

AFRIAUTISM

SPECIALTY PUBLICATION THAT HIGHLIGHTS INFORMATION ON AUTISM IN AFRICA

**WINTER
ISSUE**



Autism Advocacy

AND THE IMPORTANCE OF
COMMUNITY SUPPORT
PROGRAMS

**Fermented
Food benefits**
for individuals on the
autism spectrum

**Uvile (Vee)
Makalima**

A 20-year-old autistic
adult with a skill that
helps grow his family
business

The Real Housewives of Gqeberha's

**ASHLEIGH
MATHER**

On being a mom of two autistic kids

**Autism
& Pica**



Welcome to Afriautism Magazine, a specialty publication that highlights information on autism in Africa. We are thrilled to have you join our community. As we navigate the world of autism spectrum disorder (ASD), our mission is to inform, educate, and inspire. Whether you're a parent, caregiver, teacher, or advocate, this magazine is your resource for insights, stories, and support.

In this Winter issue, we feature Ashleigh Mather, a remarkable autism mom from Gqeberha, (South Africa) on page 10. Her journey with her two sons on the spectrum is both heartwarming and enlightening.

We also explore autism advocacy in Texas, United States of America with Grace Siller on page 17. Nteboheleng Ralitsele shares two challenging experiences that redefined her understanding of autism.

If you've been facing challenges in locating meals suitable for children with autism and sensory sensitivities, your search ends here. We are honoured to introduce Sensory Friendly Meals Insert publication that focuses solely





on autism-friendly nutrition. On this exclusive premiere edition, learn more about the benefits of fermented foods for children and adults on the spectrum. There is a gluten-free banana muffin recipe we hope your little picky eater might love.

Thank you for being a part of this journey. Your dedication inspires us to keep pushing boundaries, breaking stereotypes, and creating a brighter future for the autism community at large. Stay warm this winter, stay informed and connected, and let us continue to spread autism awareness across the continent of Africa and beyond.

Lerato Mosedame

Editorial Director

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On the *Cover*.
Ashleigh Mather

AFRIAUTISM

M A G A Z I N E

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SENSORY FRIENDLY MEALS

WINTER 2024

FERMENTED
FOODS
BEVERAGES

simple sensory-friendly
vegetable soup

Baking
Recipes

RECENT STATS ON AUTISM PREVALANCE

As we navigate the intricate tapestry of human existence, one thread stands out —autism. This neurological and developmental condition transcends borders, cultures, and backgrounds. Let us delve into the prevalence of autism, both in Africa and around the world.



Autism spectrum disorder is a condition that is characterized by a specific set of behaviours that affect an individual's ability to interact and communicate with others. These behaviours include poor motor skills, repetitive behaviour, delayed or impaired speech, challenges with cognitive functioning, and challenges with sensory sensitivities. Individuals with autism often exhibit very narrow interests and struggle with comprehension of social cues.

Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) has witnessed a surge in autism research since 2006. While challenges persist, such as limited resources and varying diagnostic criteria, there's a growing commitment to understanding and

supporting individuals with autism. The Center for Disease Control (CDC) reported that in 2018, the rate of autism in the United States was 1 child in 44. In 2023, the World Health Organisation (WHO) estimated that across the world, about 1 in 100 children has autism, a staggering increase in autism prevalence in just over six years.

Although no single cause has been identified, researchers concur that there may be genetic and environmental factors associated with autism. Even though perceived as a lifelong condition, autism can be managed through broad interventions. Early diagnosis remains crucial for improved outcomes.

Autistic children may exhibit some or all of the following signs and symptoms.

Delayed or impaired speech

Children with ASD might exhibit delays in speech and language development.

Avoids eye contact

People with ASD may find it challenging to maintain eye contact during conversations.

Repetitive behaviours

Individuals may engage in repetitive actions, such as lining up toys or repeating phrases (echolalia).

Challenges with understanding social cues.

Understanding others' thoughts and emotions can be challenging for those with ASD.

Lack of facial expression.

Difficulty displaying emotions like happiness, sadness, or anger.



Sensory sensitivities

Children on the autism spectrum may have heightened sensitivity to sounds, smells, tastes, or textures.



Rigid Routines

Autistic individuals may display a strong need for routines and distress when routines are disrupted.

Hyperactivity or inattention

Children on the autism spectrum may have behavioural traits like hyperactivity or impulsivity.

Gastrointestinal Challenges

Some individuals with ASD experience gut problems such as constipation, diarrhea and other digestive problems.

Please note that experiences, strengths, challenges, and preferences of autistic individuals vary significantly from one individual to the next. For more information on autism visit the World Health Organization's website

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Ashleigh Mather



Words By: Lerato Mosedame
Pretoria, South Africa

On being a mother of two boys who have been diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder.



Ashleigh Mather is not your typical housewife. She's a devoted wife to Martin Mather, a remarkable mother, and a force to be reckoned with on *The Real Housewives of Gqeberha*, a reality show broadcast on Showmax. Beyond the glitz and glamour, Ashleigh's heart lies with her two incredible boys Aryan and Phoenix who are on the autism spectrum. Ashleigh's journey isn't about designer handbags, expensive clothes and shoes and fabulous outings; hers is entrenched in unconditional love, resilience, altruism and advocating for her boys.

Unpretentious, tender-hearted, and a burst of transferable laughter, Ashleigh makes everyone she speaks with, feel special. When I asked how she'd describe herself to our readers, she reiterated my sentiments and said 'I would definitely say that I'm a loving, passionate, kind person. I'm a very creative person as well.'

For most parents, finding out that their child is on the spectrum can be an unfortunate experience. For Ashleigh, hearing that her 10-year-old

son was on the autism spectrum took her by surprise.

"I was very shocked. It just took me a minute to process it. I had already known that my son was different because he wasn't talking. So, I noticed some things, but I didn't think there was something to be concerned about. Obviously, there's the repetitive behaviour and sensory overload, he wasn't coping, he wasn't engaging and there was no eye contact. He wasn't doing basic things that other kids were doing at his age - like solving puzzles, doing schoolwork, just engaging. He hummed nursery rhymes before he ever spoke a word, and even now, he's going to be 10 in a few months and he can only say up to a three-word sentence, two to three words is the max we use" says Ashleigh.

When Aryan was a toddler, before being diagnosed with autism, Ashleigh and Aryan's teacher would often lock horns over Aryan's performance in class. Aryan's teacher was concerned and urged Ashleigh and her husband Martin, to take Aryan to be assessed. At the time, Aryan was only two and a half years old, and Ashleigh felt he was too young to participate in assessment tests.

'So, Aryan's teachers called us in the first time, and I refused because I said he's too young for us to assess him and put labels on him. And then months went by, and he hit three years old. They called us in for the second time, with two teachers and the principal and then they said, "Listen, we see some signs. If you're not going to take him to see somebody, at least get him assisted because we see signs and we are concerned". So, I made an appointment with one of the best therapists in Port Elizabeth, and like, you know, the assessment process, it's not just one meeting. The first one; you go in as the parent, and you tell them your concerns. You take the kid in, and you do an interview together, then she does another one, a

one-on-one assessment, then you go back, and you get your feedback, and then you go back again, to get your recommendations and all of that. We did everything she suggested, putting Aryan into a special needs school. I also had to put him on anxiety medication because he was struggling with sensory issues and just being overwhelmed altogether' says Ashleigh.





