

**ANDERSON
COOPER
360°**

HOSTED BY:
[Anderson
Cooper](#)

(BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)

COOPER (voice-over): She changed the way you think about autism.

AMANDA BAGGS, AUTISTIC (through voice synthesizer): I think everyone lives in the same world, and the idea that autistic people live in our world is kind of backwards.

COOPER: And many of you asked to hear more from this remarkable woman.

BAGGS (through voice synthesizer): A lot of it is just people reading us wrong and underestimating us.

COOPER: 360 M.D. Sanjay Gupta continues Amanda's story.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

COOPER: Well, last night, we introduced you to that woman, Amanda Baggs. She has autism. She can't speak in the way that most people can. But she certainly has a lot to say.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

DR. SANJAY GUPTA, CNN SENIOR MEDICAL CORRESPONDENT: If you wanted to talk to me, could you do that?

BAGGS (through voice synthesizer): I could make speech sounds. At this point, I could not make them mean anything I was thinking.

GUPTA: Does that frustrate you?

BAGGS (through voice synthesizer): Not really. I type very fast.

(LAUGHTER)

GUPTA: Yes, you do.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

COOPER: She actually types 120 words per minute.

Since our report, many of you have asked to hear more about this remarkable woman.

Tonight, 360 M.D. Sanjay Gupta continues Amanda's story.

(BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)

GUPTA (voice-over): Like most people with autism, since childhood, Amanda Baggs has been frustrated by her difficulties relating with others. At 14, she was formally diagnosed with autism. But there were signs from the very beginning.

As a baby, she had to be taught to nurse.

BAGGS (through voice synthesizer): I remember just being angry that I was different before I knew I was specifically autistic. But that's kind of what happens when you have grown up in a society where you learn that, if you are different, then being different is the problem.

I used to come home from school every day, and just start screaming my head off and crying, because I was really mad that I had to be. Not every kind of person got the kind of experiences I got at school.

GUPTA: But she still tried to fit in. She learned to read, even attended regular elementary school. It was manageable for a few years, but then she began to lose her abilities.

BAGGS (through voice synthesizer): It was not a sudden thing. It was like I would have more and more periods where I could not talk. And, also, the thing to understand is, a lot of my speech was very tenuous to begin with.

I know an autistic woman who describes having seen speech as a puzzle to be solved, rather than a means of conversing with people. So, you say I could hold a conversation, and that's true. But you would not necessarily be getting my own opinions during that conversation. So, there is also a degree to which speech was not necessarily communicative.

GUPTA: Which is no doubt why she found comfort not with other kids, but with her pets.

(on camera): Do you find it easier to -- to relate to animals?

BAGGS (through voice synthesizer): I slept with a cat when I was a baby. I never was away from cats. I didn't really get to know dogs until I was older.

GUPTA: What about the body language and the communication?

BAGGS (through voice synthesizer): Well, dogs are also a bit more in your face. Dogs also expect more body language...

GUPTA: Yes.

BAGGS (through voice synthesizer): ... more of the standard kind. Like, with her, I learned to wag my tail a bit.

(LAUGHTER)

GUPTA (voice-over): Amanda has always felt pressure to accommodate people. Since she can't speak, she believes people expect her to respond with gestures, with body language.

But, sometimes, she says, it's simply too much for her to process. In the same way, she does

not have an expectation about how I should relate to her. She's OK with me just being present, doesn't care much about eye contact or my body language.

(on camera): One thing I have noticed is that you haven't looked at me the entire time we have talked. You don't know my body language. You haven't looked at me. Wouldn't that be important to do?

BAGGS (through voice synthesizer): I can hear you.

GUPTA: What about that body language? Isn't that important?

BAGGS (through voice synthesizer): It can be, but, one, it can be seen out of the corner of the eye, when necessary, and, two, if I'm listening to you, I'm not going to. One could be also processing a zillion other things.

GUPTA (voice-over): I asked her if she believes that people with autism live in a different world.

BAGGS (through voice synthesizer): I think everyone lives in the same world. And the idea that autistic people live in our own world is kind of backwards, because, again, all the research and stuff, as well as our own experience, is showing that we're taking in more of our environment and consciously seeing more of our environment than non-autistic people are, which has its advantages and disadvantages.

GUPTA (on camera): Parents may hear that their child has autism, and they may take that as devastating news. What kind of optimistic -- or hope you can give them?

BAGGS (through voice synthesizer): I mean, generally, what I tell parents is not to believe most of what they read, particularly the stuff that says we have no understanding, and no connection to our families, and no anything, and are empty shells, and stolen fairy children, or whatever. Most of that is not true.

