

Autistic Women & Nonbinary Network

INFORMATION & RESOURCES FOR PARENTS & CAREGIVERS OF NEWLY DIAGNOSED AUTISTIC KIDS



Welcome to Autistic Women & Nonbinary Network (AWN)!

We are a community by and for autistic women, girls, and nonbinary individuals. We strive to provide information, support and advocacy to autistic women, girls, nonbinary people, our families, friends and allies.



AWN respects and affirms the value of Autistic lives.

No one person is the same as any other.
Even twins can be very different from each other.
Autism and Disability are just some of the many
ways some people are different from other people.



**Our community is diverse and welcoming
to all who seek to uphold our mission.
AWN is happy to have you!**

Because autism is just one of the many ways people can be different from each other,

we seek to respect and support them as full people and as equals. There are many ideals that we believe in and act on in order to better give that respect and support:

We believe in the neurodiversity paradigm.

Autism isn't a kind of sickness that needs a cure, it is just one of the many different ways brains can develop to take in information and think through things. Support for autistic people should mean finding ways for them to go through their lives as they are instead of trying to find ways to "fix" their autism.

We believe in disability justice.

Just like people have been treated unfairly by society because of things like race, age, or gender, people are also often treated unfairly by society when they have a disability. Often, the different ways people are treated unfairly by society are connected to one another. We believe that we should change society so that it no longer treats disabled people unfairly, and that this effort is connected to the other ways people are treated unfairly.

We believe in transformative justice.

We believe in transformative justice. Many of the systems we live in respond to harm in ways that end up just making more harm. Instead of doing this even more, we think it is important that when harm happens we try to work together to figure out why the harm happened in the first place in order to prevent it from happening again. If the harm was a result of the systems we live in, we think it is important to work to change those systems so they don't continue to do the same harm.

**and we believe in having pride in our
Autistic identities.**



As the name of our organization implies, Autistic Women & Nonbinary Network works with women, as well as a large range of people that don't fit into traditional gender standards. Some of the many types of people we welcome include:

Cisgender Women -

Women that were identified as women at birth and continue to identify as women.

Transgender Women and Men -

People that were identified as a certain gender at birth, but identify as the opposite gender.

Non-binary People -

People that don't identify either as men or as women.

Genderfluid People -

People that don't have a single fixed sense of gender.

Two-Spirit People -

This is a gender identity that is taken by many people with native roots in America. This identity reflects third genders that have been common to the historic cultures of many of the native people of America.

And all other people of marginalized genders or who identify as having no gender.

Along with affirming people's gender identities and expressions, Autistic Women & Binary Network also aims to respect people's needs and boundaries when it comes to disclosure, transition, and "going stealth".

Not everyone is comfortable with being out in the open about their gender identity, or how their gender expression doesn't match the gender role they were given at birth.

It can also put people who don't fit commonly expected gender roles in danger if information about their gender identity or expression is shared with the wrong people.



For this reason certain information about people's gender identities or expression should only be shared in ways that are within the consent and boundaries of that specific person.

We also know that not everyone who has a gender identity that is different to the one that was assigned to them at birth has the ability to have a gender expression that matches with how they identify.

Even if this is the case, they should still be recognized and affirmed as the gender that they identify as.

Within this group of autistic people also affected by gender marginalization, the Autistic Women & Nonbinary Network aims to give a space where they are able to feel welcome and connected to others who have gone through some of the same issues.



We also aim to help with working through many of the unique challenges that may come up in the lives of those that are autistic women or are autistic and don't fit established gender norms.

Additionally we want to give tools and materials that can be helpful in working through those challenges.

Autistic Women & Nonbinary Network wants to build space where we can all respect and celebrate the ways we are all different as well as the many ways in which our experiences and challenges overlap.

Our society is built around the needs of non-autistic people and how they expect things to be, so most people aren't very well informed about the needs of autistic people or the way that our brains work.

Many non-autistic people may not even be in any kind of regular contact with autistic people in their day to day lives. Because of this, it can be hard for people to understand the differences between the needs of autistic people and non-autistic people.

