



A STUDY GUIDE

Stranger in the Family

WRITER, PRODUCER & DIRECTOR:

Sally Browning

EDITOR: Emma Hay

52 minutes

Stranger in the Family

Curriculum Links

Stranger in the Family has relevance for Media Studies, Health and Life Skills education at senior secondary and tertiary levels, religious and community groups, medical and para-medical education, counselling and psychology education, teacher education, parent/teacher groups, and occupational therapy.

Using the Film in Educational Settings

At 52 minutes, this is a long film and it demands concentration and attention. It could be shown in smaller segments with discussion designed

FOLLOWING PAGE: PATRICK

around focus questions. Alternatively, it could be shown in its entirety and then become the focus for small research projects, responses or selected role-plays.

Synopsis

Stranger in the Family invites viewers to share the lives of three Australian families for a year, as they manage children with autism, a disorder that affects one in every 500 children born each year. Autism occurs in all social and ethnic groups. Until recently, most autistic children were institutionalized because they were considered 'unreachable'. Two of the families in this film have two children with the disorder. Having one autistic child increases the chances of having a second one. All the children attend Giant Steps, a special school using a holistic one-on-one therapy that originated in Canada.

the Australian Film, Television & Radio School, and began making short films in 1989. She is now an award-winning documentary maker with a wide international focus. Her recent documentary, *The Diplomat* (Tom Zubrycki, 2000), chronicles the final year in the twenty-four year campaign by East Timor leader José Ramos Horta to secure independence for his country. Her latest film as producer is *The Secret Safari* (Tom Zubrycki, 2001), a co-production with South



Autism is a heart-breaking illness. It can happen as late as 18 months of age, to children who have been developing normally. The symptoms include the loss of speech, unwillingness to make eye contact with anyone and other traits such as repetitive routines. There is no one cause of autism and no cure. These parents will probably never hear their children say 'I love you'. The progressive treatment shown in this film is a recent development and the positive results for some of the children are very moving.

Interview with the Film-maker

Sally Browning is the writer, producer and director of this documentary. Media students may be interested in listing the skills and attributes required by each of these demanding roles. Sally is a graduate of

Africa about gunrunning to support the African National Congress struggle against Apartheid. Here are some comments from Sally about making *Stranger in the Family*.

Did anything surprise you? I was constantly surprised by the dedication, optimism and good humour of the families who were dealing with one, or sometimes two, children with autism (and a documentary crew trailing behind). I would try and put myself in their



place, and it was hard to imagine that I could respond to such a situation in such even terms.

What was the main thing you learned as a result of making the film? Probably the main thing was the extent of the differences between children with autism, how one ‘treatment’ was never going to be applicable to all of the children. Certain things Oliver responded to, his brother Alex did not. It highlighted for me the problems of trying to posit one solution for what is a complex disorder, which is expressed across a spectrum. It also highlighted the lack of research. The plight of parents in coping with this became magnified for me. It overtook the natural desire to ‘find’ a cure, and instead, I just represented the families and their coping mechanisms.

In retrospect, would you do anything differently? No, I am happy with the approach I took and the film I made. I would like to make another film on autism as I feel there is so much to explore.



PHOTOS LEFT TO RIGHT
THIS PAGE: OLIVER SHEPHERD IN THE PLAYGROUND AT STEPPING STONES; JO SHEPHERD WITH ALEXANDER (LEFT) AND OLIVER;
FOLLOWING PAGE: SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHER KYLIE WHITTET AND CHRISTIAN VITALE; PATRICK ANTHONY

What responses have you had from the families who appeared in the film? All three families are happy with the film and the way they have been represented. I believe it’s an honest portrayal of their feelings and circumstances. We discussed early on how they would feel when their lives were exposed to an audience and it did take some convincing for one family. I gave them all the opportunity to view the film at fine cut and I agreed to change anything they felt represented them out of context or not in a light they were comfortable with. A few changes were made, but none were major. They have all been happy with the way the film highlights the issue of autism, which was one of my aims.

What has happened to Christian and Alexia? Christian and Alexia have made mixed progress—Christian is verbal now, slightly, but it’s a great breakthrough. Alexia went backwards for a month, and is now showing signs of progress. For Chrissoula, their mother, their progress is not as fast as she wanted. I am continuing to film them on and off, to capture changes for the family to see.

