ELICIA: Now, I would like to introduce our next presenter, Elaine Hatfield-White, who is a person with autism, a trained SocialEyes facilitator, registered developmental educator and allied health professional and who currently works as an accessibility adviser for Curtin University as well as Joint Program Manager of the Curtin Specialist Mentoring Program for students with autism. Elaine is going to be presenting this afternoon on SocialEyes, autism, social interaction and inclusion in the VET higher and tertiary education sectors. Welcome, Elaine.

ELAINE: Thank you very much. Thanks, Elicia. I’m just going to share my screen now and get you to my PowerPoint presentation and start with the slideshow from the beginning. This is the name of my company, Understanding Social Skills. I'm talking today to you about autism, social interaction and inclusion in the VET and higher education sectors. I'm going to be assisted by other neurodiverse people, both on the film and in person, hopefully, if they come later on. I'm using the term “neurodiverse” here because I think this best describes the people in my films and the people that you will see later. I also will be using the term “autism”, “people with autism”. As I have autism myself, that's the term I generally use to describe myself. I understand that the terms of reference are as diverse as the people themselves and that everyone refers to themselves in their own preferred way. I would first of all like to start by acknowledging the Wadjuk people of the Noongar nation who are the traditional custodians of the land on which my work is conducted and being shared with you today. I pay my respects to their Elders past, present and emerging. Okay, so the aims of this presentation today - just three simple ones, I hope. Firstly, to increase the awareness of the difficulties that people with autism experience in education, work and social settings. As I have autism myself, I obviously have been at work and working now. I have also been a student and I have also taught at university and TAFE, so I understand from an insider's perspective how autism can affect your interactions with people in educational, work and social settings. To bring the SocialEyes program to a wider audience. I was trained, as Elicia said earlier, in this program by the National Autistic Society in London, and many universities I can see, other organisations, are still using SocialEyes. I did my training in 2012. As far as I know, I'm the only person that’s doing it here in Australia. I wanted to bring it out to the wider audience, to all of you, to tell you what it is and to encourage anybody who would like to think of doing it in their state as well. Thirdly, I want to propose ways of increasing social inclusion for people with autism. You can consider what you can do yourselves in your own institutions or even do what I did and start up your own organisation to do that yourselves if you feel that there are gaps in the service. This is the reason that I set up my company, because of the gap in this area of social skills support for people with autism who are going to work, going to university and the demands that are on those people. All right, I have a question here, you may like to put your answers in the chat. Does that mean we’ve got a poll? I think we have a poll in these series, is that right?

ELICIA: Yes, we do, Elaine. I will put it up now for you.

