

Back-to-School Questions Answered

By Minni K. Ang, Ph.D. Autistic Self-Advocate

As school gets back in session, and as an Autistic adult who is also a successful professional, I believe I am in a position to answer some of the typical seasonal questions posed to Autism Canada by parents and teachers of children on the spectrum. Questions received by Autism Canada are given below in italics, with my answers in the immediately following paragraphs.

One common call from teachers is that the parents are in “denial” of their child potentially being on the spectrum and want to push them through neurotypical curriculums. What advice would you have for parents who are in denial of their child being autistic?

You need to love and accept your child for who they actually are - exactly as they are. Understand that your child has unique and valuable strengths of their own, and that they deserve an education that brings the best out in them. Autistic children have brains that are wired to organize, to identify patterns, to see the big picture... these are extremely valuable and specialized skills in certain areas of the workforce. Autistics are honest and without guile. We do very well in careers where attention to detail and pattern recognition are important. An honest Autistic is an invaluable addition to any financial institution, for example. Many in Silicon Valley are on the spectrum. Scientific research is another area where Autistics can do very well. Treasure your child as they are, accept that they are not like yourself (I assume parents in denial are not themselves autistic, which is why they may fear what they do not understand). Do not fear - the only reason so many Autistics fail (according the Statistics Canada, in 2017 77% of Autistic adults were unemployed) is because non-Autistics have been pushing us to do things the way they (non-Autistics) do things - if we Autistics were to force you neurotypicals to do things the way we do things, you would fail too. Think about it.

What accommodations would you recommend a parent should fight for to help their child on the spectrum?

Allow your child to follow their interests. Focus on their strengths, not their weaknesses. Too often, excessive time is spent on a weak area, to the detriment of a child's strengths. In the end, mediocrity and general failure is what results with this approach. Give the child enough time to follow through with things they are really keen on, instead of pulling them away with frequently changing activities. Never single the child out in front of other children, instead allow all children room to explore different learning styles. If possible, put the child at the front of the classroom where they can focus on the teacher instead of being overwhelmed by everything else that is happening between them and the teachers (i.e. if they are seated in the middle or back of the classroom, it is likely that all the children in between will make it impossible for the Autistic child to hear what the teacher is saying).

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About the Author

Let me introduce myself - my name is Minni, and I was diagnosed with Level One Autism only a few years ago, although I have of course been autistic all my life - autism is not something you catch or develop: it is rather a non-neurotypical wiring of the human brain that some of us are born with. Today I am employed full-time as a software developer by a great Canadian company, Kinaxis. I love my job - it is interesting, sufficiently challenging, and the company culture is amazing and inclusive; I was hired through their "autism at work" programme, intermediated by another great Canadian non-profit human resource agency that specializes in work placements.



My backstory is pretty complex. I emigrated to Canada in 2009, although I was here for several years as a young child when my dad did his doctoral and post-doc studies at the University of Waterloo. I have a Ph.D in Computer Applications, but also have degrees in Music and in Physics. I have worked in exceptionally diverse fields including academia, as a professional musician, in broadcasting, as a youth worker, ran my own music production start-up company, as a freelance iOS developer, as a consultant for academic and research development, and even spent a year driving a big yellow school bus!

I live in Ottawa with my spouse Sofia, our teenage daughter and our three dogs. To relax I love doing puzzles of any sort, playing one of my many musical instruments, reading or watching science fiction or fantasy, and woodworking. I have many special interests, but especially love learning how things work and creating new things for others to enjoy.