



The Essential 5

Colette de Bruin

# THIS IS AUTISM

from brain function to behaviour

With scientific substantiation by Dr. Fabienne Naber

## Colophon

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**The Essential 5**

**I dedicate this book to my father**

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# PREFACE

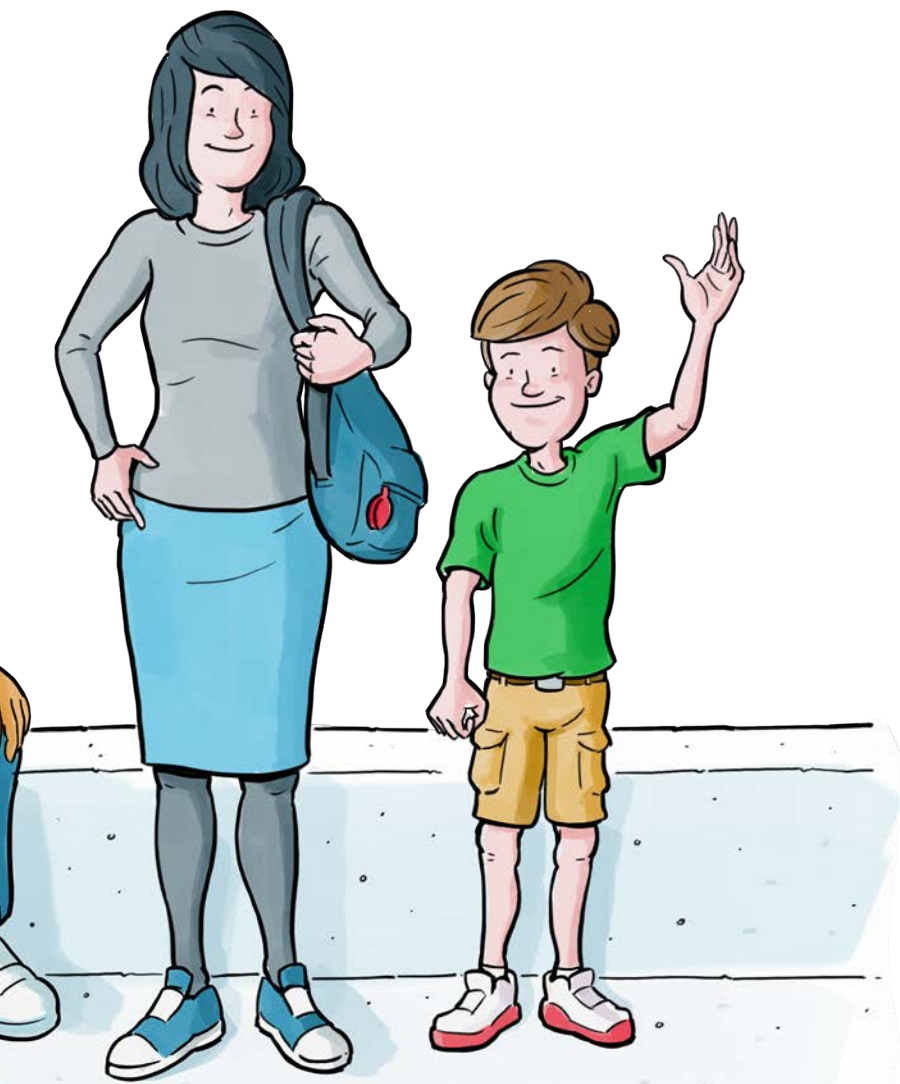
Do you ever think about how naturally you react to everything and everyone around you? How easily you can do everyday tasks, such as getting up, getting dressed, going to school or work, having a conversation and assessing situations? And are you aware of why that is? Probably not. That's not surprising either: if everything goes well, it's not something that's on your mind.





In a person with autism - we'll call him or her CASS and wherever we write 'he' you can also read 'she' - these everyday things don't go automatically. You probably already know this. If your child, partner, student, co-worker or client has autism, you know that he regularly experiences problems. He reacts differently than expected or shows awkward or even undesirable behaviour. This leads to a lot of frustration, on both sides. You're often at your wits' end. 'How can things be done differently?' you wonder.

