

# Fresh Looks at Autism

## Focusing on a Child's Optimal Potential

by Linda Sechrist

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**A** new paradigm shift regarding autism spectrum disorder (ASD) centers on evolving beliefs about the possibilities for those living with autism, as well as the unimagined brilliance they possess and their need for supportive help.

Everyone can benefit from the results of hands-on research and experience by parents and caregivers that are finding nontraditional ways to help special needs children deal with issues related to emotional and cognitive detachment and isolation. Momentum for this major shift in perspective is fueled by young adults that are telling their encouraging stories online and in books such as Carly Fleishman's *Carly's Voice*.

Parents of the one in 45 children diagnosed with ASD know that their

lifetime commitment requires extraordinary courage, perseverance, patience, determination, emotional strength, outside-the-box thinking and unconditional love. These parental characteristics are most cited by those that have mastered related developmental disorders, which they now regard as gifts, because they are thriving.

Dr. Andrea Libutti, author of *Awakened by Autism: Embracing Autism, Self, and Hope for a New World*, offers her insights for understanding the multifaceted nature of autism and the need for a personalized plan for healing. Janice Vedrode, a special needs coach, consultant and child advocate in Saginaw, Michigan, founded Spectrum Speaks and writes at [JaniceVedrode.com/blog](http://JaniceVedrode.com/blog)

to inform parents about numerous issues regarding ASD.

"Because I live in a town that didn't have an existing support group for parents with ASD children, I took it upon myself to get the ball rolling and advise parents that they need to build a dream team—doctors, therapists, special needs teachers, spiritual community, friends and family—that will make sure their child succeeds and lives a happy and successful life," says Vedrode.

Wanting to help both their own two sons with developmental disabilities and others, Boaz and Minerva Santiago, residents of Pembroke Pines, Florida, became early trailblazers ushering in the self-employment movement for special needs individuals. Their Picasso Einstein online educational platform at [SelfEmploy.org](http://SelfEmploy.org) has launched the #JobCreators Bootcamp Training for parents and professionals and the #JobCreators Integration Program that collaborates with organizations, financial institutions and government agencies.

"If you focus on pursuing a business for your child for the sake of their independence, you won't get caught up in only the business and money aspects. Self-employment allows even greatly impaired individuals the maximum opportunity to experience independence, not just in the present, but for the rest of their lives," explains Boaz.

He cites an example of a young boy with an avid interest in folding clothing. His parents learned how to create a meaningful job for him by creating a simple small laundry business from the family garage. Although at the beginning he was only asked to fold clothing (which he already expressed interest in),

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his father now accompanies him around the neighborhood to pass out business cards and promote his service. Being in business has helped him grow as a person. "Begin by assuming your child is competent and make it possible for them to follow their passion and create a future they can be proud of," advises Boaz.

Shining lights are leading the way. With her father's help, Carly Fleishman, diagnosed at the age of 2 with nonverbal severe autism, wrote a book by striking one computer key at a time that described living in a mind and body afflicted with this condition. Still nonverbal, she hosts a YouTube radio show on which she interviews celebrities via a device that turns keystrokes into verbal language.

Kerry Magro, with Autism Speaks, a research and advocacy organization, answered the question, "What Happens to Children with Autism When They Become Adults?" in his TEDx talk, one of

his many media ventures. Chris Varney, an "I can" advocate for children's rights, won rave reviews for his TEDx talk, "My Unstoppable Mother Proved the Experts Wrong."

Such powerful stories specifically relate how parents, grandparents and helpful friends forged networks that freed them and their afflicted children of the inhibiting stigma of autism and enabled them to realize their fullest potential. A bedrock philosophy in supporting ASD and other special needs children is to assume they are competent and learn to see them through God's lens, rather than the lens of the world.

*Linda Sechrist is a senior staff writer for Natural Awakenings. Connect at [ItsAllAboutWe.com](http://ItsAllAboutWe.com).*

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All children are artists.

-PABLO PICASSO

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