Her youngest child, Phoenix is also autistic. Having dealt with Aryan being on the autism spectrum, Ashleigh and her husband were well-versed in identifying autism signs and symptoms. When Phoenix started displaying some of his autism symptoms, they decided to get him assessed right away.

'So, me and Martin said, let's rather get him assessed before the teacher calls us in and tells us to take him. The nice thing is the school that Phoenix attended, the owner of the school, her daughter was also autistic. So yeah, Phoenix was also assessed around the same age as Aryan, I think three years old, although with Phoenix he was not as aggressive as Aryan. He doesn't require medication or anything like that. Obviously, speech and occupational therapy were a must. They also told us he needs to go to a special needs school where he can get one-on-one teaching and we did all the recommendations yeah, like they say early intervention is the best thing for these kids.'

One of the many symptoms of autism is sensory sensitivity. Autistic children may experience heightened or reduced sensitivity to specific textures, sights, smells, and sounds. Ashleigh had to learn to navigate around her children's sensory challenges.

"Aryan has very hectic sensory issues. For example, we have to cut all the tags on the T-shirts because they don't like them. Phoenix doesn't like wearing vests or long pants. He wants to wear shorts and T-shirts. They also don't like wearing shoes, so it can be raining, and they don't want to wear shoes, but obviously, sometimes I do insist. This one time when Aryan was just diagnosed with autism, I didn't realize that taking him out to restaurants or places that were busy and noisy would be so overwhelming for him. And you know, sometimes these kids, go to random people and bond with a complete stranger. The other time we were at the restaurant, that had a play area, and it was super busy. Aryan threw a plate at another



family and missed a person's head, and we were so shocked, but obviously it was overwhelming for him and, I didn't realize that at the time.' She narrates.

"Aryan threw a plate at another family and missed a person's head"

In this instance, Ashleigh and her husband were fortunate because the family at which her son threw the place, understood that he is neurodivergent. Ashleigh commented on the misleading portrayal of autism in the media worldwide. 'Autism is nothing like what people see in the movies. There is a

misconception about autism - that all autistic children are highly intelligent. I am lucky that my son is very smart, but I have a lot of mommy friends with kids that are low functioning that are 13, and 14 years old, and are still on nappies. They are very dependent on their parents; their parents can't even go to the toilet without them being attached or wanting to sit on them. Another misconception is the question that I get asked often if my children will outgrow autism; and I'm like, firstly, if you research anything about autism, you will learn that it is a neurological brain disorder, which means they are born that way. There's no outgrowing it.' she says.

Ashleigh is correct in saying that children cannot outgrow autism, it is a lifelong condition and there is currently no known cure. Research shows that there may be genetic and environmental factors linked to the onset of autism in children, but the exact cause of autism is currently unknown.



I decided to draw Ashleigh's attention to the TV episode in question, wherein she was sharing with her cast members of The Real Housewives of Gqeberha and was accused of excessive drinking and using her children's diagnosis as an excuse to consume alcohol.

'So firstly, one of the reasons why I decided to do the show was because I strongly wanted to create awareness around autism. That was my biggest motivation for doing the show. I wanted to create awareness around autism, and I just wanted people to understand that some of us are fighting our own battles at home with our kids, and we are all struggling. I have been at home for the past ten years and, I'm very grateful and blessed that I can stay home with my kids because you know, they need that extra attention. My kids would have never progressed if I had to work a full day's job and send them to a special needs school because, you know, these special needs schools, you pay such a high price, and that is excluding speech therapy, medications, or anything like that.' She points out.

In South Africa, there are about five government schools for autistic learners and the placement waiting list is long. The rest of the remaining autism-centered special schools across the country are run privately and cost an arm and a leg. Some parents resort to home-schooling their autistic children while others have no choice but to place them in neurotypical schools.

Ashleigh continues talking about her experience “Another thing that I think people don't realize is how hard it is to teach autistic kids basic life skills, like for me to explain to my kids, say maybe there's load shedding. How am I going to explain to them?” Ashleigh asks.

Autistic children may fail to understand social cues such as taking turns, reading facial expressions, and understanding social etiquette. In most incidents, autistic children feel frustrated and misunderstood because they don't know how to express their needs. This frustration may appear in the form of self-harm behaviour, temper tantrums, shouting and screaming, hitting, pulling and pushing, and engaging in repetitive behaviour to self-soothe. Seeing your child behave in such a manner may leave you feeling distraught as a parent.

‘There's a lot of things that go with having special needs children and I also believe that for me to be a good mom, I need to be in the right frame of mind. I need to take care of myself.’ Says Ashleigh

As a mother of two special needs children, Ashleigh understands the importance of taking care of her mental and physical health. A lot of caregivers are physically strained and emotionally exhausted. It is difficult to care for your loved ones when you have nowhere to draw support, strength and comfort. When she spoke about Aryan and Phoenix on the show, Ashleigh became emotional, it was clear that her children's condition cuts deep, and sadly, she is not the only one.

Research shows that mothers of autistic children often deal with a myriad of mental health issues including stress, anxiety, loneliness, depression, and a deep sense of guilt. Married couples divorce, in some families, fathers leave, and mothers are judged and blamed by their in-laws, the community and by religious and cultural institutions for giving birth to an autistic child.

“The ladies would say that I drink a lot on the show; and then in my head, I'm like, you know, when you go out with your girlfriends, aren't you supposed to let loose and have a good time? I mean because when you're out with the ladies, you enjoy yourself. You literally let your head down. So, they were constantly judging me and saying, oh, I drink too much, blah, blah, blah, whatever. At the end of the day, I thought to myself, yeah, I am who I am. I don't care if you think I drink too much. I had a very hectic childhood with a father who abused my mom. My parents split up. I had to move back and forth. My dad kicked me out. My mom kicked me out so I would experience so much trauma in my life. I've coped through the worst parts of my life and going through those experiences as a child and as a teenager, has made me the person I am today and has made me as strong as I am today. And also, it taught me about the type of mother that I wanted to be’





Ashleigh is passionate about autism awareness; and uses her social media platforms as a conduit to educate her followers and offer support to other women with autistic children.

"I'm very open on [Instagram](#). People constantly DM me on Instagram. A lady reached out and she said that she just lost her sister, who committed suicide because she was a single mom raising a child on the spectrum. And now she had to take her sister's child in and raise this child and she knows nothing about autism. And I was so touched by her. I gave her my number and I said if there's anything you want to chat about or you need any advice, you're welcome to speak to me. Anytime. If anybody messages me on [Instagram](#), I always reply. Especially moms who reach out to me about autism, I always give them advice. I always give them my contact. I tell them about the signs to look out for, what to be concerned with, so I try to help

any mom who thinks that she has something to worry about. I'm not that good on [Facebook](#), if you want to see the craziness. You can get me on [TikTok](#) for that.' she chuckles.

