

Who is in the lives of children with autism?

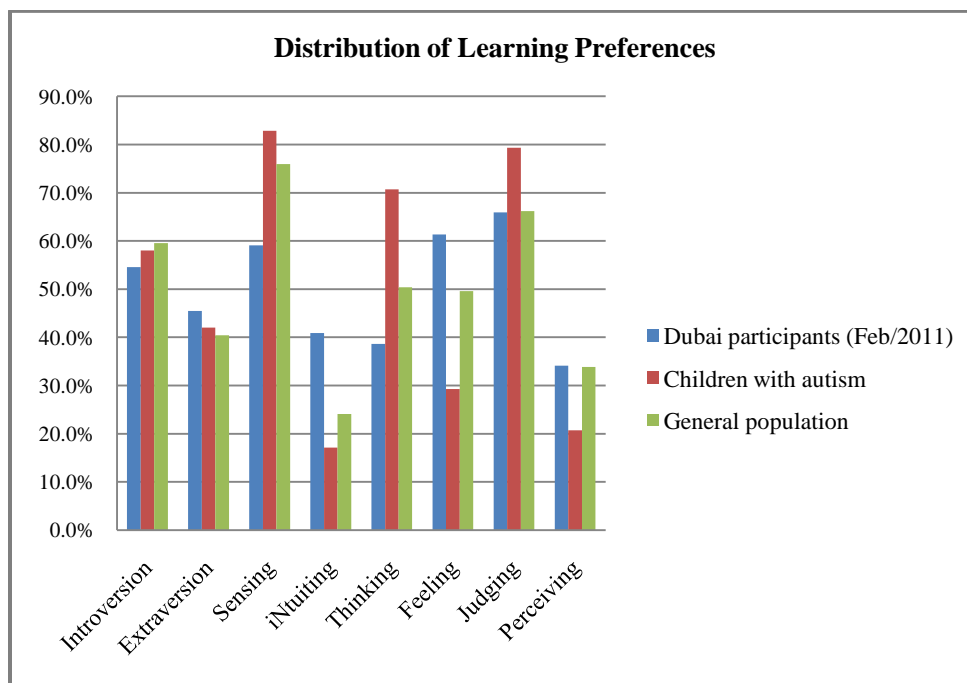
I was invited in February to present a workshop in Dubai based on my Learning Preferences and Strengths model. Learning preferences are ways that all of us prefer to gain energy, take in information, make decisions and relate to the world. Learning strengths are different ways we can all be ‘smart’, such as by seeing or acting things out. I reviewed and described each preference and strength and then asked each participant at the workshop to figure out his/her own preferences and strengths.

Learning Preferences

The first figure below shows the distribution of learning preferences of workshop participants. You can see that the majority had preferences for Introversion, Sensing, Feeling and Judging (ISFJ). In my experience, this is pretty common for people in helping professions. The profile means that these parents and professionals tend to take time to warm up to new people and situations (as suggested by the Introversion preference). Details are important to them (Sensing preference) as are harmony and good feelings among those around them (Feeling preference). They also like to finish what they start and feel a sense of relief when things are decided and settled (Judging preference).

