



Image from Action for Children's campaign.

## Monstrous Outrage!!

A coalition of disability rights campaigners, autistic people, parents, and autism specialists have come together to call for the withdrawal of a new advertising campaign by Action For Children, and a commitment from the charity to consult with disability advocates to prevent inaccurate and unethical depictions of autistic people in future

The advert in question depicts a young autistic person called 'Dan' talking about his experiences of living with autism and how Action for Children helped him with behavioural problems, and in particular his tendency to lash out at others who were insulting him and “pressing his buttons”.

The narration is accompanied by a cartoon in which 'Dan' is portrayed as being trapped inside a rampaging monster until he is taken under Action for Children's wing, whereupon the real Dan emerges as a vulnerable young man and the monster vanishes. The impression given by the advert is that his autistic behaviour is his own fault and has to be defeated.

This distressing advert is causing worldwide uproar amongst the autism community since it implies that autistic children are "monstrous" and blames the autistic child for lashing out at what appears to be bullying, rather than blaming the behaviour of the bullies themselves.

In just over a week, more than 1700 people have joined a Facebook group to protest the campaign <http://www.facebook.com/home.php?#/group.php?gid=47154931157> and there have been many blog posts on the subject (some of which are listed below).

The adverts and accompanying publicity can be seen on Action For Children's web site <http://www.actionforchildren.org.uk/> and on YouTube [http://uk.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_K5ISSTG-90](http://uk.youtube.com/watch?v=_K5ISSTG-90).

Action For Children have responded to the many complaints they received by sending out stock replies with the suggestion “If you would like to complain about the advert then you need to contact the Advertising Standards Authority at [www.asa.org.uk](http://www.asa.org.uk) ” Many have complained to the ASA and their decision is awaited.

While not seeking to question the motivations of Action for Children, who no doubt do wish to help troubled children, campaigners see their approach as counter-productive, liable to increase stigma against the condition, and offensive to autistic people, many of whom see autism as part of who they are and not a disorder that requires the help of Action for

Children to 'overcome'. By demonising autism in this way, the Action for Children risks demonising autistic people.

The campaigners call on Action for Children to stop this damaging campaign, commit to involving disability advocacy groups, including those organisations who are controlled by autistic people such as Autscope and the London Autistic Rights Movement, before planning any further campaigns on autism-related issues.

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### **Disability and autism organisations supporting this campaign**

- London Autistic Rights Movement <http://autreach.backpackit.com/pub/1354583>
- Autistic Self Advocacy Network, [http://www.change.org/autisticadvocacy/actions/view/action\\_for\\_children\\_unethical\\_ad\\_campaign\\_alert](http://www.change.org/autisticadvocacy/actions/view/action_for_children_unethical_ad_campaign_alert)
- Disability Equality in Education <http://www.diseed.org.uk/> (Richard Reiser)
- Assert (B&H) <http://www.assertbh.org.uk/>
- Greenwich Association of Disabled People <http://www.gad.org.uk/>
- C.A.P.A.A.S. (Children and Parents Asperger Autistic Support) <http://www.colour-seven.co.uk/capaas.html>

### **Statements from autism experts and organisations**

Members of the campaign group have sought out the opinions of disability organisations and respected specialists in the field of autism.

#### **Professor Simon Baron-Cohen of the Autism Research Centre at Cambridge University says -**

*".....We need to work to get the balance right, between using treatments for those aspects of autism that need treatment (such as the language difficulties, the epilepsy, the self-injury, the gut issues, or the learning difficulties) and encouraging those aspects of autism that do not need treatment and are special, so that the person can fulfil their potential. An image of a child as a demon in an ad campaign is equally unhelpful if we are to educate the public about autism. These issues, about language and imagery, are important if we take seriously the notion of neurodiversity, and wish to show respect towards those who are neurotypical and neuroatypical."*

#### **The National Autistic Society, in response to complaints from members says –**

*".....In particular, people have written to the NAS expressing their concerns about the way the advert depicts autism with a monster cartoon. They fear that the advert could be*

*interpreted as suggesting that autism is the fault of the individual and that behaviours associated with autism can and should be corrected.....*

*.....Autism is a serious, lifelong and disabling condition that affects an estimated half a million people in the UK. It is not the fault of the individual or the result of the way someone is brought up. Better public understanding is crucial in order to end discrimination and help people with autism enjoy the same rights and freedoms as the rest of society. The NAS is campaigning to improve public understanding and attitudes to autism. For more information, visit our campaign website at [www.think-differently.org.uk](http://www.think-differently.org.uk)”*

**Dr Mitzi Waltz, Lecturer in Autism studies at the University of Birmingham says -**

*”I had been hearing for several days about this advert. It has been incredibly distressing for many people with autism and their family members.....*

*.....This advertising campaign is disappointing and demeaning (by the way, the advert about the young carer also seems to fit the theme of accepting that children are dumped on, and that providing individual support without advocating for systems change is adequate.)”*

**Dr Tony Attwood, one of the world’s leading specialists in Autism, says –**

*“I am very concerned that the advert gives a message that children with autism and Asperger’s syndrome are dangerous and potentially disturbed.*

*When the child refers to “correct errors in my behaviour” this seems to imply ‘brain washing’ and a sense of guilt for how he behaved.*

*Many of the behaviours I consider as coping mechanisms for the lack of understanding and respect from other people.*

*He refers to reacting when people insult him. Those that insulted him need the treatment.”*

**Roderick Cobley, Chair of the London Autistic Rights Movement, asks:**

*“If a black child was attacked by racist bullies and fought back, would anyone suggest the child was aggressive because he was black? Yet this advert suggests that if an autistic child lashes out against those bullying him, then that is because the autism is making him or her aggressive. There is no condemnation of the bullies themselves.”*