In the grand tapestry of life, Ashleigh Mather weaves a vibrant thread; one that blends love, resilience, and advocacy. As her boys, Aryan and Phoenix, continue to grow and thrive, Ashleigh stands as a beacon of strength for the autism community. Her journey transcends reality TV glamour, touching hearts and inspiring change.

So, let's raise our virtual glasses to Ashleigh Mather—the sweetest Real Housewife who's making a real impact in the autism community!



Words By: Grace Siller
Texas, USA

AUTISM ADVOCACY AND THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNITY SUPPORT PROGRAMS

Autism advocacy has emerged as a powerful force in the development and execution of community support programs, playing a pivotal role in promoting inclusivity, understanding, and support for individuals with autism and their families.

These advocacy efforts have led to the creation of programs that address the unique challenges faced by the autism community and provide much-needed support and resources.

One of the primary objectives of autism advocacy is to raise awareness and promote understanding of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) within society. By challenging stereotypes, dispelling myths, and fostering acceptance, advocates strive to create a more inclusive and supportive environment for individuals with autism. This concerted effort not only helps to reduce stigma and discrimination but also promotes greater opportunities for social inclusion and participation.

Advocacy initiatives have been instrumental in raising awareness about autism and highlighting the importance of community support. Increased public knowledge and understanding of autism have paved the way for the development of programs that cater to the specific needs of individuals on the autism spectrum.

As a result, community support programs have emerged as a crucial avenue for providing assistance, engagement, and opportunities for individuals with autism and their families.

Autism Advocacy

Let's highlight the significance of autism advocacy through the lens of a dedicated professional working to support autistic children.

From the perspective of Mariz Sebastian, a Case Manager in Bangladesh specializing in Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) services for autistic children, the critical role of autism advocacy in promoting understanding, inclusivity, and support becomes evident.



From the perspective of Mariz Sebastian, a Case Manager in Bangladesh specializing in Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) services for autistic children the critical role of autism advocacy in promoting understanding, inclusivity, and support becomes evident.

Mariz's firsthand experiences shed light on the profound impact of advocacy efforts, showcasing how they benefit not only the individuals with autism but also their families and the community at large. As an advocate, Mariz emphasizes the importance of raising awareness about autism within society, emphasizing that it forms the bedrock for acceptance and effective interventions.

Through her work, Mariz highlights the transformative power of advocacy in various aspects. By increasing public awareness, advocacy efforts enable early detection of autism, facilitate tailored programs, and foster increased sensitivity in different environments. This heightened awareness helps to replace discrimination with inclusivity, promoting a more accepting society for individuals with autism and their families.

Mariz emphasizes the significance of raising awareness about autism within the community, recognizing it as a crucial foundation for acceptance and effective interventions. As a passionate advocate, she states, "Advocating for clients with autism and fostering understanding is a fundamental aspect of my role, as I strive to create a more inclusive environment for everyone."

One of the most significant contributions of autism advocacy, as emphasized by Mariz, lies in promoting evidence-based therapies and interventions tailored to the unique needs of each individual. By advocating for and reinforcing the adoption of research-backed approaches, advocacy paves the way for better outcomes and improved quality of life for individuals with autism.

Reducing stigma is another crucial aspect championed by autism advocacy. As Mariz explains, increased public knowledge about autism helps to dismantle stigmatizing beliefs and discriminatory attitudes, thereby reducing fear and judgment within society. By challenging misconceptions and fostering understanding, advocacy initiatives contribute to a more inclusive and compassionate environment.

In her role, Mariz encounters specific challenges faced by autistic children and their families, such as participating in public events or accessing educational and employment opportunities. It is through autism advocacy that these challenges are addressed. Advocacy helps raise awareness about the unique needs of individuals with autism, promotes training for professionals in various fields, and encourages the implementation of nondiscrimination policies in schools and workplaces. These proactive measures create a more inclusive society where individuals with autism can thrive and contribute their talents.



Mariz shares inspiring success stories that exemplify the positive impact of advocacy efforts. For instance, through collaborative advocacy initiatives, schools have become more open to supporting and accommodating students with autism. By providing training and support to educators, advocacy endeavors have fostered an environment where students with autism receive the assistance they need to succeed, leading to more inclusive educational experiences.

Beyond individual success stories, autism advocacy also plays a pivotal role in fostering collaboration and coordination among professionals, organizations, and support networks involved in the care and support of individuals with autism. By raising awareness and creating a supportive community, advocacy initiatives facilitate the development of comprehensive programs that benefit families and individuals with autism, leading to improved outcomes and a stronger support system.

However, despite progress, challenges remain in expanding autism advocacy efforts globally, particularly in smaller countries that may lack the necessary infrastructure and awareness.

Mariz emphasizes the importance of global advocacy to ensure that resources and support reach underserved regions, allowing individuals with autism and their families to access the services they need. Additionally, she highlights the need to enhance family support groups, recognizing their significance as valuable networks for sharing experiences, accessing information, and providing emotional support.

Looking forward, Mariz envisions a future where communities provide increased support for individuals with autism and their families. She hopes for a society that embraces and accommodates the unique needs of every individual, fostering understanding, acceptance, and support.

Through the perspective of Mariz Sebastian, we gain a deeper understanding of the profound impact of autism advocacy on the lives of

individuals with autism and their families. Advocacy efforts, driven by professionals like Mariz, serve as beacons of hope, guiding us towards a more inclusive and supportive society.

Autism Advocacy and Community Support Programs.

The impact of autism advocacy extends beyond policy and legislation, driving the development and expansion of community support programs tailored to the unique needs of individuals with autism and their families. These programs encompass a wide range of services, including early intervention programs, educational support services, vocational training programs, recreational activities, and respite care services. By providing comprehensive support across the lifespan, these programs empower individuals with autism to reach their full potential and lead fulfilling lives.

One notable example of the impact of autism advocacy is the creation of community support programs like Keeper of the Game (KOTG), in North Texas, United States of America. The Keeper of The Game Foundation is dedicated to enriching the lives of children and young adults with special needs and disabilities through unique baseball experiences. Their mission is to cultivate personal growth and a love for baseball among individuals in this community. By offering opportunities to play, watch, and engage with baseball on a personal level, KOTG promotes programs that empower these athletes. KOTG, is a non-profit organization dedicated to providing kids and young adults with special needs and disabilities unforgettable baseball experiences. Their mission is to foster personal growth and a love for the game. By promoting inclusive programs, Keeper of The Game allows these athletes to play, watch, and deeply engage with baseball. Through specialized initiatives, they inspire confidence, skill development, and



lifelong connections. The organization aims to create a future where every individual with special needs can fully participate and enjoy the magic of baseball.

For individuals with autism and their families, accessing community support programs can be challenging. Keeper of the Game addresses these challenges by creating a safe and comfortable environment where individuals with autism can participate in activities with full support. James Vilade, KOTG Founder states, "Keeper of The Game



Bryan Hctor, KOTG Executive Director, emphasizes, "Our consistency and support give those with autism the confidence to be themselves as we celebrate

individuality. The success stories emerging from community support programs are a testament to the impact of autism advocacy.