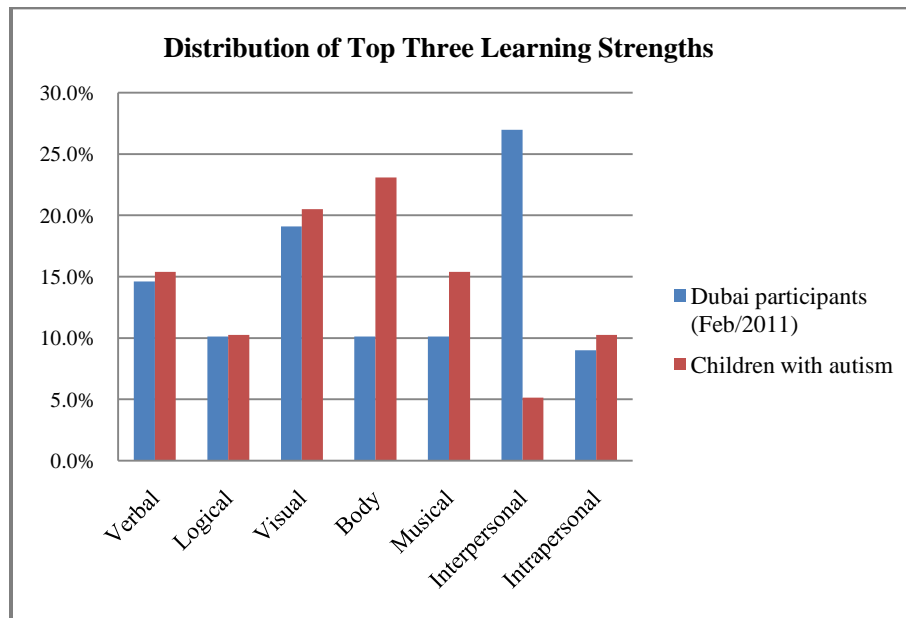
Let’s compare these trends to the general population. Even though the data are from the U.S., the participants in Dubai showed similar preferences for Introversion and Extraversion; more people have preferences for Introversion. There were some important differences in the area of information gathering: the participants in Dubai had a higher proportion of people who look for trends and the bigger picture (that is suggested by the Intuiting preference versus detail preferred by people with a Sensing preference). They also showed a larger proportion of people with Feeling preferences: remember that Feeling people can think and Thinking people can feel but Feeling and Thinking preferences suggest how they like to make decisions.

Now, let’s look at this information compared to trends in children with autism. Children with autism have similar preferences for Introversion – they need time to start feeling comfortable with new people, activities and events. But, Sensing and Thinking preferences are a lot more common in children with autism. Children with autism pay attention to detail and facts (suggested by the Sensing preference). They also prefer to make decisions based on logic and may seem blunt (Thinking preference).



Learning Strengths

The next figure below shows the distribution of learning strengths in participants at the Dubai workshop. Each person was asked to indicate their “top three” strengths. When compared to what I have found in children with autism, workshop participants showed considerably fewer Body strengths and Musical strengths. But Interpersonal strengths abounded in the participants. They are people who understand the motivations and intentions of other people and are very skilled at developing relationships.



What does this mean to working and living with our children?

Compared to children with autism, people who work and live with them showed main similarities in preferences for Introversion and Judging but differences in their preferences for Intuiting and Feeling.

When both child and adult have preferences for Introversion, the adult has to be careful not to keep all of their thoughts and feelings inside. S/he needs to be sure to talk out loud about what s/he is feeling and thinking – that helps the child understand more about other people.

When both the child and adult have preferences for Judging, it's important not to hurry to finish something. People with a Judging preference like to finish what they start but sometimes it helps to slow down a bit and check everything over first. The adult needs to take the time to make sure the child understands and appreciates what he did. People with a Judging preference feel more comfortable when they can follow the same procedure each time they do something and can feel stressed if things don't go according to the plan. For people working with or living with a child with autism, they have to figure out ways to cope and deal positively with change and the unexpected so they can help the child.

In the situation where the adult has a preference for Intuiting, s/he has to be careful not to miss or downplay details because they are important to children with autism. Also, they need to make sure the child has time for hands-on experiences even though they aren't as important to people with Intuiting preferences. Since children with autism can get caught up in details (that's the Sensing preference), adults with Intuiting preferences can be in a good position to help him see trends and patterns.

People with Feelings preferences have to be careful that their feelings are not hurt when the child with autism says something 'blunt' or is uncooperative. Also, parents, teachers and therapists with Feeling

preferences shouldn't feel unappreciated or rejected if the child doesn't behave warmly and feel 'mean' when they enforce rules with the child.

The wonderful Interpersonal strengths in adults living and working with children with autism are a true asset. These strengths mean that each child's motivations and intentions may be more easily understood and valued. That is the whole idea behind the Learning Preferences and Strengths model: to recognize, appreciate and honor how children with autism learn and cope best.

For more information on Learning Preferences and Strengths, read *Reaching and Teaching the Child with Autism Spectrum Disorders* (Heather MacKenzie, 2008), published by Jessica Kingsley Publications.