Discussion Points and Activities

- What makes a good documentary film? Is it the quality of the research, the script, the camera-work, the editing, the 'talent' or the creative spark of the director?
- Brainstorm the elements of documentary films. What makes this documentary informative, entertaining on some levels and moving on others?
- The title of any film is meaningful. Brainstorm the many possible connotations of *Stranger in the Family*. What other possible titles could you suggest?
- What skills does a film-maker who makes documentaries set in contemporary society and exploring the lives of real people need in order to show us the issues for the people involved?

Autism Victoria believes that the best way to help a person with an autistic disorder is to understand how the following three areas of difficulty affect their view of the world. This information is from the web site of Autism Victoria <http://home.vicnet.net.au/~autism>

COMMUNICATION: Autism affects the ability of a person to understand the meaning and purpose of body language and the spoken and written word. Words can be misunderstood, interpreted literally or not understood at all. Other people's feelings and emotions can also be difficult to understand.



- Discuss the ethics revealed in Sally Browning's comments.
- What are the differences between making films 'about' people and making films 'with' people?

Autism: Finding Facts

The World Wide Web offers thousands of sites relating to autism as a disorder and its effects on individuals and their families. The *Autism Mailing List* was created in 1992 and is hosted by St John's University in New York, USA. It is the first and largest list on the Internet serving those with an interest in autism from a personal or professional point of view. *Carolyn's Web Pages* offers links to this site, as well as to chat rooms, articles on autism and even humour. See On-line Resources at the end of this guide for web addresses.

SOCIAL INTERACTION: Social interaction is an essential part of life for most people. For people with autism, being sociable is difficult, scary and very confusing. Some appear to withdraw and become isolated, others try very hard to be sociable but never seem to get it right. People with autism can find friendships difficult.

BEHAVIOUR: Impairments in communication and social interaction produce a range of behaviour that has become linked with autism spectrum disorders. These may include:



- 1 Speech—absent, delayed or showing abnormal patterns.
- 2 Play—isolated, repetitive, unimaginative, destructive, obsessional.
- 3 Tantrums—can be a way of expressing extreme confusion and/or frustration.
- 4 Sensory sensitivities—to certain sounds, colours, tastes, smells, textures.
- 5 Obsessions—intensive interest with favourite topics, objects,

The Families

[the autistic children appear in bold type]

THE ANTHONYS: Sue, Steve, **Patrick**, Nicola and James

THE SHEPHERDS: Jo, Nick, **Alexander** and Oliver

THE VITALLES: Chrissoula, Angelo, **Christian**, John and Alexia

Siblings

- Which siblings do we see in the film and how does autism seem to impact on their relationships with others in the family? What extra burdens does it impose on them? What disadvantages or benefits might it bring them?
- Look carefully at the scene in which Chrissoula's family is at the meal table. What does her brief exchange with John reveal about their relationship and some of the strategies that they have developed to cope?



places, people or activities.

- 6 Insistence on sameness—routines bring some order to the autistic person's confusion; a change of routine can be very difficult to cope with.
- 7 Body movements—such as hand flapping, toe walking and occasionally behaviour that may cause self-injury (such as hand biting).

Parents

- Chrissoula and Angelo are fortunate in having a loving and supportive extended family. Identify the stresses you think these children and their behaviour might place on a marriage. What evidence do you see of this in the couples who have so courageously appeared on camera? What are some possible motivations for parents to appear in a documentary like this?

One difference between 'normal' children and those with disabilities or disorders is that they alter forever the idea of achievement. The smallest achievement of a normal child is a milestone for these children. The film ends with Patrick's father, Steve, saying how proud he was that Patrick had ridden his bike to the shop with him and his brother. He is so grateful for what would ordinarily be regarded as a minor accomplishment. There are tears in his eyes.

- Try to empathise with his situation. What might some of Steve's complex emotions be as he describes this moment?
- The mothers of these children seem to bear the greatest burden. What evidence does the film provide for this assertion? Do the web sites offer any other evidence in the form of personal stories?

