

## Close the book, but understand Autism

By Adina Genn  
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After her son, William, was diagnosed with an Autism Spectrum Disorder in 1999, Sharon Sexton-Braun set out to learn everything she could to help him thrive.

"The more I knew about Autism, the better I could advocate for my son," said Sexton-Braun.

Today, Sexton-Braun, 37, is bringing years of research to the public with her company, Bohemia-based AutismEdu. Sexton-Braun opened the company in January. The company publishes interactive CD-ROMs that teach parents and professionals how to elicit communication in children with Autism. The company released its first CD-ROM, "Operation Communication," in January.

Autism is a developmental disability that is typically diagnosed within the first three years of life and impacts a child's social interaction and communication skills, according to the Autism Society of America, a Maryland-based advocacy group. As many as one in 166 children have an ASD, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, a component of the Department of Health and Human Services.

Sexton-Braun said it is "important for me to get out there and help as many people as I can. I want to share some of what I have learned with those new parents whose children have just recently been diagnosed, as well as with the professionals who work with these children."

She prefers the CD-ROM format to books. "I chose to use the CD-ROM as a medium because it's interactive and multi-sensory," said Braun. "Instead of reading a book, you can simply listen to the presentation, read the summary of text and be visually stimulated by the corresponding pictures, all at the same time."

The format, she believes, sets her product apart from other available resources, which, she says, are primarily books.

Sexton-Braun demonstrates how to incorporate principles of applied behavior analysis in order to bring forth functional, purposeful communication with children with Autism. The CD, she says, helps family members and professionals understand how to use what motivates children in their natural environment to stimulate them to speak. The CD also covers language areas that these children have the most difficulty grasping.

Sexton-Braun invested "at least \$20,000" in launching the company, and "a lot of my time," including the writing, recording and selecting of images for the product. Sexton-Braun did the voiceovers herself.

"I was nervous about having someone else do it," she says. "It's the inflections" that mattered most to her. "I know what's important. It's more personal. I've been through this. I'm not just a teacher, but a parent. It's close to my heart."

She turned to her husband's company, Bohemia-based Lounge Lizard, to create AutismEdu's Web site, [www.autismedu.com](http://www.autismedu.com). Visitors to the site can purchase the CD, as well as access a glossary of terms and links to other resources.

The product is currently available through Autism Today ([www.autismtoday.com](http://www.autismtoday.com)), an online distributor of Autism resources, in Seattle. It is also available through Product Development Associates ([www.disabilitytraining.com](http://www.disabilitytraining.com)), a Syracuse-based distributor of multimedia training and educational resources on disability topics.

"I have no idea how it will sell," says Sexton-Braun, who is also planning word-of-mouth marketing and speaking events.

"It's a business," she says. "But it's all about the kids getting services. That's what it's about for me."