ELAINE: Lovely. Thank you very much. So, yes, have a think about the question. Do autistic people have difficulty with the following? I'm going to describe the pictures to you here as well. So, starting conversation - we have two bean people shaking hands across a railway line. Taking turns in a conversation, we have somebody talking to a group of people and it looks like they've fallen asleep. Handling sensitive topics, we have a cartoon of somebody with a thought bubble that’s empty. Ending a conversation, there's a young man trying to talk to somebody who has got his back to him, so he is unable to get his attention. And the last graphic is a cartoon of two eye balls, one blue and one brown eye facing each other for using eye contact. I can see the polls coming up now. Yes, it’s looking quite good. Okay, I will let that run for a bit more. I just wanted to say a bit more about that. Successful social interactions in work and education rely on a degree of proficiency in these areas. Because much of our work and study demands working in groups and knowing the unspoken social rules, if you have limited social exposure and experience, you can feel very excluded and isolated. And if you don't have access to the unspoken rules, it can be really difficult. So, let's have a look. Yes, okay, it looks like 51 per cent of you voted. I think probably 97 per cent of you have said taking turns in conversation is one of the most difficult things, as well as ending a conversation. Starting conversation using eye contact, 94 per cent of you said those are also very difficult, sensitive topics, 80 per cent. I think we can probably say that all of you agree to some extent that at least one of those areas are difficult. These are the areas that SocialEyes deals with. I have got some links later on in my presentation for different articles for you to have a look at but I just wanted to draw your attention to the first one that you will see on my last slide, Sharon Sturgess from the University of Leicester. She discusses working in groups and difficulties and solutions in detail in a recent article this year. I have placed it in the last page. So, back to SocialEyes. Thanks ever so much to everyone who has taken part so far, it's really helpful. We're all on the same page by the looks of it. As I noticed a gap in the area, I started my business, as I said, and I'm registered with the NDIS to work with participants in WA using the SocialEyes program. It's getting so successful that I regularly get referrals from the local autism association. So, that's me. I have a waiting list, that shows me that it's working and people are also - word of mouth, learning to hear about it. So, what is SocialEyes? SocialEyes is a social skills development resource developed by people with autism along with (inaudible) professionals in London in 2010. It was extensively piloted before then and the National Autistic Society started training people in 2010. It doesn't ask people with autism to change their inappropriate social behaviour or copy the typical behaviour of neurotypical people. It provides the option of learning social interaction skills or alternative social strategies and it uses filmed social scenarios to analyse the unwritten rules for social behaviour. We call it social autopsies and I think that is quite indicative and very descriptive of what we do, we just pull everything apart. It facilitates video modelling. We watch videos, we go on to discuss those videos in minute detail and overanalyse them. Then if people are comfortable, we might do some role play and I might video them and we might then watch that back. If we are in a group, we might look at it as a group and start unpicking the areas that we feel really happy with or areas where we might need to develop a little bit further. All the films in this, I refilmed last year. They all follow the same sequence. The reason I refilmed them was they were just all on disc. Now, I can work offline - sorry, online with people as I did during COVID lockdown earlier this year, and all of the worksheets are fully online as well. So, yes, it's very easy to work with people in remote communities who aren’t necessarily in your region. Okay, so, these films are all approved by the National Autistic Society for me to use here in Australia. The people that I work with, 83 per cent of the cast and crew were people on the spectrum. I'm very proud of that. I’m going to go to my next slide now. No, I'm not. I'm going to go back. I'm going to go to my film, just bear with me. I’m going to give you a taste of the film now. Its 14 minutes long, please bear with it and I hope you enjoy it as much as we enjoyed making it. I’m just going to get the film up now and hopefully - I'm going to stop it and start it from the beginning and make the screen bigger. Enjoy the film. It does have subtitles, closed captions.

VIDEO PLAYED

ELIAS: Usually, when we get together with other people, someone will start a conversation will us or expect us to start a conversation with them. People often enjoy talking to each other as it is a way of sharing ideas and information. There are things we can do to help start a conversation, such as making eye contact with the person or standing near to them. Let's hear from people with autism about their experiences with starting a conversation.

TAYE: Starting conversations can be quite difficult, particularly with strangers because you don’t really know what to, you know, talk about. Well, yeah, ‘cause, like, the problems with starting a conversation, you know, particularly with strangers, is that it’s something that is expected of you all the time and it’s just a social norm and if you can’t commit to that then you can’t, you know, build relationships and meet new people and that can be quite hard.

CLAYTON: I still have starting – a bit of issues starting a conversation. Like, it first started as a kid, like, having, like, no friends to talking to at all. It’s been pretty hard getting – coming to adult years but I am slowly getting better at it.

MITCH: Sometimes, it is, sometimes, it isn’t. It’s a bit in between, to be honest. Most of the time, I’ve either already arrived and they're already talking with some people and I just join in with the conversation. That’s pretty much it unless someone comes up to me and says, “Oh, how you doing?” and all this and that and I say, “Yeah, I’m good, how about you?” all that stuff, really.

DARCIE: Yes, I have always hated going to social gatherings and meeting new people ‘cause I never know how I'm meant to talk to them or, like, what I'm supposed to say, so I kind of just end up standing there and not really engaged and just feeling a bit out of place.

ELIAS: Discuss your own experiences with Starting a Conversation. When you are ready, move on to Step 2. Sometimes, it can be difficult to know what to do or say to start a conversation. Sometimes, it can be hard to work out whether a person wants to talk to us or not. People may give us verbal or visual clues to help us work out what they are thinking or feeling. Some visual clues that people give to show they want to start a conversation could be making more eye contact with us or using open body language. Someone may give us a verbal clue by asking us a question to show they want to start a conversation. Watch the next clip and see if you can pick out the visual and verbal clues that Tom and Sam show us about how they are thinking and feeling.