KOTG's collaboration with the Frisco RoughRiders, the Texas Rangers' AA Baseball Team, has provided individuals with autism an unforgettable experience on a professional baseball field. These events have not only showcased the incredible strengths of participants but have also created a platform for individuals with autism to shine and be celebrated.

Education and awareness play a crucial role in breaking down stigmas and misconceptions surrounding autism. KOTG actively addresses this aspect within their programs by embracing the special needs community and fostering an environment of love and acceptance.

Bryan Hctor, KOTG Executive Director highlights the volunteer opportunities provided to student athletes, stating, "The volunteer opportunities Keeper of The Game provides to student athletes do wonders for awareness and for breaking down stigmas as these student athletes get to participate with those with autism and share their love of baseball."



According to James Vilade, KOTG Founder, the key elements of an effective autism community support program include consistency in programming, love for all participants, and the team aspect of embracing individuals with autism.

Consistency, love, and support provide individuals with autism the confidence to exceed expectations and thrive.



KOTG continues to empower individuals with autism by creating an inclusive and supportive community. Through their dedication to consistency, love, and embracing the unique strengths of each participant, they are making a significant difference in the lives of individuals with autism, other special needs and disabilities, and their families. The organization's commitment to education and awareness further contributes to breaking down stigmas and fostering a more inclusive society.

The impact of autism advocacy and community support programs is undeniable. These initiatives have emerged as powerful forces, promoting inclusivity, understanding, and support for individuals with autism and their families. By raising awareness, challenging stereotypes, and fostering acceptance, advocacy



efforts have paved the way for the development of tailored programs that address the unique challenges faced by the autism community. These programs provide much-needed support, resources, and opportunities for social inclusion.

The transformative power of advocacy is evident through the stories of professionals like Mariz Sebastian, whose firsthand experiences highlight the benefits of increased awareness, evidence-based therapies, reduced stigma, and improved access to education and employment. Collaborative efforts,

such as those demonstrated by the Keeper of the (KOTG), showcase the profound impact of community support programs, providing engagement, support, and celebration for individuals with autism. Through education and awareness, these programs break down stigmas and create an environment of love and acceptance.

As we move forward, the vision is to create a society that embraces and accommodates the unique needs of every individual, fostering understanding, acceptance, and support. As autism advocacy continues to grow and evolve, the future holds the promise of even greater support and opportunities for individuals with autism and their families.



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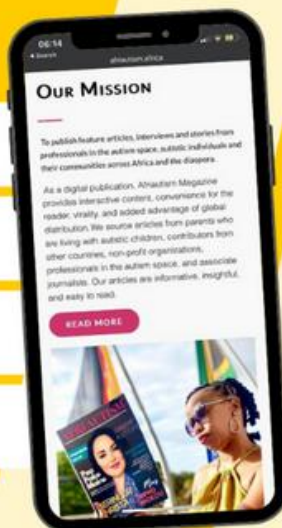
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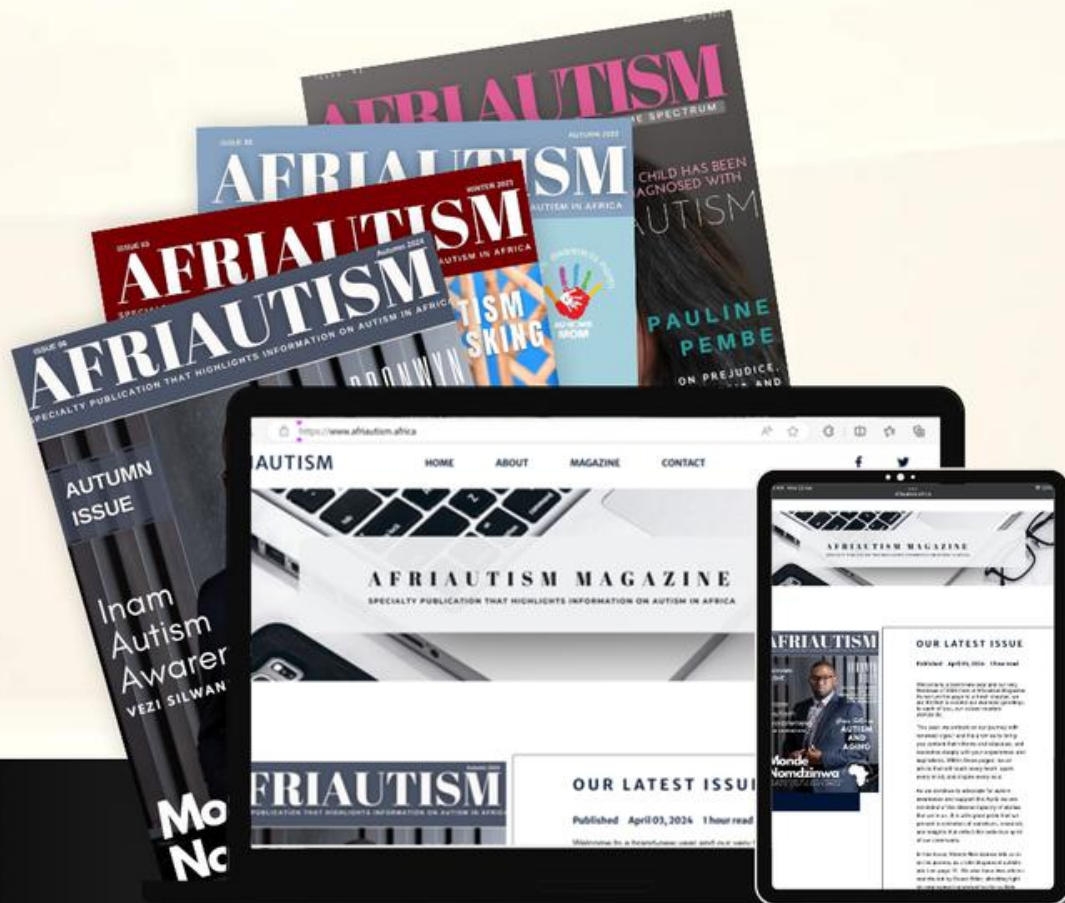


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TWO CHALLENGING EXPERIENCES THAT REDEFINED MY UNDERSTANDING OF AUTISM

Words by Ntebohelen Ralitseole

As I delved deeper into the world of autism, I began to realize that understanding the diagnosis was only the tip of the iceberg.

As an educator, I thought I had a solid grasp on teaching students with autism. I attended varsity, workshops, read books, and developed lesson plans tailored to their unique needs. But nothing could have prepared me for the profound lessons I would learn from two extraordinary individuals, who would challenge everything I thought I knew about autism. Through my experiences with them, I gained a new perspective on what it means to be autistic, and my teaching practice was forever transformed. I invite you to join me on a journey of discovery, as I share two challenging experiences that redefined my understanding of autism and taught me to look beyond the lesson plan.