This book answers that question, but there's more: you also get an insight into the cause! This is because things in CASS' brain are processed differently than in people without autism. This insight will give you a better understanding *and* clarity about why a certain approach works with CASS and why others do not.



Are you affected by autism yourself? Then this book will be very interesting for you too. You'll have a better understanding as to why you think and react the way you do. In addition, this book will give you guidelines on how to ask for help more specifically. You can also use this book to help people in your environment understand how you think. Moreover, by using this book, you can show them how they can support you when something doesn't quite go as planned or not at all.

I've been helping children and adults with autism to better understand the world around them and to become (more) self-reliant for over a quarter of a century. If you're close to CASS, you also play an important role in this. You can help CASS by applying a different way of observing and communicating. This book provides you with a wide range of solutions that will make CASS' life, but also yours and others around him, a lot clearer and easier to understand. They prevent CASS from getting stuck or showing unruly behaviour and help him develop (more) self-reliance.

## THE CREATION OF THIS BOOK

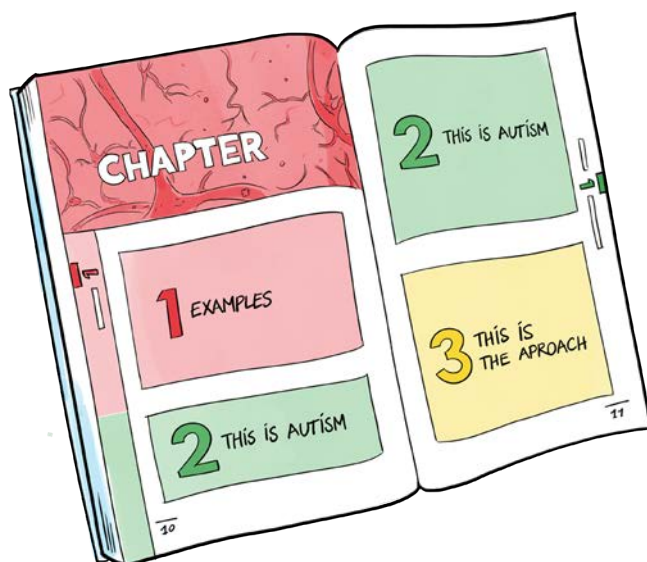
What exactly happens in the brain of someone with autism, causing him to react so differently? I didn't have a clear answer to that question until I met Fabiënne Naber, a neurobiologist and autism expert. She went in search of explanations for CASS' behaviour using the most recent scientific brain studies and closely examined generally accepted theories about autism. She managed to make connections that had never been made before. They clarify what autism is and they explain why The Essential 5 methodology works so well. In this book, I'll take you on a journey of our discoveries.

## THE STRUCTURE OF THIS BOOK

Chapters 1 to 9 will tell you more about CASS. These chapters are made up of three parts:

- Each chapter starts with examples of behaviour. After all, knowing the best approach starts with recognising the signals.
- The second part of each chapter is called 'This is autism'. Here, we explain the functioning of CASS' brain and the effects thereof on his behaviour, scientifically substantiated by Fabiënne's research. The literature references are listed per chapter in the back of the book.

- The third part of each chapter, 'This is the approach', gives you specific instructions on how to deal with awkward or undesirable behaviour. This approach is based on The Essential 5 and Anti-communication methodologies.



Chapter 10 brings everything together and indicates the potential consequences for CASS' development. This is when you'll start to understand why The Essential 5 methodology works as an overall approach to ensure CASS can function better and more independently.

The examples we use are taken from everyday practice. Some of the names have been fictionalised for privacy reasons. Examples from the first part of a chapter often re-appear in the second and third parts. This is to show you coherence in what you observe in behaviour, the cause of the behaviour and the possible solutions you can use to help CASS.

## **EVERY HUMAN IS UNIQUE**

Every human is unique. This also applies to CASS. Autism expresses itself differently in every CASS: it has its own unique bar code with behavioural characteristics. These behavioural characteristics are a result of the way in which CASS' brain processes information. Disturbances affect his information processing, as a result of which CASS doesn't understand information or interprets it differently. How different differs per CASS. That is why the examples you come across in this book sometimes do and sometimes don't apply to your CASS. The same applies to the behaviour shown by your CASS: this can be different than described in this book, depending on the situation. The key is that you learn to properly observe what is happening in your CASS, so that you know which elements from this book you can use to help him. Therefore, adjusting your actions in line with CASS' needs is different each time.

