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## **Fathers of autistic children: an interview with Tom Purser**

### **Can you tell us how you first became interested in autism?**

So I first became interested in autism as a parent; I'm father to a now 15-year-old son with autism, but I started working for the National Autistic Society about six and a half years ago, initially working to support local authorities with implementing the Autism Act locally, but also delivering parent training and a few other things like that.

### **Can you tell us about your current work?**

So I'm now the Head of Campaigns at the National Autistic Society; that involves overseeing the team which delivers all the campaigning work at the NAS, currently our Too Much Information public understanding campaign, but it also includes looking after our network of 115 branches across the country, all the work that they do, and our Autism Friendly Award, which is our way of helping places become more autism-friendly and accessible to autistic people and their families.

### **Can you tell us how gender stereotyping may impact on how fathers engage with support services?**

So I think in terms of gender stereotypes, what we see a lot of is assumptions about the roles that fathers and mothers play in their support of their autistic children. At an early age, what I experienced was actually a difficulty for fathers to actually be involved with being supported, so actually getting the right information, being part of things like Early Bird or other support groups that parents could access, and that there are actually quite a lot of barriers there, and a lot of that comes from both assumptions about roles that fathers fulfil, but also how fathers see themselves and see their role in the support of their children.

### **What barriers do fathers encounter when supporting their autistic child?**

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So I think there are two really key barriers that fathers encounter when trying to support their autistic child, first of all I think there's a lack of parental role models for fathers, which can in those early days, post-diagnosis, really give someone to model how they help support their children, understanding what their role is, where they can make a big difference, and I think the other big barrier is that balance between perhaps their role as the main earner in the family, and their role in having to go to work and then being able to go and access the kind of great parent support programs that are out there, just not physically being able to get to those sessions can be a big barrier.

### **As a father of an autistic child have you experienced gender stereotyping and how has this affected you personally?**

So back in 2005, 2006, when we were taking part in the Early Bird program after my son was diagnosed, I was actually the only dad in our group that attended all of the sessions consistently, and I think the way in which professionals regarded me was, they didn't really understand why I was there, perhaps; they didn't really see whether I was there as a caregiver, or whether I was just there to find out a little bit more, and a lot of the material that seemed to be available, not just within Early Bird, but around all the advice that was available for parents, was very much targeted as mothers.

What we know is that fathers can play, and do play, a massive and important role in their autistic children's lives, right throughout their lives, but actually there is a huge lack of guidance and resources written directly for fathers and that would help them do that.

### **What can professionals do to support fathers of autistic children?**

So I think on a one-to-one basis, it would just be trying to understand what each father is looking for, what kind of information and guidance that they're looking for, but thinking a bit more creatively about perhaps how some of those support sessions are scheduled, doing things in the evenings, things being delivered perhaps through the school rather than via health services, but also thinking about how you can enable some of that information using the technology that we've got to be delivered direct to fathers, not having to rely on fathers being able to make the time away from work to get that information, but being able to deliver that information in a way that fits in with other responsibilities.