My first experience was with a student who refused to engage. I still vividly remember the day I met Alex, a bright and curious 8-year-old boy who was diagnosed with autism. As a special education teacher, I had worked with a couple of students on the spectrum, but Alex's behaviour was unlike anything I had ever encountered. He was a master of avoidance, expertly dodging every attempt I made to engage him in a lesson. His response to my enthusiastic greetings and carefully crafted activities was a resolute silence, accompanied by an unyielding gaze



that seemed to pierce right through me. No matter how hard I tried, Alex refused to participate, his body language screaming "I'm not interested" in a language that was both defiant and heartbreaking.

At first, I wondered if I was doing something wrong or if Alex simply didn't like me. But as the days turned into weeks, I realized that Alex's behaviour was not about me, it was about him. He was struggling to connect, to find meaning in the chaos of the classroom, and to navigate the complex social landscape that came so naturally to his peers.

As I looked beyond the surface of his behaviour, I saw a deeper story unfolding – one of anxiety, frustration, and a desperate need for control. It was a turning point in my understanding of autism, a moment that forced me to re-examine my assumptions and approach to teaching. Little did I know, this experience would be just the beginning of a journey that would redefine my understanding of autism and forever change the way I teach.

My second experience was with a student who broke the rules - a young boy with a mischievous grin and an unrelenting desire to push boundaries. I thought he was just being defiant; refusing to follow the simplest instructions; but as I got to know him better, I realized that his behaviour was not about being disobedient, he was seeking control in a world that often felt overwhelming and unpredictable.

He frequently disrupted the classroom, not out of malice, but because he was not coping with the sensory stimuli surrounding him. The fluorescent lights were too bright, the chairs were too hard, and the noise level was too loud. He would try to escape the chaos by breaking the rules, not realizing that his actions were causing more commotion.

As I worked with him, I began to understand that his behaviour was not a personal attack on me or the classroom, but a cry for help. He needed a safe space to process his emotions, to feel grounded and secure. So, I adapted my teaching approach, incorporating more sensory-friendly activities and providing him with the tools he needed to self-regulate. Although it wasn't easy, it was a pivotal moment in my understanding of autism. I learned that sometimes, the students who break the rules are not trying to be difficult, they are simply trying to survive in a world that doesn't always understand them. As I delved deeper into the world of autism, I began to realize that understanding the diagnosis was only the tip of the iceberg.

As I reflect on the two challenging experiences that have redefined my understanding of autism, I am reminded that teaching is not just about imparting knowledge, but about building connections and fostering empathy. The lesson plans, the curriculum, and the teaching strategies are all important, but they are mere tools in the hands of an educator who is willing to listen, learn, and adapt. The true essence of teaching lies beyond the lesson plan, in the unscripted moments, the unplanned interactions, and the authentic relationships that we build with our students. It is in these moments that we discover the true heart of autism - a heart that beats with a unique rhythm, a heart that feels deeply, and a heart that longs for connection and understanding.

As educators, we have the power to create a safe and inclusive space for our students with autism, a space where they can thrive, grow, and flourish. We have the power to look beyond the labels, beyond the diagnoses, and into the eyes of our students, to see the beauty, the potential, and the humanity that lies



within. It is in this space; beyond the lesson plan, that we can truly make a difference in the lives of our students, including our own.

As I conclude this reflective journey, I am left with a profound appreciation for the complexities and nuances of autism. The two challenging experiences shared in this article; serve as a poignant reminder that every individual on the autism spectrum is unique, with their strengths, struggles, and stories to be told. By embracing the unpredictability and chaos that may come with teaching students with autism, we can foster a deeper understanding, empathy, and connection with them. I hope that these experiences will inspire educators and caregivers to look beyond the lesson plan, to see the individual, and to create a more inclusive and supportive environment for all.

Hi, I'm Nteboheleng Ralitsele, a dedicated special education teacher hailing from the picturesque kingdom of Lesotho, now based in South Africa. Driven by a passion for empowering children with special needs, I deliver personalized support and care that fosters inclusivity and



awareness. Through my work, I strive to kindle hope and inspire a brighter future for all. In sharing my story, I aim to connect with families and educators on a similar path, offering guidance and insights that celebrate diversity, individuality, and the power of community. By sharing my journey, I hope to spark a ripple effect of compassion, understanding, and support, creating a more inclusive world for everyone.

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Autism & Relationships: Nurturing Social Connections and Building support Networks



Words By: Grace Siller
Texas, USA

Individuals with autism may face unique challenges in nurturing social connections and developing meaningful relationships, but there are numerous strategies that can help them overcome these obstacles

Autism is a neurodevelopmental disorder that hinders social communication and interaction.

People with autism encounter challenges in forming and sustaining relationships due to difficulties in understanding social cues and navigating social interactions. Sensory sensitivities and repetitive behaviors further restrict social engagement, leading to feelings of loneliness, isolation, and exclusion.

Navigating social relationships can be challenging for individuals on the autism spectrum. However, fostering meaningful connections and building support networks are essential aspects of well-being and personal growth. Autism can present unique challenges when it comes to social interactions, but it does not diminish the innate need for connection and belonging.

Chaya Smith, a mother to autistic twin boys, sheds light on the importance of social connections in the lives of individuals with autism. Drawing from her personal experiences, Chaya's insights offer valuable guidance to parents and caregivers seeking to support their child's social development. Her profound understanding and unwavering commitment to her children's well-being serve as an inspiration to families navigating similar journeys. Chaya emphasizes that social connections play a vital role in boosting confidence and reducing hesitation for individuals on the autism spectrum. Reflecting on her own children's experiences, she observed that allowing them the freedom to play independently, without constant hovering, alleviated anxiety and empowered them to make their own decisions regarding social interaction. "It's important to let them be themselves," Chaya advises, highlighting the significance of embracing individuality in fostering social growth.

To nurture social connections, Chaya actively sought out indoor and outdoor playgrounds and parks, providing her children with opportunities to engage with peers. Recognizing the unique challenges they faced, she took a patient and open-minded approach, avoiding the imposition of expectations on her children. By allowing them the space to explore and interact at their own pace, Chaya witnessed the blossoming of their confidence and the development of meaningful social bonds.

She acknowledges that building social connections for individuals with autism can present challenges and barriers. In some instances, other children may hesitate to engage due to unfamiliar sounds, hand gestures, or different play styles. Additionally, a lack of understanding from other parents may result in social isolation. In the face of these obstacles, Chaya employed redirection techniques to navigate such situations. She taught her children the importance of accepting that not everyone may want to play. She redirected their focus to alternative play areas, ensuring that her children understood it was okay and fostering resilience and adaptability.

Highlighting the broader importance of nurturing social connections for individuals with autism, Chaya emphasizes the role of parents as advocates. "We as parents are our kids' biggest advocates," she asserts. "It's up to us to be open, understanding, and willing to listen and learn." Chaya believes that by sharing experiences and stories, parents can contribute to the community's knowledge and understanding of autism, ultimately fostering a more welcoming and accepting society for individuals on the spectrum.

As the autism community continues its quest for acceptance and understanding, Chaya's story serves as a source of inspiration and a call to action, reminding us of the importance of nurturing social connections and embracing the unique strengths of every individual, regardless of their place on the autism spectrum.