**Mike Stanton, author of “Learning to Live with High Functioning Autism”, speaker on autism, teacher of children with severe leaning difficulties and parent of a young man with autism says –**

*“I have very real objections to Action for Children’s treatment of autism in this ad campaign.*

*In all their other work they quite rightly see troubled children as victims of poverty, abuse, neglect and discrimination. They provide services for young adults because one of their slogans is “For as long as it takes.” They do not sign a person off at 18 or 21 if the damage has not been repaired.*

*But with autistic children they seem to think that it is the autism that is solely responsible for the child’s behaviour and ignore the injustice and abuse that compound the natural difficulties that an autistic child might face even in the best of worlds. All the problems are located within the child and they are all ascribed to the autism monster.*

*The angry child and the frightened child are the same person. The anger and the fear are united in the experience of the autistic child. The anger is born of fear and the cure for anger is to take away the fear. But in Dan's story we are shown a frightened boy inside an autism monster and the cure is to take away the monster of autism and trample it into the ground.*

*Disturbing as this campaign is, I am even more disturbed by thought that, if this is how Action for Children think about autism, what is the impact of this way of thinking on the way they respond to autistic children in their care?"*

**Carole Rutherford, co-founder of Autism In Mind says –**

*"We are greatly concerned that if people who do not understand autism are encouraged to think that people with autism are monsters, this might in time, reflect on the way in which society treats people with autism"*

**Sharon Fennell, who formed the Facebook campaign group says –**

*"So soon after the media sowed confusion over prenatal screening and the value of autistic lives, Action for Children's ad which has been broadcast repeatedly on televisions throughout the UK, portrays autism as a monster to be defeated, a monster with a nice well behaved boy trapped inside. This will further reinforce the view many have of autism as an excuse for bad behaviour, a shell entrapping a "normal" child, a source of suffering. Autistic people and families with autistic members face enough difficulties, discrimination and stress from the lack of understanding in society. Action for Children's ill judged campaign will make our lives harder."*

**Barbara Jacobs, author of "Loving Mr. Spock" says (in correspondence with AFC) –**

*".....Throughout the advert and the cartoon the child's guilt is encouraged, rather than any examination of the part that bullies played in his responses. This means that autistic children educated within your residential schools all emerge with this idea that there is something within themselves to blame when others hurt them, insult them, and pick on them? Haven't you heard of the social model of disability? One of the parents I interviewed asked, 'Why do we have such problems with professionals diagnosing our children, when the other kids just smell them out and make their lives a living hell?' Dan was perfectly right to be angry.*

*I complete my PhD in June, and will then write my next book, in which I shall tell what I've learnt about these autistic children, their parents, and their teachers, from my research. I shall have no hesitation in condemning the practices for autistic children within residential schools run by AFC, on the evidence of this advertisement, and shall use it in all my public and academic presentations as an example of bad practice....."*

**Steve McGuinness, Chair and founder member of CAPAAS, parent of a young son with asperger syndrome and a person who himself is on the autism spectrum says –**

*"I have real and valid objections to Action for Children's treatment of autism within this latest ad campaign, as they have got it so completely WRONG in assuming that it is DAN's autism alone which is responsible for his behaviour. This type of thing will only serve as an endorsement to those people who wrongly subscribe to the belief that autism is disobedience not disability, therefore dismissing/ignoring any injustices/abuses that*

*are compounded by the Autistic Spectrum Disorder. I am equally worried that this is how action for children sees autism to be, as such I worry immensely how this way of thinking impacts on the way they themselves may respond to children/ young adults with autism within their care? In one foul swoop I feel that the great and positive hard work that a great many people and groups, (my own support group included), tirelessly do in promoting autism awareness and such like will hang in the balance while this agency in promoting the DAN video on behalf of AFC to a public unfamiliar with accurate autism awareness'.*

*Autism is not a tragedy, ignorance is the real tragedy'*

### **Blog Posts:**

Action for Autism: Action for Children or action against autistic children?

<http://actionforautism.co.uk/2009/01/23/action-for-children-or-action-against-autistic-children/>

The Voyage: life with autism in Northern Ireland: Autistic children demonised by Action for Children

<http://thefamilyvoyage.blogspot.com/2009/01/autistic-children-demonised-by-action.html>

Asperger Square 8: Dan: The Real Story

<http://aspergersquare8.blogspot.com/2009/01/dan-real-story.html>

THE NEW REPUBLIC: Autistic Monster Dan (Cured)

<http://the-newrepublic.blogspot.com/2009/01/autistic-monster-dan-cured.html>

Biodiverse Resistance: Monsters and changelings and charity advertising, oh my

<http://biodiverseresistance.blogspot.com/2009/01/monsters-and-changelings-and-charity.html>

Andrea's Buzzing About: You Can't

<http://qw88nb88.wordpress.com/2009/01/26/you-cant/>

Existence is Wonderful: The Action for Children Autism Ad, Revisited

<http://www.existenceiswonderful.com/2009/01/action-for-children-autism-ad-revisited.html>

Abnormaldiversity: Dan and the Monster Autism

<http://abnormaldiversity.blogspot.com/2009/01/dan-and-monster-autism.html>

Six Home Ed in Kent: Action For Children? Don't make me laugh

<http://fivehomeedinkent.blogspot.com/2009/01/action-for-children-dont-make-me-laugh.html>

Change.org Autism Blog: My Son is Not a Monster

[http://autism.change.org/blog/view/my\\_son\\_is\\_not\\_a\\_monster](http://autism.change.org/blog/view/my_son_is_not_a_monster)