BEN: Hello, Tom. Sorry I’m late. How long have you been in here?

TOM: Seven minutes.

BEN: This is my friend, Sam, he has just moved here from town. I’ll be back in a sec, I’m just going to grab some drinks, okay?

SAM: Thanks, Ben. Nice to meet you, mate. Ben’s told me a lot about you.

TOM: 25 million people work in the coffee industry.

SAM: Oh, is that right?

TOM: 75 per cent of coffee are grown – is grown on small farms in Latin America, East Asia and Africa.

SAM: Oh, yeah? Mm.

TOM: 950 billion cups of coffee are drunk each year.

SAM: So, I guess my 20 cups a day is nothing then?

TOM: Americans consume half the world’s coffee in the world.

SAM: Mm, mm.

BEN: Here we are.

SAM: Cheers.

TOM: You forgot the spoons. Don’t worry, I’ll get them.

BEN: So, how was Tom?

SAM: He’s not very friendly, is he? I mean, he didn’t want to talk to me, he just wanted to talk about coffee. I was wondering if it’s he does not like the look of me or something? Whatever. That is one of your friends I’m not seeing any more of.

BEN: Yeah, he’s all right, he just finds it difficult to start a conversation with someone he doesn’t know, okay?

ELIAS: When Sam greets Tom, he doesn’t respond or make eye contact. Sam raises his eyebrows and shrugs his shoulders showing he is a bit surprised. Then Sam faces Tom and leans towards him, showing that he would like to have a conversation with him. In the silence that follows, Tom does not look at Sam or acknowledge his smile of encouragement because he does not see it. When Tom does begin to speak, it’s not about anything that Sam can easily respond to. Sam looks puzzled and looks away for a moment. Tom continues to talk about coffee. Sam gives him more signs that he is not able to join the conversation by looking around, checking his watch, taking out his mobile, but gets no response from Tom. Sam gives up trying to have a conversation with Tom and sits back in his chair, turning away from Tom, looking at his phone and looking annoyed. When Ben returns to the table, Sam smiles at him. Ben asks Sam what he thinks of Tom. Sam explains that Tom gave him the impression he was not wanting to be friendly and does not like him as he kept talking about a subject Sam knew nothing about. Talk or write about what you saw and about your own experiences with meeting new people. Have a look at the worksheets for this step. When you are ready, move on to Step 3. There are social strategies that we can use to support us when starting a conversation. Good visual strategies can include using eye contact, using open body language, smiling at people who are talking to us when appropriate, nodding if we agree with what they are saying. These let other people know that we want to start a conversation with them. Good verbal strategies can be the “WORM Technique” to start a conversation. We can say, “Mm,” to show we are listening. Have a look at the next clip and think about what happens when Tom tries some of these strategies.

VIDEO ENDS.

Unfortunately, I don't think we have got time for the rest of the film. I think I was probably talking too long to start with. But I'm very pleased to say that – I’m just going to try to minimise this now. I'm very pleased to say that two of my participants I'm working with at the moment are here and I'm going to ask them to come in and share their stories with us. I'm just going to get them. They are in the other room. Just have a look, this is some feedback that other people have given me about working on this resource. (pause). It doesn’t look like there's lots of people watching this but I think there is. That's wonderful. Thank you very much. Okay. All right. So, we’ve talked about some questions that I'm going to ask you. You have had some time to think about the questions. So, I have been working with you both most of the year?

LYLE: Most of the year, yeah.

ELAINE: Most of the year, yes, in a group setting, Yes, Using the SocialEyes resource. Okay, I will start off by asking you Jimmy. How do you feel that attending the sessions has helped you?

JIMMY: It gives me a routine. Some of the training has been really getting me out of my room, getting - interacting with people in a relatively safe place, just trying to open up, networking again.

ELAINE: Yeah.

JIMMY: It's been a while since I have tried to go back and interact socially.

ELAINE: You are thinking of coming back to university to study? Yes. Has it made you feel a bit more confident?

