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The Double Empathy Problem

A short, practical guide for teaching and support staff working with autistic students.

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Doctoral research supervised by Dr Damian Milton, who originated the Double Empathy Problem, and Dr Triona Fitton.

The idea in 60 seconds

The old model said autistic people have a social communication deficit: the difficulty sits inside them, and the job of school is to teach them the skills they lack. The **Double Empathy Problem**, set out by Dr Damian Milton in 2012, says the misunderstanding runs both ways. Autistic and non-autistic people have different communication styles, so each finds the other hard to read. The gap belongs to both sides.

This matters because it changes who does the adapting. If the difficulty is shared, the responsibility for closing it is shared too. The work moves from changing the student to changing how we communicate and how the setting is built. This is a neuroaffirming approach: autistic communication is different, not broken.

The old, one-sided view	A double-empathy view
Autistic people lack social skills.	Autistic and non-autistic people miscommunicate <i>with each other</i> .
The student must learn to fit in.	Staff and the environment adapt too — the adjustment is mutual.
Difference is a problem to fix.	Difference is real and valued; barriers are what we remove.

The evidence, briefly. Crompton et al. (2020) found autistic people pass information to each other as well as non-autistic people do; the drop-off happens in mixed groups. Sasson et al. (2017) found non-autistic people form negative impressions of autistic people within seconds — based on style, not on what is said.

Five reframes to use in the room

One quick shift each. Pick one and try it consistently for a week.

1 · Eye contact

You might see	A student looks away or won't hold eye contact, and it reads as not listening.
A double-empathy reading	Looking away can free up effort for processing what you said. The eye contact that reassures you may be costing them the answer.
Try this	Don't require eye contact. Let them look away to think, and judge attention by the response, not the gaze.

2 · Tone and bluntness

You might see	A flat tone or a very direct, blunt reply reads as rude or uninterested.
A double-empathy reading	Directness is a communication style, not an attitude. The content can be perfectly reasonable even when the delivery is plain.
Try this	Respond to what was said, not how it sounded. Don't mark a student down for tone.

3 · Literal instructions

You might see	A student takes an instruction literally, or does 'the opposite' of what was obviously meant.
A double-empathy reading	The instruction leaned on a hint that was clear to you and invisible to them. They answered the question you actually asked.
Try this	Say exactly what you mean, in plain words, written down where you can. Check understanding without making them guess.

4 · 'Fine at school'

You might see	A student seems calm and compliant all day, so we assume everything is fine.
A double-empathy reading	Appearing fine can take enormous effort (masking). The cost often lands later — at home, or by Friday.
Try this	Treat a smooth day as worth checking, not closing. Watch for end-of-week dips and reduce demand rather than reward compliance.

5 · Group work and joining in

You might see	Reluctance to join group work reads as poor social skills or not trying.
A double-empathy reading	Group work stacks social and sensory demand across the very gap this idea describes. Opting out can be a sensible call, not a failure.
Try this	Offer other ways to contribute. Don't make taking part conditional on doing it the neurotypical way.

Discussion prompts for a staff meeting or INSET

A 20–30 minute conversation for a department or whole-staff session. Work through a few of these together.

1. Think of a recent moment you read as rudeness, defiance, or disengagement from an autistic student. How might it look through a double-empathy lens?
2. Where in our routines do we rely on unspoken social rules — hints, tone, ‘reading the room’ — that some students simply can’t see?
3. What do we currently ask autistic students to do to fit in? Which of those could we change about ourselves or the environment instead?
4. How would we actually know if a student who seems ‘fine’ is masking? What would we look for, and when?
5. What is one explicit communication habit this department could adopt for every student, starting next week?

Try this week

Pick one of the five reframes. Use it consistently with one class for a week. Note what changes — for the student, and for you.

Want the full session?

I run talks, INSET, twilights, and workshops that take staff through the Double Empathy Problem and what it means in practice — grounded in current research and in daily work with autistic students.

Book a session: daniellouisgreen7@gmail.com · daniel-green-researcher.pages.dev

Milton, D. (2012) ‘On the ontological status of autism: the “double empathy problem”’, *Disability & Society*, 27(6), 883–887. ·
Crompton, C. J. et al. (2020) ‘Autistic peer-to-peer information transfer is highly effective’, *Autism*, 24(7), 1704–1712. ·
Sasson, N. J. et al. (2017) ‘Neurotypical peers are less willing to interact with those with autism based on thin slice judgments’, *Scientific Reports*, 7, 40700.