## **CHOICES FOR THE SAKE OF READABILITY AND COMPREHENSIBILITY**

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is the official diagnosis as listed in the DSM 5; the worldwide classification system used for psychiatric disorders. In this book, we use the word autism, in line with everyday language.

Our brains are a complicated matter. We've chosen to show elements of the brain function as simply as possible and always in conjunction with characteristic examples. In reality, it's more complex and nuanced than that. Studies on autism not related to the approach described in this book have been disregarded.

## **NEW VISION ON AUTISM**

In this book, two fields of study link up with each other: neurobiology (knowledge of our nervous system and brain) and educational therapy (knowledge of impairments, disorders and situations in which learning or upbringing are problematic).

The correlation between existing studies discovered by Fabienne as a neurobiologist, combined with my many years of practical experience in educational therapy, means that the behaviour of people with autism can suddenly be explained quite logically. Moreover, based on our joint insights,

we've developed a new vision of what autism is. This vision is based on the eight disturbances that can occur in the brain and which cause the behavioural characteristics that lead to the diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder. We discovered that a number of generally accepted theories are, in fact, not the cause of autism, but rather the result of how CASS' brain functions. In addition, we believe that the current general picture and the current diagnosis are too one-sided. Women with autism in particular, often remain underexposed and do not always receive the correct diagnosis. Our new diagnostic view offers room for a more extensive diagnosis. You can read about this in the appendix 'Bar Code - Circle of Autism Spectrum Symptoms'. This vision offers starting points for new research and guidelines on how you can change your view on people with autism.



FRAGMENTED INFORMATION PROCESSING



FAILURE TO RECOGNISE SOCIAL INFORMATION



CREATING INCORRECT LINKS



HYPERSENSITIVE OR HYPOSENSITIVE REACTIONS



STRUGGLING TO GIVE MEANING



STORING INFORMATION CHAOTICALLY



MISSING FRAMES OF REFERENCE



FAILURE TO DISCARD INFORMATION

*The eight disturbances that can occur in the brain of someone with autism*

**▶▶ This is Autism has been written on the basis of the latest insights. It provides the scientific substantiation that justifies the approach applied by The Essential 5 and Anti-communication methodologies. We would like you to join us in our vision on autism, where science and practice go hand in hand. ▶▶**

## THE ESSENTIAL 5 BASE ATTITUDE

Before you read on, it's important to know that this book is written on the basis of the vision and base attitude of The Essential 5 methodology. The main values therein are:

- Thinking and reacting respectfully, based on a positive attitude.
- The unconditional belief that CASS' behaviour is a direct result of his brain function and the faith that CASS, with the right approach, can do what he needs to do.
- Being credible, reliable and realistic.

The Essential 5 methodology is aimed at teaching you how to help CASS. This methodology at the same time means that CASS can develop his maximum potential and continue without your assistance, within the shortest possible term. This way, CASS develops his abilities in successive phases: from person-dependent through structure-dependent to independent.

If you want to give CASS what he needs in order to function to the best of his ability, it's important that you learn to tune in to CASS extremely well. You do that by being alert and receptive to the signals that he sends out, particularly those that are the result of his brain function. We call this receptiveness 'being Anti-sensitive'. Being Anti-sensitive helps you to better recognise the signals. After reading this book, you'll also understand these signals better. Being Anti-sensitive is part of The Essential 5 base attitude and is an essential skill that helps you to support CASS with maximum effect."

**▮ ▮ Our Essential 5 base attitude is rolled out like a red carpet in all our corridors. It's a part of us. ▮ ▮**

*Berdine Wijmenga,  
former Head of Aquamarijn,  
The Essential 5 school in Leeuwarden.*

## THE ESSENTIAL 5 SERIES

This is the third book in The Essential 5 series. All three books complement each other. *The Essential 5* was published first and forms the general basis. It's a must-have for anyone dealing with children or adults who need additional clarity.