JIMMY: Yes. In talking with you, you are working at Curtin, so at least I’ll have someone at Curtin to chat with at Curtin. Yes, so I’m looking at Curtin to come back and do a postgraduate degree. I was doing engineering. I did engineering. I'm thinking about going back and doing a postgrad. So, at least it's contact with people that I can work with.

ELAINE: Yes. That’s good. Thank you. Thanks, Jimmy. And, Lyle, we will go to you now. So, you come to the sessions, you also have a mentor here, part of the specialist mentoring program at Curtin, what is the difference between what we do and what you get from your mentor and your speech therapist?

LYLE: I kind of feel it’s (inaudible) – what I’ve done with Elaine has been kind of in addition what I’ve learnt with speech therapy and my mentoring. Other things I’ve learnt have been kind of the practical aspects of social interaction and communication, whereas with speech therapists, it's been more along the lines of, like, trying to gauge emotions in people and, like, the emotional aspects of communication. And, yeah, it's kind of been helping having those two different things but then working together, have been a big help.

ELAINE: Okay, thank you very much. I think a lot of people that come and work with me in the program - and I'm not sure if this applies to you guys as well - have had lots of therapy and are really therapied out. The comment on the slide that you can see is - if I can share my screen again. Somebody actually said that the environment improves communication and reduces threshold fear. What he meant by that was that going to a psychologist or a hospital setting or any clinical setting can induce a lot of anxiety about how you are going to perform, et cetera. Whereas, our setting is a much more informal and - do you feel that it feels like therapy?

JIMMY: No.

ELAINE: No. It doesn't. I don't feel like it does either even though, strangely, I come under therapeutic supports through the NDIS in the category. Okay. Feedback from parents is always really good, positive feedback as well. If anybody would like to ask me more, I'm very happy to take more questions et cetera on email. I'm sure you can get my email from the people that organise Pathways. Just looking at some active recruiters of people with autism - Bank West, BHP, who think you are possibly going to an internship – Lyle’s got an internship interview in a couple of weeks.

LYLE: With BHP.

ELAINE: So, they regularly give people with neurodiversity the opportunity of internships there. Auticon, UK government, Proctor and Gamble, Glaxo Smith Kline, SAP, Passwerk, Experian, Allianz Insurance and Woodside have recently advertised internships for people on the autism spectrum. Just wrapping up. What can we as practitioners do? We can provide and promote orientation from secondary or home education to the VET, TAFE and the university sectors, provide programs that facilitate understanding and maintenance of social skills such as SocialEyes but also such as the mentoring program we have at Curtin. You’ll hear more about that later in the conference. I think Debbie is going to be running a panel and my colleague, Jasmine, will be on that. What else can we do? Autism awareness training. As Thomas Tobin was talking about earlier, you know, universal design, if you start autism awareness training in your establishment then you are giving people the tools - the lecturers, the academics the tools in which to apply universal design and make life more inclusive for people with autism. Also, we can advertise links with industry and internships through the Australian National Disability Organisation that frequently have internships twice a year. Okay. Just wrapping up there. I think we are probably out of time. There are some links for you to follow. I'm sure you probably can get a copy of this. I don't have to read out the links, do I, Elicia?

ELICIA: No, Elaine. You don't need to read the links. Your presentation will be available on the ATEND website after the conference.

ELAINE: Thank you. Well, thanks very much. Have we got any time left for any questions?

ELICIA: Actually, we have one minute left, Elaine, and we did have a question come through the chat box. Quite a few people are really keen to know what the WORM Technique described in the video is?

JIMMY: Weather –

LYLE: Occupation, recreation, media.

ELAINE: Media, yes. Thank you, guys. So, it stands for weather - it's a conversation starter. Mentioning something about the weather. It's small talk, really. Something about your job, asking somebody about their job, what do they do to relax and what sort of media do they listen to or watch. It's just an easy way to remember conversation starters.

JIMMY: What is on the news? Media, what’s on the news?

ELAINE: Oh, media, what is on the news, yes.

ELICIA: Fantastic. Thank you, Elaine, to you and your co-presenters. Congratulations on the internship, that is excellent news.