Individuals with autism may face unique challenges in nurturing social connections and developing meaningful relationships, but there are numerous strategies that can help them overcome these obstacles. Here are some key strategies:

Education and Awareness:

Building meaningful connections starts with education and awareness. Educating ourselves and others about the characteristics of autism, communication differences, and sensory sensitivities can foster empathy and promote inclusive interactions.

Communication Strategies:

Effective communication is crucial for nurturing social connections. Individuals with autism may benefit from clear and direct communication, visual supports, and alternative communication methods such as visual schedules, social scripts, or augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) systems.

Shared Interests and Activities:

Identifying common interests and engaging in activities centered around those interests can provide a natural platform for social interaction. Encouraging participation in group activities, clubs, or special interest groups that align with the individual's passions and strengths can foster a sense of belonging, shared experiences, and can facilitate social connections.

Social Skills Training:

Social skills training programs tailored to individuals with autism can provide valuable tools and strategies for navigating social interactions. They focus on understanding social cues, perspective-taking, conversation skills, and problem-solving techniques to enhance social competence and self-confidence. They offer opportunities for individuals with autism to practice social skills in structured settings, such as social skills groups or peer mentoring programs.

Creating Structured Social Opportunities:

Structured social opportunities, such as organized events or group activities, can provide a supportive environment

for individuals with autism to practice social skills and build connections. These events can be specifically designed to accommodate sensory sensitivities and include clear routines and expectations.

Utilizing Technology:

Technology can serve as a valuable tool for fostering social connections. Online communities, forums, and social media platforms allow individuals with autism to connect with others who share similar experiences and interests. Virtual communication platforms can also facilitate social interaction, enabling individuals to connect with friends, family, and support networks.

Foster Inclusive Environments:

Create inclusive environments that accommodate the sensory needs and communication styles of individuals with autism. Provide sensory-friendly spaces, clear communication cues, and visual supports to facilitate social interaction and participation

Encourage Peer Support:

Encourage individuals with autism to seek out peer support networks and online communities where they can connect with others who share similar experiences and challenges. Peer support provides validation, understanding, and a sense of belonging.

Building Support Networks

Families and individuals affected by autism spectrum disorder (ASD) often face unique challenges in fostering meaningful relationships and building support networks. However, with the right strategies and support systems in place, individuals with autism and their families can navigate these challenges and cultivate thriving relationships that enrich their lives.



Elizabeth Doggett, a dedicated sibling caregiver to her autistic brother Ryan, opens up about her unique journey of raising a child with autism, likening it to an evolving recipe. Elizabeth emphasizes the essential ingredients of care, compassion, and patience as the foundation for building a strong relationship with her brother. Drawing from personal experiences, she shares insights into the trials and triumphs of caregiving, highlighting the importance of support networks and the power of community in the lives of individuals with autism and their families.

Elizabeth compares the process of caregiving to experimenting with different recipes, where each family discovers what works best for their child. Through trial and error, they uncovered the ingredients that helped Ryan thrive, leading to his transformation into a social butterfly who became more comfortable in loud environments. Care, compassion and patience served

as the guiding principles in their journey, fostering a deep bond between Elizabeth and her brother.

Recognizing the significance of support networks, Elizabeth sheds light on the challenges that caregivers of individuals with autism often face, including feelings of loneliness and a lack of understanding from those around them. She shares how she and her brother's teacher became

their primary support group, offering assistance with essential services and contributing to Ryan's overall development. The positive impact of a supportive school system played a significant role in their journey, reinforcing the importance of collaboration between families and educational institutions.

In the face of limited local resources, Elizabeth and her parents turned to social media platforms as a means to connect with the autism community and seek support. Online platforms, such as Facebook, became a source of solace, allowing them to share their experiences and receive encouragement from other families facing similar challenges. Elizabeth highlights the profound impact of reading the words "you are not alone," which brought warmth and comfort to their lives when they needed it highlighting the importance of support networks and the power of community in the lives of individuals with autism and their families. Elizabeth acknowledges the pivotal role therapists, counselors, and social workers have in building support networks for individuals with autism and their families. Drawing from her firsthand experience as a registered behavioral technician, she emphasizes the positive impact these professionals have in the lives of individuals with autism. Additionally, Elizabeth underscores the importance of self-care for caregivers, recognizing the value of finding support and respite within their own community.

As the autism community continues to navigate their unique journeys, Elizabeth's insights serve as a reminder of the importance of building support networks. Her story resonates, offering hope, inspiration, and a reminder that no one walks this path alone.



In addition to nurturing individual relationships, building a support network is essential for individuals with autism and their families. Here are some strategies on how to build a support network:

1. **Family Support:** Families play a critical role in supporting individuals with autism. Creating a nurturing and accepting home environment, seeking resources and services, and advocating for their loved one's needs can offer a strong foundation for building social connections. Support groups and parent networks can also provide a valuable space for sharing experiences and learning from one another.
2. **Empower Family Members:** Building a strong support network starts within the family. Providing resources, education, and emotional support to family members helps create an environment where individuals with autism can thrive. Family members can also play an active role in advocating for inclusive practices and raising awareness in their communities.
3. **Peer Support:** Peer support is essential for fostering social connections. Encouraging inclusive environments in schools, workplaces, and community settings can facilitate positive interactions between individuals with autism and their neurotypical peers. Peer mentoring programs, buddy systems, or social clubs can create opportunities for friendships and mutual support.

In the crude neurotypical world where “nomalcy” reigns supreme, Vee defies the odds by showcasing his ability to contribute to society even as a neurodiverse individual.



Uvile (Vee) Makalima is a 20-year-old autistic adult and a twin brother to Ovayo Makalima. Autism Spectrum disorder is a neurodevelopmental disorder that affects how he behaves, learns, and interacts with others. Despite being on the spectrum, Uvile contributes to society thanks to his family who understands his cognitive functioning. Uvile has been with The Hamlet Foundation for over 12 years, where he honed key skills that have positively impacted the course of his life. People who meet Uvile for the first time, often remark that he does not look autistic; this is because autism spectrum disorder, is also termed an invisible disability.

In 2023, Vee’s family started a small business, crafting revitalising essentials. This was a perfect opportunity for Uvile to showcase skills he learned from the Hamlet Foundation. The company was named Vee@work, paying homage to Vee because he is actively involved in product labelling, packaging, packing, and basic assembly. Vee@work aims to educate, encourage, and empower the neurodivergent community or “auties” out there to discover their abilities and use them towards contributing to society.



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VEE@WORK

Winter Issue 2024



Discover the unique culinary experience of Sensory Friendly Meals, an exclusive insert publication of Afriautism Magazine, designed with the sensory needs of individuals with autism in mind. This thoughtful collection of recipes ensures that every meal is not only nutritious and delicious but also tailored to be gentle on the senses. We understand the importance of texture, colour, and flavour balance in creating autism-friendly meals that can be enjoyed by all. Each dish is crafted to provide comfort and satisfaction, making mealtime a stress-free and enjoyable part of the day. Join us in celebrating the diversity of tastes and the joy of eating with meals that are as friendly and welcoming as they are delectable.

