; he lives near his parents, aided by a “life-skills coordinator.” But his love of letters—individual letters—has been a lifeline. A local library has exhibited his calligraphy, and he sometimes visits nursery schools to carve children’s names from poster board for them. To earn money, he sorts documents at Ortho-MacNeil Pharmaceuticals. “My job,” he says, “is getting along perfectly.” ❖

❖ The following chart will help you see how the scientific perspective is reflected in Mark Haddon’s characterization of Christopher in Lessons 16 and 17. Use your Response Notes to fill in the chart.

Details about Christopher	Details from science
<i>Male</i>	<i>Four out of five people with autism are male</i>

❖ Discuss with a partner the differences between learning about a subject from a fictional perspective and from a scientific perspective. What are the advantages and disadvantages of each? What kind of information do you learn from each perspective? Which do you prefer and why? Record notes from your discussion here.

When would you seek out a scientific perspective on a subject?