Often times, because people aren't aware of these differences in needs, presumptions can be made about autistic people that can cause harm.

Many of the spaces and systems we live in are built in ways that fit the needs of non-autistic people much more than they fit the needs of autistic people.



Because many spaces don't take into account the needs of autistic people, it is common that these spaces can be built in ways that are in fact very distressful for autistic people.

These distressing things can often go unnoticed by non-autistic people, so it can be common that the only times when they have been in contact with autistic people and have known so have been when those autistic people were under a lot of distress.



This can lead to many people only having a view of autistic people that is limited to how autistic people function when under high amounts of distress. Because many of these distressing things can be invisible to non-autistic people it is hard for them to tell why autistic people are under distress, and they can tend to make assumptions why based on how their own brains function instead of from knowing what autistic people are going through. These assumptions can be inaccurate and very harmful.

There can be a lot of fear and worry around being diagnosed as autistic because of these inaccurate assumptions and biases, which is not good because diagnosis can be the difference between an autistic person being able to have their needs met and to better connect with those around them.

For this reason we think it is important to share the facts about autistic peoples needs and things that we go through, and to correct false ideas and assumptions around autism.

You are not alone! Welcome to a whole new understanding of you!



As the parent of a newly diagnosed autistic child, you may have many questions and concerns.

WHAT IS AUTISM? WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE AUTISTIC? WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE? HOW CAN I BEST SUPPORT AND HELP THE AUTISTIC CHILD IN MY LIFE?



To help answer these questions, we looked for answers from the real experts: autistic adults.

We have also reached out to experienced parents for their first hand knowledge, insight and wisdom in helping you to understand what can be a confusing time. It can be difficult to navigate the amount of often conflicting information available on autism today.

GUIDANCE

"After years of believing I was just as positive and accepting a parent as I could be, I stumbled upon AWN and blogs by autistic adults, and realized, I still had a lot of work to do, with fixing my own perceptions and now trying to forward the messages of autistic self advocacy. One day, my little girl will be an autistic woman, and it is my job to guide her there. This is where this organization comes in, because I had NO idea how to do it. I have no personal living as autistic knowledge. I want to be the best parent I can be, because I want her and her sister to be the best women they can become no matter what their neurodiversities are."

-Dawn

SELF LOVE

"Help her love who she is: when she is playing or studying or spinning or singing or painting or drumming or bouncing or screaming or crying or finding beauty in the most unlikely places."

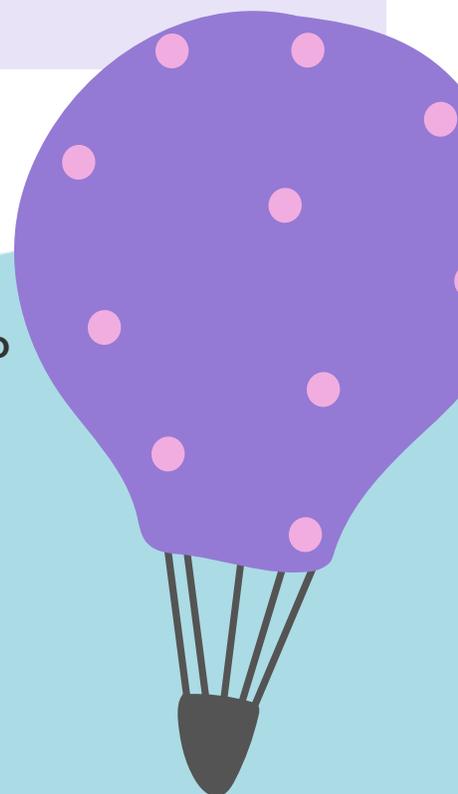
- Karen Lean, *Sincerely Your Autistic Child: What People on the Autism Spectrum Wish Their Parents Knew About Growing Up, Acceptance, and Identity*

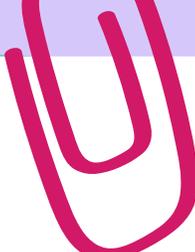
"PRESUME COMPETENCE."