WINTER 2024

SENSORY FRIENDLY MEALS

FERMENTED FOOD BENEFITS

simple sensory-friendly vegetable soup

Baking Recipes





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Fermented Food benefits

Embark on a culinary journey through the ancient art of fermentation, where the simplest ingredients transform into a symphony of tastes and health benefits.

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Autism-Friendly Soup

Dive into the comforting embrace of a classic Simple Vegetable Soup, a wholesome concoction that brings together the earthy goodness of fresh, seasonal vegetables.

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Banana Muffin

Discover how alternative flours and natural ingredients can come together to create muffins that are not only safe but also irresistibly delicious.

Have you been struggling to find autism-friendly meals for your picky, sensory-sensitive little one? Worry no further, we have a treasure trove full of sensory-friendly meal recipes from allergen-free banana muffins to a tasty heartwarming winter soup. This is our exclusive premiere edition, and we look forward to adding more pages for your cooking pleasure. For now, Bona Petit.





Autism-Friendly Soup Recipe



This Autism-Friendly Vegetable Soup is a gentle, nutritious option that is free from common allergens and artificial additives. It's designed to be easily digestible and soothing for those with sensory sensitivities. The natural flavors and textures make it a wholesome choice for anyone seeking a simple yet delicious meal.

Carrots are rich in Vitamin A, which is known to help in improving behaviour and provides immune system support. Carrots also contain fiber which is beneficial for children on the spectrum. This fiber aids digestion, promoting gut health for your autistic child. Vitamin

Celery is a valuable source of vitamin K essential for bone health. Its crunchy texture may be appealing to autistic children who have sensory preferences for certain food textures.

Potatoes are a comforting food that can be easily incorporated into the diets of children who are on the autism spectrum. Potatoes are high in vitamin A essential for immune functioning and vision. They are a good source of fiber which aids digestion. Additionally, the natural carbohydrates in potatoes provide energy that can be important for active children.

Homemade **Broth** can be a soothing and nourishing food for autistic children. It can serve as a base for incorporating various vegetables and proteins into a child's diet, making it a versatile option for picky eaters.

These foods not only provide nutritional benefits but can also be part of a sensory-friendly diet, accommodating the unique preferences and needs of autistic children.



● Ingredients:

- 1 tbsp olive oil
- 1 cup chopped carrots
- 1 cup chopped celery
- 1 cup diced potatoes
- 4 cups low-sodium vegetable broth, Salt and pepper to taste

● Instructions:

- Heat the olive oil in a large pot over medium heat.
- Add the carrots and celery, and cook until slightly softened.
- Stir in the potatoes and cook for another 2 minutes.
- Pour in the vegetable broth and bring to a boil.
- Reduce heat and simmer until vegetables are tender.
- Season with salt and pepper.
- Serve warm.

The benefits of fermented foods for children with autism

Fermentation has been a preferred safest method of preserving food for centuries. Recent studies have revealed that incorporating a variety of fermented products as part of dieting produces positive results for individuals on the autism spectrum.



LERATO MOSEDAME
Pretoria, South Africa

As a parent of three neurodiverse children, I am always on the lookout for new research findings that may assist in better-taking care of my children. Recently I came across an account on social media that highlighted the importance of incorporating fermented food in an autism-friendly diet. According to the curator, her autistic son has shown great improvements since she added fermented products to her cooking regimen. I decided to dig deeper into fermentation, to find out if there is a correlation between fermented food produce and autism spectrum disorder.

Fermentation is a metabolic process that converts carbohydrates such as starch or sugar into energy without using oxygen. It is the safest food preservation technique, which dates back to 6000 BCE. During the process of fermentation, various molecules such as lactic acid, carbon dioxide and others, are produced. These molecules play a pivotal role in restoring the balance of essential bacteria



in the gut, ensuring the overall health of the stomach. Fermentation is also known to kill harmful bacteria found in vegetables.

How do fermented products help children on the autism spectrum you may ask. Scientists and the medical fraternity concur that there is a strong link between the gut health and brain functioning. According to research findings, there is a clear indication that a healthy gut impacts positively on the brain, therefore influencing behaviour. Regular consumption of fermented products may help reduce gut inflammation, constipation, diarrhea as well as improve overall digestion for autistic individuals. The following fermented products are known to have a positive impact on the overall gut health.

Gherkins are small cucumbers, pickled in brine, vinegar, or other solution and left to ferment for a period of time. Gherkins are well known for containing vitamin A and B as

well as other beneficial compounds.

Kombucha is a sweet and fizzy fermented tea rich in probiotics that also promotes gut health. Though it may be repulsive to children with sensory sensitivity, it remains an excellent beverage alternative for autistic individuals, improving overall wellness.

Kefir, a fermented dairy product which is made by adding kefir grains into milk to produce a tart and tangy drink similar to a drinkable yoghurt. You may add kefir to porridge or drink it as it is. If your child is allergic to dairy products, you may want to try non-dairy alternative such as coconut or oat milk and add kefir seeds.

Fermented Sorghum porridge is the most preferred breakfast meal in my household. Not only is sorghum rich in antioxidants and probiotics, but it also helps with diarrhea, lowers blood cholesterol and weight loss.

Vegetables such as cabbage, beetroot, carrots and broccoli, cauliflower, and myriads of other vegetables, may be fermented to produce probiotics that are rich in fibre, vitamins, enzymes, and minerals that help improve digestion, boost the immune system, reduce stress, and help build stronger bones.

There are several strategies to consider when preparing your products for fermentation.

First and foremost, sterilize glass jars or bottles with boiled water before fermenting vegetables to minimize the chances of contamination from bad bacteria and pathogens. I recommend you use flip-top bottles for brewing Kombucha drinks and airtight bottle jars for fermenting vegetables and fruits to minimize explosion. Please don't store your fermented containers in a closet that is mounted close to a stove or fridge. Fermented products must be stored in a dark closet/room away from the sunlight.

Most vegetables are fermented using brine, a liquid solution made of water and a high salt content. The time of the fermentation process depends on the type and size of food stored. Natural ingredients require brine for fermentation and adding lactobacillus bacteria to your food will quicken the process. Some fruits such as strawberries and blueberries may be fermented using sugar, water, and honey. Fermented food shelf life may vary from six months to a couple of years depending on the contents. Remember that food will continue to ferment at a slower pace even when placed in the refrigerator.

After much research and listening to testimonials of parents with autistic children and how fermentation has positively impacted their children's behaviour, I can confidently report that fermentation is not only the safest method of preserving food, but it is also another method to help alleviate gastrointestinal challenges that often come with being on the autism spectrum.

I have begun preserving carrots, gherkins, and beetroots, with the hope that my picky eaters may enjoy them. I will be sharing the outcome on my social media platforms, as to whether I am seeing improvement or not. I also advise that you read more about fermentation. Watch YouTube and TikTok videos on preparation methods, techniques, jar and bottle types and sizes as well as the correct amount of salt to add to your fermentation solution.




