I'd like to take just a little bit of time, if I can, to talk a little bit about the difference between, say, boys and girls, but also share with you a little bit about emotional connectedness, or disconnectedness, depending on your interpretation.

We talk about the ratio of boys to girls being four boys to every girl is apparently the statistical diagnostic rate. So, in other words, there's four boys getting diagnosed with autism to every girl that's being diagnosed. However, most recently there's been a number of research papers that are suggesting that, in fact, in many cases, the actual rate of diagnosis is closer to 1 to 1. But the girls, for a whole range of reasons, are a little more skilled and a little more talented at actually being able to look at their peers around them and then be able to imitate the behaviour and therefore not get picked up, because the diagnostic process is...arguably, according to this latest research, is a little gender-biased.

And so I think sometimes we... we need to have a look at what happens with young girls, and particularly to think a little bit about the behaviours and the relationships that they develop and ask ourselves what that actually means. And let me make a couple of suggestions. We talk today about the younger generation getting into inappropriate sexual behaviour or sexting or, you know, tweeting pictures of each other, etc. etc. etc. And we often talk about some of the young girls that are engaging in this, they're not quite sure why they've done it or what they were intending to do out of it.

And I guess one of the arguments that we would like to mount is that perhaps some of these young people are in fact people on the spectrum that have been undiagnosed. And one of the reasons for that is that...we think, anyways, because girls are very good at looking around at their peers, asking their peers questions and then from that, they say, "Right. Now, this is what you do when you like a boy," or, "This is what you do when you want to tell a boy that you like him."

And so, as a result, there's a lack of understanding about some of that other social connectedness or relationship connectedness that some of these young people miss. And so they can sit there and say,
'Oh, well, look, this young fellow was walking past me the other day and he smiled at me. He must like me, because he smiled. And so, "I like him, so now I will go down the road of sending him a text..." ...perhaps inappropriate in terms of really the relationship, or a photo or whatever. And so one of the issues that we’re now trying to grapple with is starting to recognise that within the girls of our world, if you like, how many of our girls are vulnerable because they haven't been diagnosed, and because we haven’t as a society really adequately explained to those young girls what the social rules of relationships are.

Now, that’s a particularly important issue, particularly as the girls are reaching adolescence. And we’re often...we often discover some of these things when the girls are reaching, say, Year 8, Year 9, Year 10, and all of a sudden the girls go away on their holidays at school, at the end of the year, at Christmas time. They come back into the workplace... sorry, into the schoolyard, and all of a sudden the girls in Year 9 are not wanting to play with their Barbie dolls anymore as the girl on the spectrum is because up until then, Barbie dolls and playing that way was the way we interrelated. What they’re now wanting to do, of course, is play with the... the young man in Year 12, and the girl that’s on the spectrum cannot grasp this, and all of a sudden she finds herself being isolated from her peers.

And we realise that in fact what's happening is that they're now getting challenged in terms of relationships and the new dynamics that happen as you reach into those older years in high school.

Now, it's no different, of course, for the boys. In saying that, I want to stress, though, that this notion that there is no emotional connectedness by young people on the spectrum is absolutely false. That in truth, for many, many young people on the spectrum, they absolutely can engage in an emotional conversation. Whether they understand necessarily all of the emotional drivers that are happening to them may well not be true. But to suggest that people on the spectrum are incapable of emotional connectedness is absolutely false as well.

How those young people express it, how those people manage it and how those young people address their emotional relationships is perhaps problematic, and that’s as much about the fact that... not so much about their inability to be emotionally connected but more about their inability to understand those unwritten social rules that every one of us knows innately, except for people on the spectrum.

And so, again, when you're working with anyone from the very young, all the way through, think very seriously about and check in with that young person to help them with their emotional interpretations of issues. We often don't believe it and we often underestimate the ability of people on the spectrum to actually identify they've got emotional connectedness. But then helping them to work that through and make sense of it.

And that's about asking a person, "Why do you think that's the case?" Ask them to explore the reasons why they're feeling what they're feeling, rather than simply saying, "People on the spectrum don't feel," because it's not true.

So, my suggestion to you would be look at the emotional... the emotional issues. I spoke...and I've talked often to people about trauma and the experience of trauma, and we...again, that only happens if you've actually had an emotional experience. And so we would argue with you that if
somebody has emotional connectedness, it's terribly important that you take the time to help them explore that, to help that person understand where that emotional connectedness comes from, and to understand how to then do something about it in an appropriate, socially acceptable way.

We know young people are making mistakes with their...with their relationship issues, particularly when you're naive and young. We know that, again, some of our parents and some of the parents that are on the spectrum struggle enormously to connect with their children. That doesn't in itself mean that they don't have an emotional bond. What it says is 'we don't know how to express that emotional bond'. And if we do express it, it's about, 'Am I expressing my emotional bonds in an appropriate and acceptable way?'

And so that's...the challenge for us is to help our young people from the very earliest of ages to explore their emotional feelings, to give them a context in which to put it, but also to help them to understand that just because somebody else is doing something, it doesn't mean that that's the thing that we should do, unless you've got an understanding of and a context in which to put it.

So, if we're talking about adolescents, let's not just dismiss an adolescent because they're an adolescent and put it down to puberty or put it down to naivety. Let's make sure that when we look at these things, we take the time to help that person make sense of what the behaviour is, what the social parameters around it are, and then what are the emotional and physical expectations that come from that. At least we can then give our young people from the very earliest of ages a context in which to frame and reframe their emotional connectedness.

So, thanks for that. I hope that helps.