-ARIANE

"Supporting my daughter's needs was paramount to helping her be happy and to healing the fear in our family. Knowing more about how her brain worked solved many mysteries for us. The daily details of this include lots of sensory activities, respecting specific daily routines, respecting her need to pull back when overwhelmed, and not getting angry when she's overwhelmed and melting down."

-Kathryn



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1. Relax. Don't freak out...your child will be okay, and so will you. They are the same child they were before you knew they were autistic. They need you not to view them as defective or broken, because a large portion of the world will be seeing them that way.
 2. There's already great variability on the spectrum as is, and layered on top of that, the way some genders present is often different than the way people expect autism to be manifested. This may cause your child to be ineligible for certain services as they may be perceived as not in need of them. Or their autistic tendencies may be missed, misinterpreted, minimized, disregarded, or a combination of some or all of those.
 3. It might be a lonely road for them and for you. I've gone to "autism playdates" where my child is surrounded by a sea of boys. She were in a therapy program where for nearly a year she was the only girl. And a lot of literature, research, and even anecdotal material one might come across is very heavily male-skewed.
 4. You might have to "unlearn" nearly everything you know about autism because a lot of it is likely very biased and comes from a deficit-based perspective.
 5. The way many people raise their children may not be the best way for you to raise yours. In order to be the parent that they need, there are likely going to be some things that you have to leave by the wayside, and others that you might have to embrace. And that's okay.
 6. **PROTECT THEM.** The rate of sexual and physical abuse that children with disabilities encounter is astounding. Furthermore, there might be characteristics that they have as an autistic person that may unfortunately make it more challenging for them to always be able to discern when they are being taken advantage of and/or when they're at risk. You might have to be very explicit and very blunt about things. You might be uncomfortable doing that, but you'd be a lot more uncomfortable later if you could have possibly helped them avoid a horrible experience.

- Morénike

LISTEN

"Your child is a gift, first and foremost. You have the opportunity before you to raise a strong, amazing woman, no matter her diagnosis. Chances are the success she finds in life will not look like you imagine it to look, but it doesn't mean it will be less fulfilling for her. Be sure to learn her strengths and work in them and **ALWAYS LISTEN.**"

- Tara

DO

Accept your daughter, love her, accommodate her needs, advocate for her, listen to her, teach her how to assert boundaries and respect those boundaries once asserted, encourage her passions and interests, and shut down any bullying and teasing targeted at her in your presence.

DON'T

Demand that she look or act normal, blame her for being bullied, suggest that she could overcome [difficulty] if she "tried harder," blame her or make fun of her for her meltdowns, or discourage non-hazardous stimming. Remember the following: she's trying as hard as she can, she is more confused and baffled by allistic people than they are of her, and meltdowns are not tantrums but rather a human reaction to stress overload.

-ischemgeek

"DON'T SPEND YOUR DAYS AND NIGHTS WORRYING SO MUCH, BECAUSE YOU WILL MISS THE JOY OF WATCHING YOUR CHILD GROW."

-KIMBERLY



WHAT IS AUTISM?

Autism is a condition that makes it hard to take part in the society we live in, and to have our needs met.



The spaces we exist in and the social patterns that are considered acceptable or not acceptable are based on the needs and expectations of people that are non-autistic and fit into a social standard that wasn't built to consider the ways that autistic people are different from non-autistic people.

Because the differences between how we are and the way society expects us to be creates difficulties for autistic people trying to live and participate in society, autism is considered a disability.



Autism is considered a developmental disability

because the differences between autistic people and non-autistic people can be seen as early as when we're 2 years old, and those differences continue to show in the ways we grow in ways that are different from the ways non-autistic people are expected to grow.

Children are expected to be able to do certain things and pick up certain traits at certain times and ages when growing up. For example, some of the things children at the age of 3 are expected to be able to do are things like:

speak in small sentences,
complete small puzzles,
and be able to walk up and down
sets of stairs.