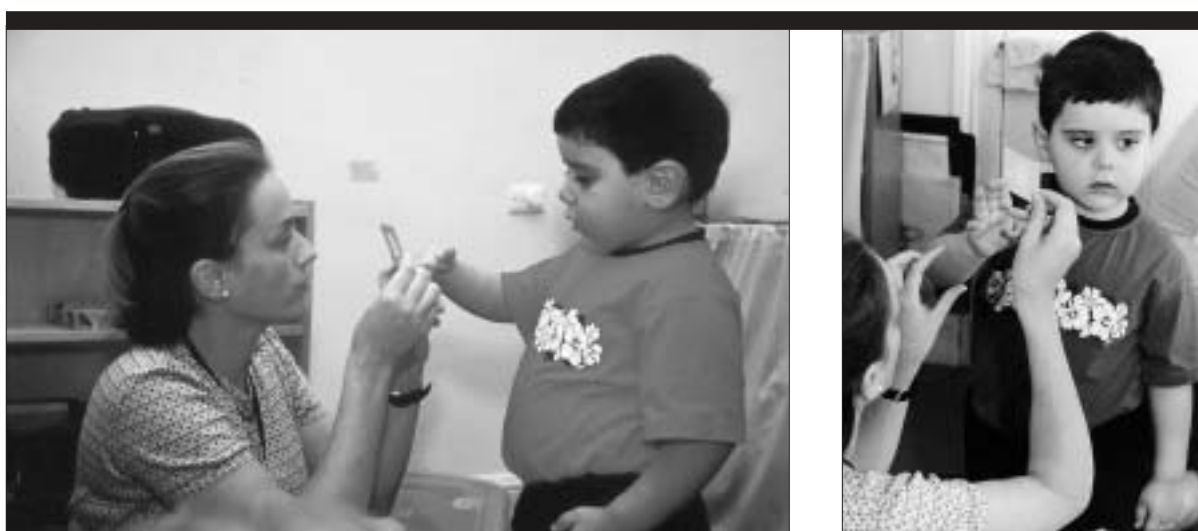
Coping Strategies

- What coping strategies can you observe the children's parents

medicine, it may be possible to identify those at risk of developing autism during pregnancy. What are some of the ethical dilemmas that face parents when confronted with the possibility of abortion for such reasons? What are some of the ways these dilemmas have been addressed so far?

The Role of Humour

- Does humour have a healing effect? What evidence do you see of this in the film?



and carers using? How effective do these seem?

- How would you want a professional to tell you that your child had a disability of some kind?
- What sort of response would you want from your family and others close to you?
- What coping strategies do you use to deal with crises in your own life?

Ethical Issues

- With the rapid growth in genetic

The Schools

There are several schools featured in the film. Giant Steps is a special school for autistic children. The aim is to integrate as many children as possible into mainstream schooling. For older children like Patrick, this is only possible because he has his 'shadow' with him.

- What extra skills would a mainstream teacher need to work effectively in an integrated classroom including an autistic child? Would these skills be different if the child was sight or hearing

PHOTOS
THIS AND PREVIOUS PAGE:
 SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHER
 KYLIE WHITTET WITH CHRISTIAN
 VITALE



impaired or was physically disabled in some other way?

- Autistic children look 'normal'. What problems does this create for them and their parents in everyday life? Has *Stranger in the Family* made you more careful about making assumptions about people?

Activities

- In the scenes at Patrick's school, what behaviour do you observe and how does his 'shadow' respond?
- Devise a job description for a 'shadow'. How might this need to change in relation to the gender, ethnicity, age and degree of autism of the child?
- What effect has the medication had on Patrick? What finally made his parents decide to use the medication?
- Put yourself in Patrick's parents' situation. What reservations do you have about this decision? What advice would you want in this situation from medical staff?
- What emotional support would you need in this circumstance? Where would you find this support?
- Do attitudes to conditions such as autism vary in various communities? How would you begin to investigate this in sensitive and appropriate ways?

Activities

- The following activity may help to uncover inappropriate and appropriate behaviours. You are a teacher or a health care worker about to work with an autistic child and his/her parents or carers. Conduct a negative brainstorm to list as many attitudes and behaviours as you can which would guarantee that you would alienate the parents and make sure that they would never want to work with you. (Trevor Habeshaw, a UK educator, introduced me to this activity.)
 - How would these differ if the parent was from a non-English speaking background, a recently arrived refugee or an Indigenous person?
 - Discuss these, and then use them as a basis for designing more appropriate behaviours.
- Choose a community in which you may wish to work or about which you want to know more.
 - What are the most effective ways of learning more about this community?
 - What facilities exist within that community to help or support the families of autistic children?
 - What changes could you suggest to improve these facilities or support services?
- Write the copy for a pamphlet or poster about autism for a group of your choice. It could be for young mothers, a religious group, a

community group or for fellow students.