Please remember that autism spectrum disorder is a lifelong condition. There is currently no known cure for autism spectrum disorder. Incorporating fermented products into your cooking regimen does not mean your child will be healed from autism. Fermented products only help with sustaining a healthy gut, and help alleviate gastrointestinal challenges such as gut inflammation, constipation, diarrhea, and gut related issues. A healthy gut will have a positive impact on brain functioning which in turn helps with behavioural patterns. Please remember to consult with a healthcare professional before incorporating fermented products into your autism-friendly diet.





GLUTEN-FREE BANANA MUFFINS

This recipe is designed to be simple and easy to follow, with clear steps and minimal ingredients to accommodate those with autism. The use of natural sweeteners and gluten-free flours makes it suitable for a wide range of dietary needs. Feel free to customize the recipe with your favorite flavours and add-ins!

 SERVING 2	 TIME 30 MINS	 KCAL. 260
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Ingredients

1 1/2 cups gluten-free oat flour
1/2 cup almond flour
1/4 cup coconut sugar
(or sweetener of choice)
1 teaspoon baking powder
1/2 teaspoon baking soda
1/4 teaspoon salt
3 ripe bananas, mashed
1/3 cup unsweetened
applesauce
1/4 cup coconut oil, melted
1 teaspoon vanilla extract
Optional: 1/2 cup of your
favorite add-ins
(chopped nuts, blueberries,
chocolate chips)

Instructions

1. Preheat your oven to 350°F (175°C) and prepare a muffin tin with liners or by greasing with coconut oil.
2. In a large bowl, whisk together the oat flour, almond flour, coconut sugar, baking powder, baking soda, and salt.
3. In another bowl, combine the mashed bananas, applesauce, melted coconut oil, and vanilla extract.
4. Add the wet ingredients to the dry ingredients and mix until just combined. If using, fold in your chosen add-ins.
5. Divide the batter evenly among the muffin cups, filling each about 3/4 full.
6. Bake for 18-20 minutes, or until a toothpick inserted into the center of a muffin comes out clean.
7. Allow the muffins to cool in the pan for 5 minutes before transferring them to a wire rack to cool completely.



WINTER 2024

SENSORY FRIENDLY MEALS

Sensory Friendly Meals publication is an exclusive insert of Afriautism Magazine that focuses on autism-friendly nutrition. For more information get in touch with us: food@afriautism.africa





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Bongiwe Leepiloe is a dedicated advocate for autism awareness and inclusivity. As the founder of "Not a Disability but an Ability" NPO, she channels her passion into promoting understanding, education, and inclusiveness within the autism community. Alongside her role as a mother to a remarkable 5-year-old boy diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder, Bongiwe tirelessly works to break down barriers and empower individuals with autism to thrive. Through her organization, she strives to create a world where differences are celebrated, and every individual is valued for their unique abilities. Bongiwe's unwavering commitment to advocacy serves as an inspiration to many, driving positive change and fostering a more inclusive society.

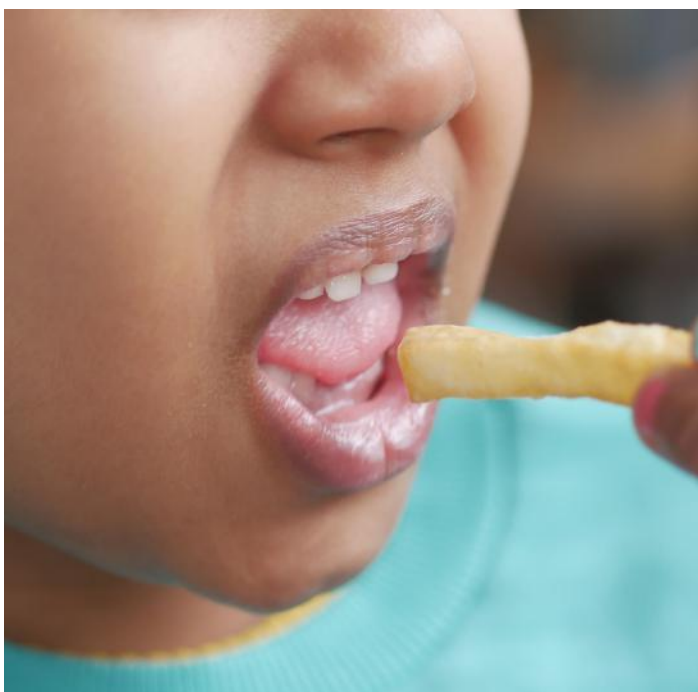
Autism and Pica



Words by Masego Sehoole
Dubai, UAE

Pica is a condition characterized by the consumption of non-nutritive substances, such as dirt, paper, or chalk. It often occurs in individuals with developmental disorders, including autism. Research suggests that pica is more prevalent among children and adults on the autism spectrum. However, the exact relationship between pica and autism remains complex and multifaceted.

Several factors contribute to the link between pica and autism. Sensory processing differences in individuals with ASD may lead to unusual eating behaviors. Some autistic individuals may seek oral stimulation through non-food items due to sensory-seeking tendencies. Additionally, communication challenges and limited expressive language skills may prevent them from expressing hunger or discomfort, leading to unconventional eating habits.



Addressing pica in individuals with autism requires a holistic approach. Behavioral interventions, such as functional communication training and sensory-based strategies, can help reduce pica behaviors. Educating caregivers, teachers, and healthcare professionals about the risks associated with pica and implementing preventive measures are essential. Collaborative efforts between parents, therapists, and educators can promote healthier eating habits and improve overall well-being for individuals with autism.

Remember that early identification and intervention are crucial for managing pica in individuals with autism. If you suspect pica in someone with ASD, consult a healthcare professional for personalized guidance and support.





Autism Ekasi hosted their second annual event at Eskia Mphahlela Library, one of the biggest libraries in the city of Tshwane. The event was attended by Dr Emile Gouws an Autistic self – advocate and Dr Nausheen Ameen an educational psychologist who plays a very huge role in South African autism community. Guest speakers provided information and rendered their support to parents who were present. Their advocacy work talks volumes through many invites they receive from different sectors in South Africa. Autism Ekasi continues to be the voice for children diagnosed with autism in the townships of South Africa



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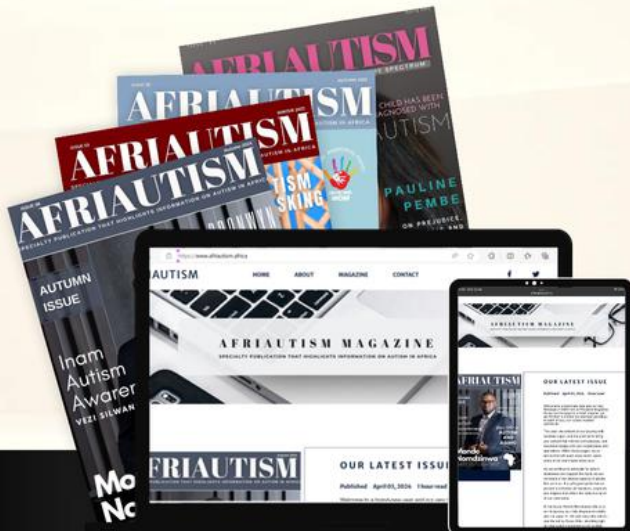
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We eagerly await your contributions.

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