A developmental disability would be a condition that made it so that the child was only able to do those things at a later age, or was never able to do those things they were expected to do at that age.

It is common that autistic children can have many delays in developing the ability to do certain things at the same times a non-autistic child would be expected to, or not develop certain skills at all.

It is also nearly as common for autistic children to simply develop the ability to do certain things outside of the order children are expected to learn those things.

The "double empathy" issue is something that happens a lot with autistic people, most often when engaging with non-autistic people.

Non-autistic people communicate with each other in ways that are intuitive to them. They don't have to think twice about things like how certain non-verbal cues take on certain meanings, or even how subtleties in the way they say certain things convey a large amount of meaning among each other.



Unfortunately it can be difficult for autistic people to either convey or pick up on a lot of this meaning that non-autistic people are used to communicating to each other.

This creates difficulty for autistic people and their ability to engage with many of the people around them, as well as difficulty for non-autistic people to comfortably communicate with autistic people.

That being said, generally, autistic people tend to find it much easier to communicate with each other than to communicate with non-autistic people.



There are also many common autistic traits that are tied to repetition.

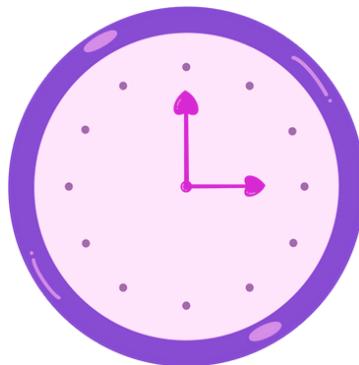
"Stimming" is one of those traits.

"Stimming" is the name we give to repetitive things we do,

often in order to keep ourselves calm or to help deal with our senses being overwhelmed.

Common "stims" include things like rocking back and forth, wagging your hands around, spinning, or things like repeating phrases & noises, or singing aloud.

There is a very wide range of "stims" autistic people take on that isn't limited to what has been listed.



Another trait tied to repetition is that many autistic people enjoy having set routines for things, and can often find it distressing when they have to suddenly change from that set routine.

While many autistic qualities are connected to how our brains work, autism doesn't just affect the brain, it affects all the parts of the body that our brain is connected to.



The brain is connected to the rest of the body through a network of cell tissue called nerves that are connected through your whole body.

When you sense something it is because the organ in your body that makes that sense picked up a signal and sent it up to your brain through your network of nerves.

For example, when you taste something it is because your tongue has sensors on it that are sensitive to the types of molecules that are commonly found in food.

When the sensors on your tongue are in contact with one of those molecules it sends a signal from your tongue down through your nerves and up to your brain. Your brain takes that signal and turns into feelings and sensations. Similar steps take place for your other senses.

Autism often has an effect on many of the steps related to our senses because of how our senses are connected to our nerves and our brain.

This most often shows through autistic people either being more sensitive to certain things we come across or less sensitive than non-autistic people.

Differences in the connection between our brains and our bodies are probably why it is also common for autistic people to tend to have issues with things like balance and coordination.



While there are many qualities that have been listed, autistic people are as diverse as any other group of people with their own strengths and weaknesses.

The amount of support that each autistic person needs can vary greatly between individuals and even in the same person from day to day. However, each and every autistic person experiences and interprets the world around them in distinctly autistic ways.

**The best way to learn about autism
is to ask an autistic person!
Autistic people are the only true
experts on autism!**

WHAT IS ACCEPTANCE?

**"CHANGING THE WORLD FOR MY CHILD AND
NOT CHANGING THEM FOR THE WORLD. "**

-GEE



"It means not changing what fundamentally makes my child who she is. It means respecting her stims, it means respecting her sensory needs, it means presuming that my child is as competent as the next. It means giving her the space and accommodations to succeed with her unique neurology."

-Sandy

"That one's autism diagnosis should be viewed in the same manner as other core characteristics of that individual--as part of who they are, and as such something to be celebrated. Just as someone might be proud of being Latina, or proud of being a woman, etc, they should identify with and be comfortable with who they are. And Autistic is who they are--along with all of the other components of their personhood.