The book *Auti-communicatie* (Auti-communication) is not translated in English yet and is the follow up to the Dutch version of *The Essential 5*. This methodology is crucial for effective communication with CASS. If you know how to apply Auti-communication, it saves a lot of struggle *and* you build positive contact. It prevents problems, between parent and child and between partners, as well as in a professional setting.

*This is Autism* gives you an insight into CASS' brain. After reading this book you'll never be able to say: 'He's doing it on purpose.'

I wish you many new insights after having read *This is Autism*,

**Colette de Bruin**

## THE COMPLETE PICTURE OF INFORMATION PROCESSING

The information that enters your brain goes through different areas of the brain, involving a whole range of activities before you can give meaning to it and determine what to do with it. All steps of that process are discussed in this book. The next two pages illustrate all areas of the brain that are involved in information processing.

### Chapter 1

Information that enters your brain, through your senses or from your body, is transported through neural pathways. In CASS' case, these neural pathways are chaotic. The extent to which varies per location in the brain and per CASS. The consequences of this become clear when we follow the journey that this information takes in the brain. This process is visualised on the next two pages and discussed in the following chapters on a step-by-step basis. This chapter teaches you how to communicate in such a way that information takes the shortest route through the neural pathways in CASS' brain.

### Chapter 2

The first area of the brain where all pieces of information travel through is the STS. It recognises and labels social information and gives it priority. In this chapter, you'll learn to adjust your communication when the STS of CASS does not recognise social information.

### Chapter 3

The pieces of information continue their way. The insula sorts the information and puts together what belongs together. In this chapter, you'll learn to recognise and disconnect faulty links. This happens when the insula of CASS sorts information incorrectly or when some of the information failed to arrive at the insula.

### Chapter 4

Subsequently, the information continues its way to the thalamus. This part determines whether the information goes on to the conscious or remains in the subconscious. In this chapter, you'll learn how to deal with CASS showing hypersensitive or hyposensitive reactions. This happens when the thalamus allows through too much or too little information.



## Chapter 5

Information that is allowed through arrives in the frontal lobe. The frontal lobe puts together the information that has been received. To do so, it matches the pieces with information stored in the hippocampus (the memory), until it can be given meaning. In order to make a match, the information from the frontal lobe must travel via the thalamus and insula to the hippocampus and vice versa.

In this chapter, you'll learn to be clear and predictable so that the process of matching and giving meaning in CASS runs smoother.

## Chapter 6

Subsequently, the manager of the working memory, which is also located in the frontal lobe, decides what to do with the information: think and do (taking action), storing or discarding.

In this chapter, you'll read about thinking and acting. You'll learn what you can do if information clogs up CASS' working memory (open folders). You learn to recognise the signals when that happens and how you can trace the cause so that you can close any open folders.

## Chapter 7

The information that must be saved is stored in the hippocampus (the memory). Like a computer, this is done at a high degree of organisation, in folders and files. In this chapter, you learn how to create and organise folders, making it easier for CASS to retrieve information.

## Chapter 8

The folders and files in the hippocampus form frames of reference. Your brain uses these to match newly received information. These frames of reference form the starting point for your thoughts and actions.

In this chapter, you'll learn to expand and adjust CASS' frames of reference for his 'I', for 'social situations' and for 'facts'.

