

April is Autism Awareness Month - How do you support a child with ASD?

By [Shani Lits](#), issued by [JNPR](#)

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Every year, the importance of April being Autism month increases. Initially it started with a focus on 2 April as World Autism Awareness Day - aimed to increase awareness or understanding of the Autism Spectrum. Over the years, there has been a progression far beyond awareness, and an extension to April Autism Month. This provides an opportunity to increase awareness, acceptance, empowerment, and overall support for those on the Autism Spectrum and their families.



Furthermore, there has also been a major shift to highlight neurodiversity, embracing of uniqueness and most importantly assuming competence for every individual. However, there are still many people who are unsure about what it means for a person to be on the Autism Spectrum.

About the Autism Spectrum:

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a developmental disability that is caused by differences in how the brain functions. Individuals with ASD experience difficulties with regards to social communication and interaction, as well restricted and repetitive interests, or behaviours.

Thus, individuals with ASD may communicate, interact, behave, and learn in different ways.

ASD often emerges (and can be diagnosed) during early childhood and usually last throughout a person's life.

Prevalence*

- About 1 in 44 children have been identified with ASD
- ASD is about 4 times more common among boys than among girls
- ASD is reported to occur in all racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups

We know that individuals on the Autism Spectrum experience life differently - a wonderful description of this neurodiversity is that ASD *"is not a processing error, it's a different operating system"*. Further, we use the term spectrum to indicate they vast array of abilities and needs that individual's with ASD can experience. Together, a focus on neurodiversity and a spectrum helps us to better understand the famous quote that "if you have met one person with autism, you have met one person with Autism (Dr. Stephen Shore)". Every individual deserves to be seen as unique, encouraged to reach his or her potential and offered customised support.

At Els for Autism South Africa, we have seen the instrumental role that parents, and caregivers play in the empowerment of individuals with ASD. Despite many obstacles-including stigma, discrimination; and lack of access- supportive families can ensure that individuals with ASD lead a happy, fulfilled and encouraged life.

WHAT YOU CAN DO TO SUPPORT A FAMILY MEMBER WITH ASD

- **Communication:** Use clear and concise language, adapt augmentative and alternative communication where appropriate
- **Visual aid:** Use visual supports and structure
- **Empowerment:** Provide choice and work toward independence wherever possible
- **Prompting:** Model rather than using hands on instruction, wherever possible and set the individual up for success

- **Be patient:** Allow time to process and respond
- **Give positive feedback:** Make learning motivating and fun, and make it worthwhile

There are so many incredible evidence-based resources and supports that can be implemented by family members to help support an individual with ASD. At Els for Autism South Africa, we focus on empowering caregivers by coaching them on how to implement a variety of evidence-based practices at home.

Caregiving can be a mental challenge and can leave carers feeling drained. Consider finding a community of carers who are experiencing similar challenges so that you can build a sense of community around you. The Join Panda App is one such platform that allows for people experiencing different mental health challenges to join sessions with a guided counsellor and other facing similar challenges.

* source: *Center for Disease Control's Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring (ADDM) Network*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Shani Lits is a clinical psychologist and program director at Els for Autism South Africa, and expert speaker on The Join Panda App.

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