Autism acceptance is critical."

-Morénike





"Autism isn't a choice, and we can't change it,
but we can change our perceptions.
Radical acceptance allows us to embrace
Autistic life, with all of its joy and sorrow."
-Autistic, Typing from "Autism Moon"

**"ACCEPTANCE MEANS NOT TRYING TO CHANGE WHO I AM."
-TERRI**

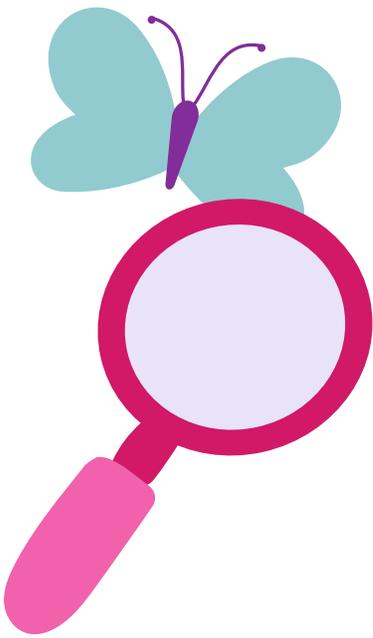
"Parents who practice acceptance will not allow anyone to devalue their children. They will not allow anyone to value their children on the basis of what they can do, but on the basis of their humanity."

-Amy Sequenzia, awnnetwork.org/autism-acceptance-requires-action



"If you want your child to learn to love
themselves for the amazing person that
they are, then you must learn to accept
that they are Autistic, and they are
exactly who they were meant to be."

-Lei



"I'd ask parents and caregivers to recognize that she does NOT have to change or hide who she is in order to find someplace where she fits in or can be accepted in the world. The world is big. We do not live in a monoculture. Autistic girls learn and gain skills and develop relationships differently from most people, not in a way that's inherently defective or insufficient. It's not wrong that the way she works is very different from most other people. People find all different ways of living in the world."

-Emily

**"Fear is the enemy. Hope is everything.
Acceptance is how it happens."**

-Lynne Soraya, *Sincerely Your Autistic Child: What People on the Autism Spectrum Wish Their Parents Knew About Growing Up, Acceptance, and Identity*

"Autism is deep love. People write it off as special interest or obsession, but even if it's not something I can excel at, I can excel at loving what I love, loving what I do, loving who I love. Autism is being able to be consumed by love and interest, it is giving 100% because it is an insult to the thing one loves to give any less. Autism is going big or going home."

-Kassiane

"SUPPORT. INCLUSION. RESPECT."

-A.H.



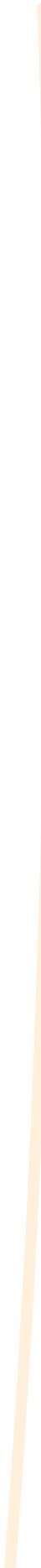
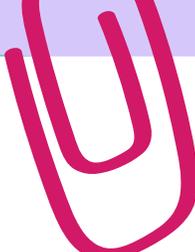


People will tell you 'they're still the same child they were before the label' and that is true. You already know your child -- the label is confirmation, not change. People will also tell you your child is not defined by their autism, that it is something outside of who they are and that they can overcome it. This is not completely true.

Autism is pervasive -- that is to say, there is no "place" inside your child that is the not-Autistic place. They are not defined by their autism, yes -- they are many, many things and will become many, many things through the years and autism is only one of those things.

However, autism is big and you cannot ignore it away or define it away or trick it into going away by not using the words about it. Autism is the way your child's brain is put together. If you believe in a marvelous God, then you must believe there is a purpose for the unusual and beautiful way your child's brain was made. If you do not believe in God, then you must come to accept that nature has mysterious ways and has produced this wonderful and beautiful child of yours that you are tasked to love and accept the way they were born.