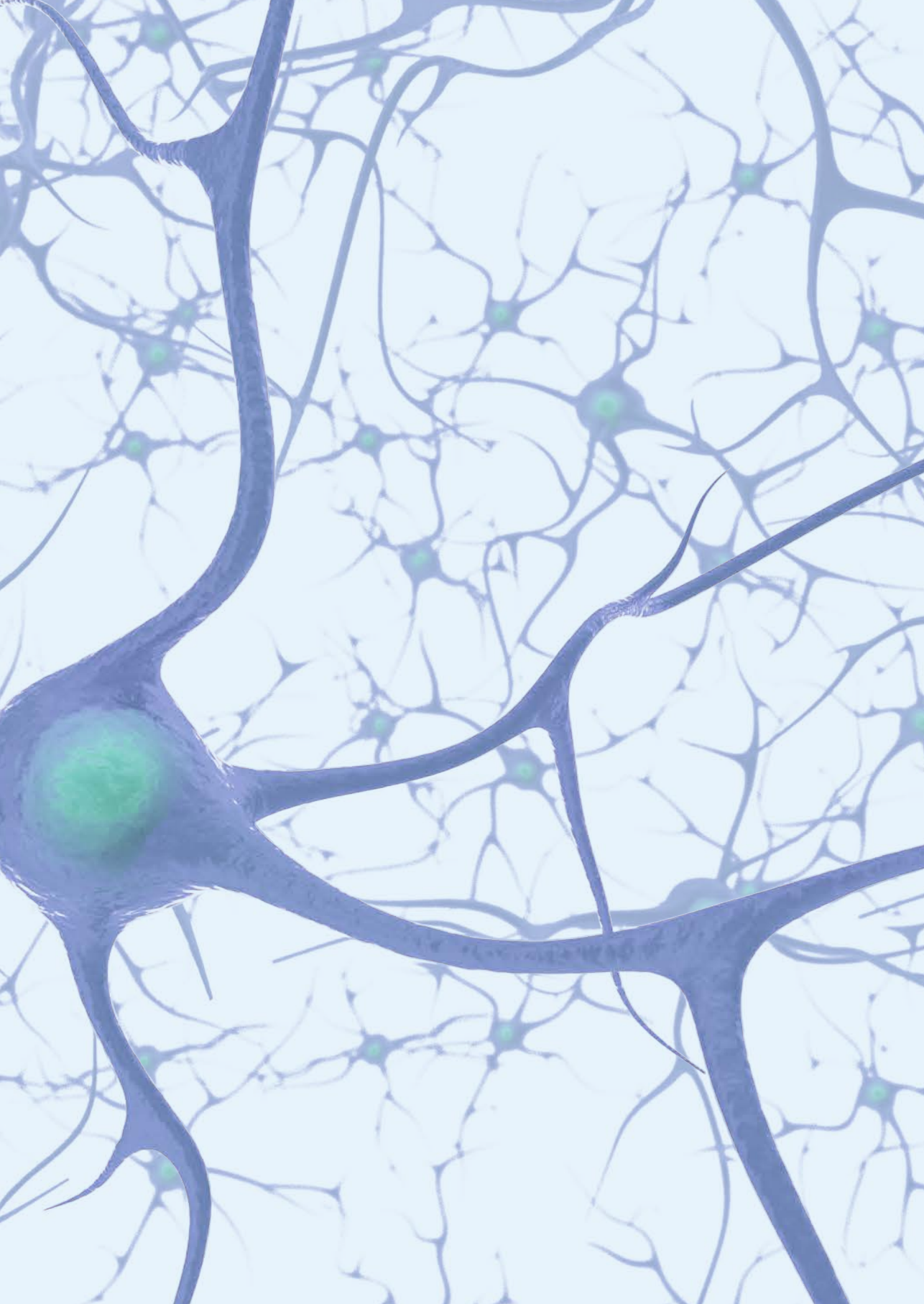
## Chapter 9

Your working memory has to discard any superfluous information, otherwise your head will get overloaded. In this chapter, you learn to clear up CASS' brain.

## Chapter 10

The journey through the brain is complete. You understand how our brain works and where disturbances may occur in CASS' brain.

This chapter explains the consequences of the disturbances for CASS' development and why a single overall approach is so important.





The Essential 5

1

RECOGNISING  
AUTISM

# 1 **RECOGNISING AUTISM**



Behaviour that you show is the result of what you have observed. You react to what you hear, see, smell, feel and taste and to the internal stimuli from within your body. Everything you observe enters your brain in separate pieces and is then put together by that brain. Subsequently, you give meaning to that information, after which you can start taking action. It is the same in CASS, yet the information processing and giving meaning to that information runs a different course. As a result, he often shows different behaviour than expected. Learning to understand CASS starts with observing his behaviour, observing what he does and how he reacts, because the behaviour shown by CASS provides indications of what happens in his brain and of what he needs.

