

Four A's of AUTISM

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1. AWARENESS

2. ACCEPTANCE

3. APPRECIATION

4. ACTION

Parents are responsible for recognizing and appreciating the strengths of their children. Autistic children frequently face significant challenges. However, the characteristics often identified as “disadvantages” can be, and should be, seen as advantages. I suggest that we transition from looking at individuals on the autism spectrum as a collection of deficits, disorders and disabilities to looking at them as a collection of abilities and strengths. We can do this by considering the Four A's of Autism: Awareness, Acceptance, Appreciation and Action.

Awareness

Society now has a greater awareness of autism than was found in previous generations. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, we recognize that 1 in 54 people is diagnosed with autism — almost two percent of the population. In general, parents, pediatricians, educators and employers are aware of the growing number of individuals on the autism spectrum and recognize the common symptoms of the condition. This awareness builds a solid foundation for developing the other parts necessary to view autism as a strength.

Acceptance

Acceptance occurs when we recognize that autism is here to stay. This is true for both society and for a family with an individual on the spectrum. Although there are therapies and interventions to help an individual with his/her challenges and difficulties, that person will always be autistic. A signal that people or organizations have moved from awareness to acceptance is when they start asking, “What are we going to do *with* autism?” instead of “What are we going to do *about* autism?” They will also ask, “How can we *use* the strengths in a person with autism?” instead of “How can we *change* this person's deficits?” For example, many on the spectrum have very strong interests. They focus on one interest and become fixated. As a boy I had a strong interest in airplanes – and still do! I loved anything related to airplanes, and spent much time reading and talking about them. One point of view could be that I spent too much time focused on this interest and not enough time doing schoolwork, or anything else for that matter. On the other hand, my special interest could be employed as a launchpad for teaching math, English and science by **using** the interest subject as integral to teaching content. These special interests can be considered a pathway to enhance learning and other aspects of a child's life. Accept the special interest as a strength. From what I've seen, every successful person on the autism spectrum has found a way to leverage this passion into some sort of employment and become a regional, national or international expert in that area. Accept, embrace and work with autism. Don't try to “fix” it.

Appreciation

When people on the spectrum are valued for their contributions to society, they feel appreciated. Many individuals and companies have embraced autism. Software companies such as SAP, Microsoft, Apple and Google are part of a growing number of organizations actively seeking out individuals on the spectrum. These firms know such individuals have an impressive skillset that is well suited to the detail-oriented computer world. However, it's important to remember that many individuals have abilities in other areas and/or require more supports. For example, I know a man on the spectrum who didn't talk very much. His communication skills were poor and he was intellectually challenged. How could his skills be appreciated in society? His special interest was pulling laundry out of a dryer, folding each item perfectly and ensuring that the clothing had perfect creases. He loved the sensory input from the laundry – the heat and the smell. As a grown adult, he chose folding laundry for his employment. He's fulfilled, and is contributing to society. Society appreciates him and his skill.

How can we use the strengths in a person with autism?

Parents spend more time with their children than anyone else and play a key role in fostering their child's key interests.

Action

Action is the **glue** joining the other three A's together. Each person in the autism community must work to raise awareness, encourage acceptance and foster appreciation for the ability and skills autistic people bring to humanity. The key word is "work." Parents are the experts on their children. Parents spend more time with their children than anyone else and play a key role in fostering their child's key interests. A good way to determine the child's interests is to observe how the child spends most of his/her time. Is it lining up cars? Is it taking apart electronics? Is it flight simulators? Is it folding laundry? Whatever your child's focused interest, be mindful that this is the area in his/her life in which he/she will most likely be successful. Once a strong interest is identified, it is vitally important to follow up with an action plan to develop those skills. It is never too early to start developing skills that could one day lead to future areas of study and/or employment. For example, suppose a child is fascinated by using a flight simulator on the computer. This interest is a gift as now the parent or teacher could teach math, English, science, or other subjects using this passion as a launchpad. As part of fostering interests, ask yourself: "Where can these skills go, and how can these skills lead to future areas of study or possible employment?" The answer may not always be obvious or present itself right away. But it should always be on a parent's mind.

If you have met one autistic person, you have met one person on the autism spectrum.

What would the world be like if we united in discovering the strengths of autism?

Conclusion

There is enormous diversity within the autism spectrum. If you have met one autistic person, you have met one person on the autism spectrum. Each individual with autism is unique. There are some characteristics that are common to autistic people. However, there is huge variation within that spectrum. The potential of your child is unlimited. Ask yourself what your child can do, and what your child's strengths are. What makes your child unique? So often we hear in conversations a focus on a child's limitations. But, what would the world be like if we united in discovering the strengths of autism? I found my autism superpower and you can help your children find theirs too!



Stephen Shore, Ed. D., was diagnosed with autism as a child. Nonspeaking until the age of four, Stephen is now a professor at Adelphi University where his research focuses on matching best practices to the needs of people with autism. He has written many books, including: *College for Students with Disabilities*; *Understanding Autism for Dummies*; *Ask and Tell*; and *Beyond the Wall*. Currently, he serves on the board of Autism Speaks as one of the first two autistic board members in its history, looking to improve the potential of those on the autism spectrum. He is internationally renowned for presentations, consultations and writings on lifespan issues pertinent to education, relationships, employment, advocacy, and disclosure. His latest endeavor has been working on a program called LEARN AUTISM, which is a web-based learning resource to help parents on their autism journey. For more information please go to <https://www.learnautism.com>.



Originally published in
AUTISM ADVOCATE Parenting Magazine Oct 2020
www.autismadvocatemagazine.com

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