GUPTA: Just nonsense?

BAGGS (through voice synthesizer): Yes. A lot of it is just people reading us wrong and underestimating us.

GUPTA (voice-over): Dr. Sanjay Gupta, CNN, Burlington, Vermont.

(END VIDEOTAPE)

COOPER: She certainly has a lot to teach us all about communicating with one another.

We asked you to send Amanda your questions about autism. Her answers are next.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

COOPER: Before the break, we brought you the story of Amanda Baggs, a woman who is changing the way a lot of us think about autistic people.

Last night, we asked you to write to Amanda by logging on to the 360 blog. We got hundreds of questions for her. She answered as many as she could.

Earlier tonight, I talked about the questions and Amanda's answers with cognitive psychologist Morton Ann Gernsbacher, who has met Amanda and communicates with her regularly online.

(BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)

COOPER: Professor Gernsbacher, I want to start reading you the first e-mail.

This is from Marion in Ontario, Canada. She asks: "You mentioned that it is beneficial for people with autism to be in contact with other autistic people. Can you share your reasoning for this and how it's helpful to you."

Amanda responded, saying: "Being exposed to a wide variety of autistic people is important, because then we are around people perceiving closer to the same things as we are. We may pick up on things about each other that are invisible to non-autistic people."

Do you think, Professor, it's a good idea to expose autistic people to others who are also autistic?

MORTON ANN GERNSBACHER, COGNITIVE PSYCHOLOGIST: Absolutely.

In fact, some of the first advice I give to parents whose children are recently diagnosed are -- is to get to know autistic individuals. Get to know autistic children, autistic teenagers, autistic adults. Get to know them, either by reading the books that they have written, by listening to presentations that they give at conferences, or, in this...

(CROSSTALK)

COOPER: How does it help? GERNSBACHER: It's -- it's extremely helpful.

You know, when you think about it, when parents are expecting a child, they are often quite interested if they are going to have a little boy or a little girl. And the reason is, is that they want to visualize what that child will be like. And they want to think about things that they can do that are very specific and tailored to, in this case, the gender of the child.

So, getting to know who autistic individuals are helps parents get to know who their child might be like. And, of course, there's a lot of variability among autistic individuals. And, as Amanda suggests, it's very important to get to know a lot of autistic individuals.

COOPER: Elizabeth Cruise in Lantana, Florida, asked Amanda: I was wondering how you feel when you hit yourself in the head. Does it hurt or give you some sensory feedback that feels good to you? Is it because of sensory overload?"

And Amanda responded to Elizabeth, saying: "It's usually a reaction to stress or overload, or else something I'm compulsive about that has just gone wrong, and often a combination of the three."

Is this pretty much why other autistic people might hit themselves? Or there are a variety of reasons, I suppose?

GERNSBACHER: Well, I think that it is very important for any behavior, for any of us, for any individual to appreciate the motivation and the interpretation of that behavior from the individual's perspective.

I mean, all of us perform different behaviors. You might, for example, when you come into my house, leave your shoes in the entryway. And I might ask you, well, why did you do that? Is it because you were lazy? Is it because you were tired of having shoes on? Or did you do it out of

respect?

And I think it's extremely important, for all of these behaviors, to be quite respectful, to understand the individual and what his or her motivation and his or her message is in those behaviors.

COOPER: Angie Wettstain in Owensboro, Kentucky, wrote Amanda: "I have been told that those with autism do not show affection to others. Is this a true statement?"

And Amanda responded: "Autistic people do show affection to others. We do not always show it in a standard way, or at the expected times, but most of us do show it."

How -- how do people show -- how do autistic people show emotion?

GERNSBACHER: Every one of our scientific studies suggests that autistic children are just as firmly attached emotionally and socio -- socioemotionally to their primary caregivers as are their peers.

Now, many times, those emotions might be displayed in non-typical or non-standard ways, as Amanda also shares in her YouTube.

COOPER: Lawrence Decker in Floyd, Virginia, wrote Amanda: "There are three persons with autism in my family. How do you think an island, populated only by autistic persons such as yourself, would function?"

Amanda's response to Lawrence was: "I don't know. I don't think I would want to live on an island with people of only one neurological configuration, no matter what it was" -- a pretty interesting answer.

GERNSBACHER: Absolutely.

You know, Amanda and many other autistic self-advocates are truly beacons for the importance of diversity. They don't want to be excluded. They don't want to be secluded. They truly want to be included. And they appreciate that there is a lot of importance to having variation in our society.

But the -- the critical piece is acceptance and -- and appreciation of that variation, of that diversity.

COOPER: Professor Gernsbacher, appreciate your -- your perspective. Thanks.