This chapter gives you an insight into the first step of information processing and into the first of eight disturbances in CASS' brain that impede the information processing and which cause his behaviour. You will be given guidelines on how to help CASS improve his information processing.

## **REACTING TO INFORMATION SLOWER**

You probably recognise that CASS needs more time to react than others and that he processes information slower. He needs more time to think. As a result, he is not aware of what is happening around him or will be so (much) later. On one occasion, he may realise that he has missed something, while on others he may not be aware of this at all. Sometimes, CASS only reacts to something that has happened after an hour, a day, a week or even a year. For others, it has long since become a thing of the past. CASS can also react differently to signals that his body gives him, such as hunger and thirst.

The event in Thomas' class in group 5 is an example of CASS reacting slower: Thomas' teacher has come up with a fun way to practise the 8-times table. She throws a beanbag to a student and at the same time gives a sum from the 8-times table. The student must give the answer and at the same time throw back the beanbag. The teacher does not mention names, so everyone must be very alert.

The beanbag lands with Thomas and he is given the sum '8 times 8'. He catches the beanbag and places it on the table in front of him. He looks at the teacher and does not react.

After a few seconds, the teacher says: 'Just do 5 times 8.'

Thomas does not react and keeps looking.

After another few seconds, the teacher says: 'Try 2 times 8.'

Thomas keeps quiet. Suddenly he says: '64' and he throws back the beanbag. His teacher can only just stop herself from saying that it is wrong, because she realises that he has given the right answer to the first sum. Thomas needed extra time to process her question. Well done by the teacher for recognising this and also well done by Thomas for maintaining his concentration on the first sum. Thomas could easily have been confused by the teacher adjusting the sum. This could have resulted in no answer at all or the whole process would have taken much longer, because Thomas would have re-started his calculation every time a new sum was given.

## MISSING INFORMATION

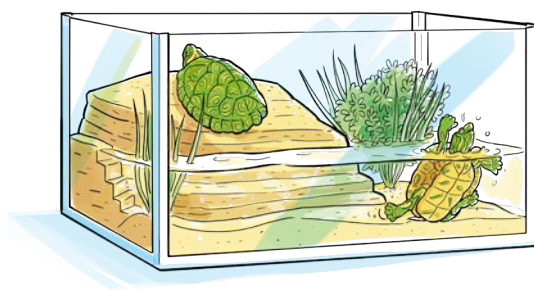
Every person sometimes misses information, but CASS misses more information than average.

A conversation between Damien and his teacher makes it clear that information does not arrive to him consciously.


His teacher asks him: 'What's the name of a tank that holds tortoises?'

Damien replies: 'Harry and Eddy.'

He has missed part of the question. ('What's the name of a tank...') As a result, he gives a different answer than you would expect.



# THIS IS AUTISM

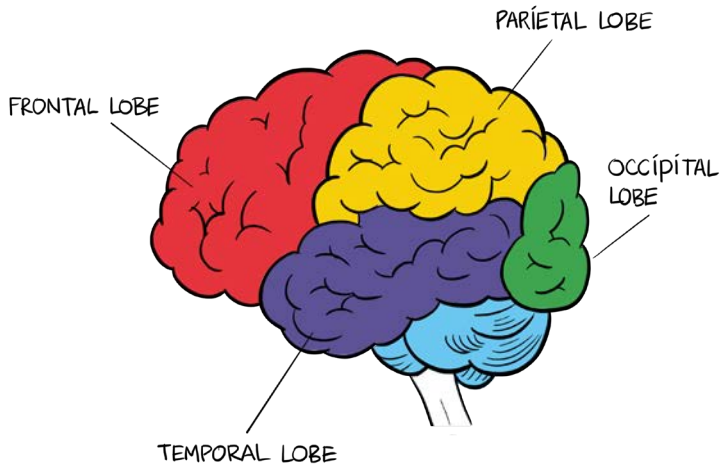


Your brain is highly fascinating and complex and forms the basis of your entire functioning. Fortunately, we are starting to understand the brain better and better. Yet at the same time, it remains something mysterious. This is because your brain not only controls your bodily functions, it also forms your personality, your 'inner-self'. Where a heart or liver is still 'interchangeable', the brain of every person is unique. If you were to have a brain transplant, it would be difficult to determine who you are actually dealing with. Your unique brain enables you to experience emotions, think, act, reason, store experiences and learn. Everyone does this in his own unique way: you and me, and CASS too.