- Plan a segment for a radio programme designed to educate a community of your choice about autism.
- You are asked to interview a parent of an autistic child for a short article for the 'Daily Living' section of the daily paper. What questions would you like to ask? What do you want the readers to feel or do as a result of reading your piece? Research similar articles to find the positive and negative aspects of this kind of writing.
- Rewrite the same article for a different audience, for example, for a student newspaper.
- Prepare a collage of newspaper articles about children with disabilities or disorders. Identify any common features. What makes a good article stand out?
- Find and view a film or video about someone else who has coped with a disability themselves or in a member of their family. If it is fictional, how well does it portray family relationships? *My Left Foot* is one example. Check your state film and video resources for other suitable films.
- How bad is a 'bad day'? Use a scene from this documentary, for example, the mother struggling to get not one but two autistic children from the car into school, and write a diary entry from the parent's point of view about this incident.
- Write the same incident from the point of view of a passer-by or from the point of view of a teacher at the Giant Steps school.

Teachers and Students

- You are a teacher in a mainstream school. Choose the age group with whom you are working and plan how you would introduce an autistic child into your class in ways that would help all students to understand the benefits and challenges.

Fund-raising

- Raising funds to keep the special schools going is a financial burden on already burdened parents. What means do they use to raise funds? What sort of work is involved and how might the wider community help?
- Write a one-page submission to a government inquiry into funding for autism.

Caring For Those With Special Needs

Activities

- What personal qualities are essential for anyone working at Giant Steps?
- Form an interview panel for a person applying for a job at the school, either a teacher, a 'shadow' or in an ancillary capacity. What questions would you ask? What would you want in an ideal reply? Hold a 'mock' interview and give feedback to the applicant.
- Giant Steps are looking for a different fund-raising activity than the usual ball. Plan a marketing campaign for them around an innovative idea. Think of Red Nose Day, for example, or the ribbon days for Breast Cancer or AIDS.
- Investigate web-based resources on the latest treatments for

autism, support for parents of autistic children, or information for mainstream teachers who are going to have an autistic child in their class. Prepare a brief annotated report on these resources. Some therapies listed on the South Australian web site include:

Auditory Integration therapy
Sensory Integration
Lovaas therapy
Music therapy
Giant Steps
Relaxation techniques
TEAACH [*structured teaching*]

- At tertiary level, these and other therapies could be the focus of individual project work or research and the findings made available to interested groups.

General Focus Questions

- Identify the clinical aspects of autism as revealed in the film, including information about behavioural and verbal effects.
- What effects do each of these clinical aspects have on the children, their parents and carers?
- There are three couples in this documentary. What is similar and different about these families and the ways in which they respond to their children's autism?
- What would you want or expect from your spouse or partner if your child was diagnosed with autism or any other disorder that affected their life to a similar degree? What would you do if they did not respond as you hoped?
- What are the unique features of the Giant Steps school and its programmes for children of vary-

ing ages? How do these differ from mainstream schools?

On-line Resources

Netiquette—Cyber Do's and Don'ts

New researchers using the Net need to be aware of cyber Do's and Don'ts in terms of Chat Rooms or email discussion lists.

Activities

- Discuss your likes and dislikes in terms of face-to-face communication. What is similar or different in on-line communication? There are numerous Netiquette sites to help you begin, but you may wish to establish your own 'rules' for using electronic forms of communication. If you are using the mailing list for research, you will need to consider laws relating to privacy and the special need for sensitivity when working with someone who may have a disorder.
- Discuss the special needs that may arise for the parents of autistic children from non-English speaking backgrounds. How could these needs be met in appropriate ways? Who establishes what is appropriate and what processes do they use to do this?

Resources

<http://hunter.apana.org.au/~cas/>

This is *Carolyn's Web Pages*, a gateway to many other sources of information, including a partners' support site and a link to the St John's site.

<http://hunter.apana.org.au/~cas/ozautism.html>

This is the site for the Australia and New Zealand Autism Support. It lists and links directly to autism support and information



organizations in South Australia, Victoria, the UK and the USA.

<http://www.span.com.au/autism/index.html>

This is the South Australian web site mentioned earlier; it offers useful information about autism, as well as recommended reading for those who want to understand this disorder and its effects. A good starting point is the booklet, *Approaches to Autism*, 2nd edition, by the National Autistic Society, London. Also see Elizabeth Gerlach's book, *Autism Treatment Guide*, Eugene, Oregon, Four Leaf Press, 1993.

This study guide was written for ATOM by Patricia Kelly

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