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My Son Sam – James and Sam Best

Exclusive footage of a father's radical experiment to help his autistic teenage son is the centrepiece of this week's *Australian Story*.

Dr James Best threw away the rule book on autism, deciding to take his son Sam on a backpacking trip across Africa.

Rather than keeping him to routines and “wrapping him in cotton wool”, he wanted to expose his 14-year-old son to uncertainty and unpredictability.

It was based on the idea that adolescence represents a particular opportunity for learning, similar to that during infancy when the brain is highly receptive to change.

The program follows father and son for six months as they travel from South Africa to Uganda via Namibia, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Malawi, Tanzania and Kenya.

Dr Best set up a daily program of exercises and challenges for his son as they trekked across the African continent, hopping on and off buses, shopping in local markets, visiting schools and churches, and coming face to face with wildlife on safari.

By the end of the trip, there was a clear improvement in Sam's ability to hold conversations and look after himself.

“I really think it is much more likely that Sam will be able to do things like have a relationship and have a job now than it was at the beginning of the trip,” Dr Best told *Australian Story*.

The project has been hailed as “ground-breaking” by autism researcher Dr David Trembath of Griffith University.

Dr Trembath, who studied video footage of Sam's interactions in Africa, says it may shake up the field of autism.

“Usually what we do is we take a research environment and we try and replicate the real world,” he says.

“What we're doing here is we're taking the real world and we're attempting to wrap research around it.”

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