

TODD ROOT PLUGS IN

By Carol Stock Kranowitz, MA



At seven, Todd Root's "100% logic-based brain" and synergetic thinking were in full bloom. He loved math, visualizing it in glorious color and complex networks. But because his verbal skills didn't match his math skills, he couldn't explain how the colors and hues revealed a solution.

Alas, his teachers had zero understanding of his autistic brain and extrasensory gifts. They would say, "Show us how you do it. Just write it out on the board." He would say, "That's not how I do it!"

Not getting how he got it, they implied he must be cheating. They denied him his fidgets. Then they decided he needed tutoring... during recess!

Keeping him indoors to do math their way deprived him of opportunities to move and play freely outdoors with his classmates. Todd remembers, "They were nice ladies and probably good teachers, doing their best with the knowledge they had at the time. But they shortchanged my social development, because they weren't plugging me in to experiences to learn and grow in a communicative way."

School experiences like this were the basis of Todd's lifelong interest in figuring out how to succeed in life without being forced to jump through other people's hoops. He determined that if others weren't plugged into him, he would attempt to plug into them. He took notes of others' behavior and learned to emulate it, seemingly doing a great job with his actions, reactions, and interactions.

One self-help tool that Todd began using in 10th grade is his book of tips, or maps, which is always by his side. In each book — currently his 94th — he jots down best practices that he borrows to meet the challenges of daily scenarios in personal and professional life.

A map may be about the etiquette of getting a slice of pizza when among a hungry group. It may structure how to deliver a presentation, handle a disagreement, stay in a crowded room when he is on sensory overload, or manage "small talk and tall talk." These books have increased self-awareness as he acknowledges his challenges and creates frameworks for success. His books also honor great mentors who have said, "Look at what Todd brings. What can't he do? What's on his horizon? Let's make it happen!"

Todd made a lot happen when he brought his math wizardry to the financial world in New York's Wall Street and in San Francisco. With his small books at hand to map the way, he excelled in complex and ultra-fast paced interactions involving vast amounts of global wealth ... but he "just did it" without feeling really attached to that line of work.

Always, the educational world has been his interest. He especially enjoys making school better for students who think differently from typical kids. He also enjoys helping educators, professionals, and parents understand sensory differences, neurodivergent learning, and non-traditional teaching approaches. Gratification comes when he helps neurotypical individuals "discover how effective they can be when they can see a subject at the micro-granular level, but they can't do that if they're not totally plugged in!"

Todd says, "Kids need to plug themselves in to learn how the world works and to look ahead." His aim to guide students and educators intensified when his daughter, at four, was diagnosed with pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS).

Todd determined to assist his little girl and other neurodivergent children so they would be comfortable, known, and equipped to succeed at school. With her empathetic parents' guidance, her teachers' growing understanding, and her innate gifts, she flourished at school and beyond.

Todd has made good things happen as Director of Donor Advisory at the Independence Academy of Indiana, a school for neurodivergent children in 3rd - 12th grades. He raises awareness of the school and also money, helping donors make dreams come to reality. Example: the school recently moved to a two-acre campus with space for a sensational playground. One problem



with the site, however, is its location beside a highway and a nearby airport.

Todd was sensitive to the visual and auditory stimulation affecting the children as they arrived at school. He intuited what drama might have gone on earlier at home that increased the anxiety of students, many of whom he knew started their day under stressful conditions. The din from road and sky didn't help.

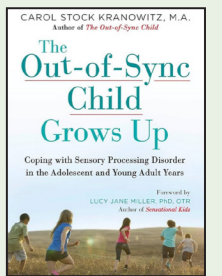
In sync with the kids' emotional state, he came up with the solution of building an acoustic wall. He learned about a nonprofit organization, Keep Indianapolis Beautiful (KIB), whose mission is to engage diverse communities to create vibrant public places, helping people and nature thrive. He contacted Jeremy Kranowitz, KIB's President and CEO, and made a proposal. Together, they found a donor enthusiastic about funding a tree-planting project.

In 2023, volunteers from KIB, the fire department, PNC Bank, and friendly corporations, alongside students and teachers, planted forty trees that border the schoolyard and dim the racket coming from the cars and planes. The trees have made the schoolyard beautiful in the traditional way — and even more beautiful for people who need it in another way. Now, the trees are an attractive and soothing part of the children's tree-tending work and daily activity walks around the school.

Where will Todd Root plug in next? The world of publishing! His big book, *Jumping through Hoops: Perspectives*

from *Being Autistic in a World of Neurotypical People*, will be issued in 2025. It will present how autism affects him and how his map of the world may positively affect others in order to bring about understanding, remove barriers, and help people map their own pathways in life. ■

Carol's "Sync" series includes *The Out-of-Sync Child Grows Up*, in which 50 adolescents and adults discuss their lives, goals, and careers. Visit www.out-of-sync-child.com and www.facebook.com/CarolStockKranowitz for more information.



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