A short lesson in biology.

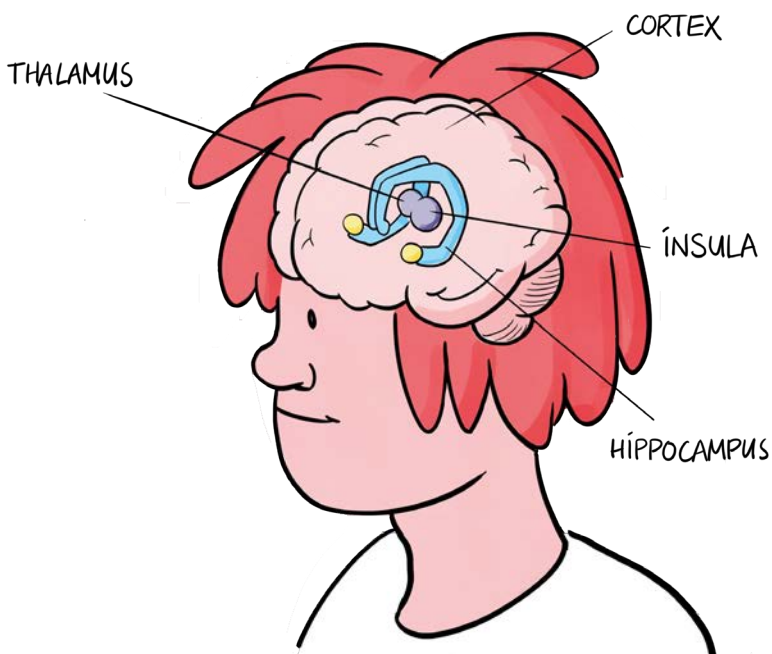
Your brain and spinal cord together form the central nervous system. That nervous system coordinates your body by controlling the muscles, regulating the functioning of the organs and processing sensory stimuli. The cerebral cortex is located on the outside of your brain. That is the area in your brain where all information from the rest of your body is received, processed and interpreted. The cerebral cortex is divided into lobes.

Each lobe roughly has its own functions. The frontal lobe is home to a person's conscious and mental functioning: everything that has to do with conscious thinking and feeling. The temporal lobes (on either side of your head) mainly regulate language and hearing. The parietal lobe regulates sensory information and spatial thinking. The occipital lobe mainly processes visual information. The first two in particular are important within the context of this book.



*The cerebral cortex is divided into lobes.*

If you were to make a cross-section of your brain, the thalamus, the insula, the hippocampus and the amygdala would also be revealed. The thalamus is the control hub that receives all information and which determines what needs to be done with the information. The insula is the information sorting centre and as such a junction of neural pathways in your brain that carry the information. The hippocampus regulates your memory.



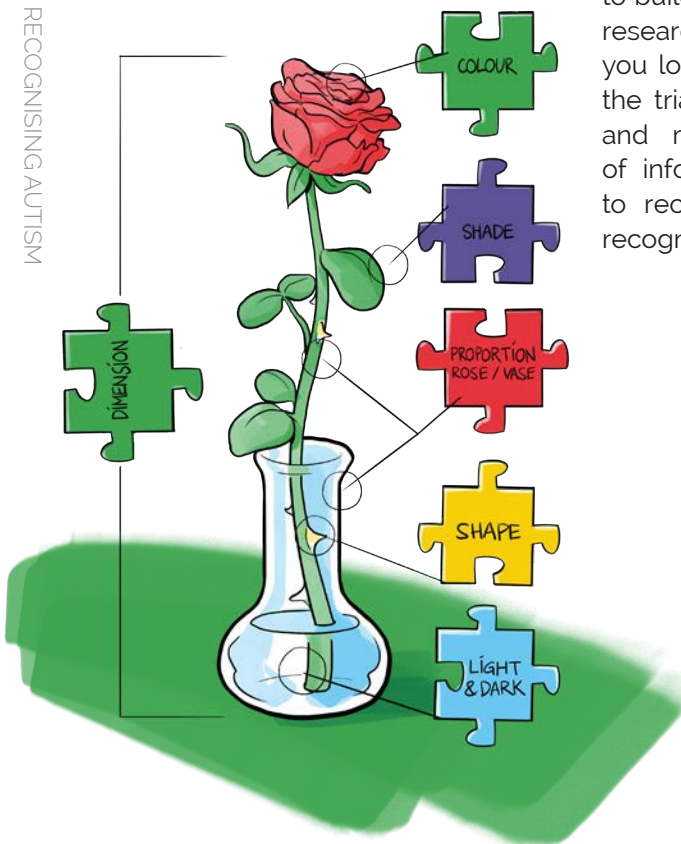
*The parts of the brain that we will discuss more in-depth in this book*

