Magic and Autism

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Tapping into social cues to trick their audience, magicians rely on a phenomenon called joint attention. Most audience members will pay attention to what a magician is looking at—so a magician can direct their attention away by looking in the opposite direction. People on the autistic spectrum can have trouble picking up on the cues of joint attention and may not be fooled by a magician’s sleight of hand. Researchers are now looking at magic as a useful technique to teach children with autism how to read social signals.

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NARRATOR: Neuroscientists Susan Martinez-Conde and Stephen Macknik think magic tricks, like the one performed by Penn and Toddler...

PENN JONES: We take the ball and we place it on our hand. We’re holding it in our hand underneath the cup.

NARRATOR: ...might not work on a child with autism.

SUSANA MARITZES-CONDE: Brain neurologists believe that magic tricks that rely on social cues will be less effective in people with autism.

STEVEN MACKNIK: (Barrow Neurological Institute) Have also shown a very difficult time paying attention to other people and paying attention to their eyes. They are very blind to this.

STEVEN MACKNIK: (Adolescent Psychiatry, Ithaca, NY) Kids with autism pay more attention to the social aspects of the trick, especially something that looks like this hand in that direction. They are probably more social, and now what am I saying? I think we should attach. Someone on the autism spectrum might be able to pay less on the less social components, and as a result, they may have more attention right above the magician’s hands so somewhere where the magician’s hand is on the other people’s hands.

NARRATOR: (Brain Sciences, special education teacher, Adelphi University) Kids with autism have autism, and when he was eight years old he saw a magic show that he would never forget.

NARRATOR: (Brain Sciences, special education teacher, Adelphi University) Kids with autism have autism on their mind and it’s all about how the brain works.

PETER MURPHY: (University of California, Davis) Magic is a teaching tool.

PETER MURPHY: (University of California, Davis) Magic is a teaching tool on how you make decisions. It’s like a hard Quinn on an intervention technique. You know, teach children with autism how to follow the gaze of the magician in order to better understand social attention.

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