You cannot peel away the autism. You cannot discipline it away, drug it away, cut it away with surgery. It is an indelible part of who your child is and your job as parent, grandparent, caregiver, person who loves this child ... your job is to help them grow up to be the best Autistic person they can be. They may speak; They may never speak.



They may drive a car; driving may be beyond their abilities. They may marry, raise children, live in the suburbs with a dog and a cat. They may live their life alone and happy to be that way. You cannot predict the adult they will be by looking at the child they are -- this is true of all children, but infinitely more so with your Autistic child.

We are still learning about autism across the life-span but one thing we do know is that Autistic children who might appear nearly identical at age six turn out to be completely different at age twenty-six.

So focus on who you have in front of you right now and don't let fear lead you down paths that damage your beautiful child for the uncertain promise of a future outcome. Talk to other parents of Autistic children. Talk to grown Autistic adults. Learn as much as you can directly from people living it and filter the words of "experts" through the sieve of lived experiences. Finally, if you still feel tempted to try to remove your child's autism as if they were an apple and you could wield a corer, skillfully dissecting and discarding everything you deem not-normal about them, I would like you to read a short story by Nathaniel Hawthorne, "The Birth-Mark." Read it and reflect on what it might mean for you as the caretaker of an Autistic child.

-Maxfield

FURTHER READING

"Autism Moon" by Autistic Typing
facebook.com/AutisticTyping/posts/413085455958525

We Are Like Your Child
wearelikeyourchild.blogspot.com

"What is Acceptance?" by Parenting Autistic Children With Love & Acceptance
autloveaccept.wordpress.com/2015/03/12/what-is-acceptance

"Here, Try on Some of My Shoes" by Radical Neurodivergence Speaking
timetolisten.blogspot.com/2013/09/here-try-on-some-of-my-shoes.html

"The Cost of Compliance is Unreasonable" by Love Explosions
loveexplosions.net/2013/01/30/the-cost-of-compliance-is-unreasonable

Non Speaking Autistic Speaking by Amy Sequenzia
nonspeakingautisticspeaking.blogspot.com

Emma's Hope Book
emmashopebook.com

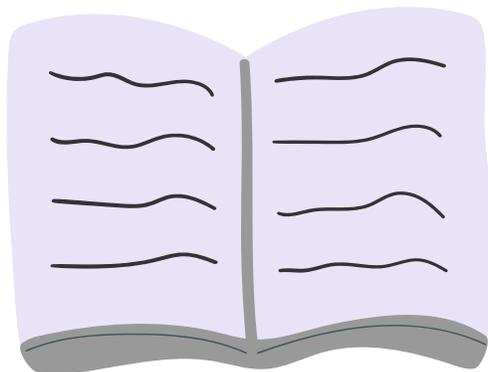
Autistic Spectrum Parenting
asparenting.com

Ollibean
ollibean.com/blog

Foundations for Divergent Minds
divergentminds.org

Behavior Plan for Parents & Caregivers of Autistic Kids
neurodiversitylibrary.files.wordpress.com/2017/01/parent-plan-1.pdf

"Are We Trying Too Hard to Teach Our Autistic Children?" by Suburban Mamma
suburbanautistics.blogspot.com/2014/08/are-we-trying-too-hard-to-teach-our.html





facebook.com/awnnetwork.org



instagram.com/awn_network



twitter.com/awnnetwork_



awn-network.tumblr.com

AWN INITIATIVES:

DIVERGENT

awnnetwork.org/divergent-when-disability-and-feminism-collide

HEALTH CARE RESOURCES

awnnetwork.org/autistic-womens-health-provider-survey-results

AUTISTIC PEOPLE OF COLOR FUND

autismandrace.com/autistic-people-of-color-fund/

SINCERELY, YOUR AUTISTIC CHILD:

What People on the Autism Spectrum Wish Their Parents Knew About Growing Up, Acceptance, and Identity

beacon.org/Sincerely-Your-Autistic-Child-PI685.aspx

CONTACT: awnnetwork.org/contact-awn

DONATE: awnnetwork.org/donate-to-awn