## FRAGMENTED OBSERVATION

CASS needs more time to process information. The information he receives is not always complete. A logical explanation for this can be found in his brain. This is explained in more detail below.

People often say about CASS that his observations are fragmented. That is not unique, as this applies to everybody. When looking at a vase, for example, your brain does not process that vase as a whole. The information your brain receives includes data on proportions, shadow, colour, light and dark, shapes and dimensions. Therefore, you only actually see a number of specific details. These separate parts of information are combined by your brain into a complete picture of a vase.

The data you observe must contain sufficient specific characteristics in order to build the right image. Eye movement research demonstrates that when you look at a face, you mainly register the triangle formed by the eyes, nose and mouth. These separate pieces of information are sufficiently specific to recognise someone or to form a recognisable image in general.



*Your brain combines separate pieces of information into a complete image*



## FRAGMENTED OBSERVATION IN THE CASE OF AUTISM

The same eye movement investigation shows that CASS looks at different points compared to people without autism. He often focuses on less specific characteristics, which means he needs more information in order to give meaning correctly. When CASS observes a face, he pays particular attention to the chin, cheeks, ears and hairline. He prefers to avoid eye contact, because the emotional information that can be read from this is often too overwhelming and at the same time, it means too little to him.

Eyes, nose and mouth give more specific characteristics than cheeks, chin and ears do. This makes it more difficult for CASS to recognise the image, in this case a person. He needs more information, i.e. he needs to look at more details in order to create a matching picture of the person. It is important for CASS that all details are correct. If a detail is not correct, he will find it difficult, sometimes even impossible, to recognise the image.



*CASS looks at less specific details of a face*



*Someone without autism mainly looks at the triangle 'eyes, nose and mouth'*

# THIS IS AUTISM

The behaviour of people affected by autism is not always easy to understand. This book explains the cause of this behaviour in plain English. At the same time, it serves as a reference guide on how to deal with this behaviour. The colourful illustrations clarify the journey that information takes through the brain and the eight disturbances that impede information processing in people with autism. In addition to providing you with an insight into the cause of autistic behaviour, this book also sets out an overall approach. The strength of this book is based on the interaction between two autism experts, the practical knowledge of the founder of The Essential 5 methodology Colette de Bruin and the scientific knowledge of neurobiological behavioural scientist Dr. Fabienne Naber.



About the author:

**Colette de Bruin** is an authority in the field of autism and author. Through her organisation, methodology and books, she trains parents and professionals who care for people with autism.

*'This book is an enrichment for parents and professional carers and provides a clear insight into the possible relationship between brain and behaviour. The strength of this book lies in the theoretical framework of The Essential 5 methodology and Anti-communication. It provides a clear picture on autism, as described by the title: This is autism.'*

**Ina Berckelaer-Onnes, a professor emeritus of orthopedagogics, a specialist in autism at Leiden University**

*'This book makes it so logical. It removes all resistances. You simply can no longer say: 'He's doing it on purpose!'*

**Annemiek Cozijnsen, a practical pedagogical family counsellor at 'Wijs op weg' care providers**

*'I thought I already knew a lot about my son, but now I TRULY understand him. Thanks to The Essential 5 methodology, my son has already undergone a major development. With this book, we can tailor our approach even better, thanks to the insights into his complex brain.'*

**Maruscha van de Weerd, mother of a son with autism**

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