

Uink

Autism-Europe N°82 / December 2024

We



are



not



invisible.



**Not invisible campaign:
stories from the autism community**

**NAS autism inclusion
awards inspire change**

**An autism and disability-specific
European post-election guide**

**New initiative a gamechanger
for autistic children in Spain**

**Urban resilience for autistic people
in the Turkey earthquakes**



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Edito

Dear readers,

In this edition, we highlight the recent political developments marking the start of a new policy cycle at the EU-level, following the recent European parliament elections. On 17 September 2024, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen unveiled the European Commissioners designates, their portfolios and missions. AE warmly welcomed the European Commission's commitment to work towards a 'common approach' to autism at the EU level as stated in the portfolio of the Commissioner for Health.

It echoes Autism-Europe longstanding call for a coordinated and strategic response to meet the needs of autistic people at the EU, national and regional level, pursuant to the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (UNCRPD). In line with international recommendations, AE calls for the EU 'common approach' to be holistic, rights-based, adequately funded and promoting a cross-sectoral policy response to address the pervasive discrimination experienced by autistic people in all fields of life. An EU common approach must be designed and implemented in full cooperation with representatives of autistic people and their families. Therefore, AE looks forward to working closely with the European Commission and all interested stakeholders in all future steps. It is crucial that equality and advancing disability rights remain at the forefront of the European Union's agenda.

Gaining visibility and amplifying the voices of autistic people and their families is essential to ensure their needs are understood and heard. Therefore, we are excited to unveil our new website in the context of our 'Not invisible' campaign. Join us in sharing your stories and experiences. By submitting videos, essays, pictures, or audio recordings to the website, you will help promote a deeper understanding of autism, advocate for autistic people's rights, and ensure that autistic people are recognised, valued, and included.

Best regards,

Director,
Aurélie Baranger



President,
Harald T. Neerland





Not invisible: AE to publish stories from the autism community

“We are not invisible” – Autism-Europe invites the autism community to share their stories, breaking with stereotypes and raising awareness of the challenges autistic people face in advocating for their rights to be upheld. The “Not invisible” campaign, which started in April 2024, seeks to highlight the fact that autistic people are often made invisible in society. By showcasing lived experiences from across the community, the campaign aims to promote a deeper understanding of autism, advocating for change and ensuring that autistic people are recognised, valued, and included.

#AutismNotInvisible - everyone is invited

The Not invisible campaign aims to bring autistic people to the forefront. The experiences of the autism community are often minimised, ignored, or misunderstood. In this phase of the campaign, Autism-Europe and its members work to address this by encouraging the community to share their stories in any format they prefer, through videos, written blog posts, photography, artworks, and more. These submissions will be featured on a newly created website, where these personal narratives will illustrate the diverse experiences within the autism community.

Autism-Europe’s goal is to shed light not only on the often-unseen challenges and barriers autistic people face, but also on their talents, thoughts, hopes and connections. AE seeks to create a platform where these lived experiences can be acknowledged, valued, and mobilised for concrete policy change.

Inclusion and access to decision making

At the heart of the campaign is the strong belief that autistic people must be part of the conversation when decisions are made about their lives. For far too long, individuals on the autism spectrum have been excluded from discussions surrounding policies, support structures, and campaigning. Not invisible seeks to change this by ensuring that the voices of autistic individuals are central to shaping a more inclusive and understanding society.

Autistic people should have equal opportunities and access to participating fully in all aspects of life. This includes access to education, housing, employment, healthcare, and community activities without facing discrimination or barriers. By amplifying personal stories, the campaign highlights the need for systemic changes that prioritise the needs and rights of autistic people.

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An, who is an artist from Belgium, is one of the first to be featured on our new platform

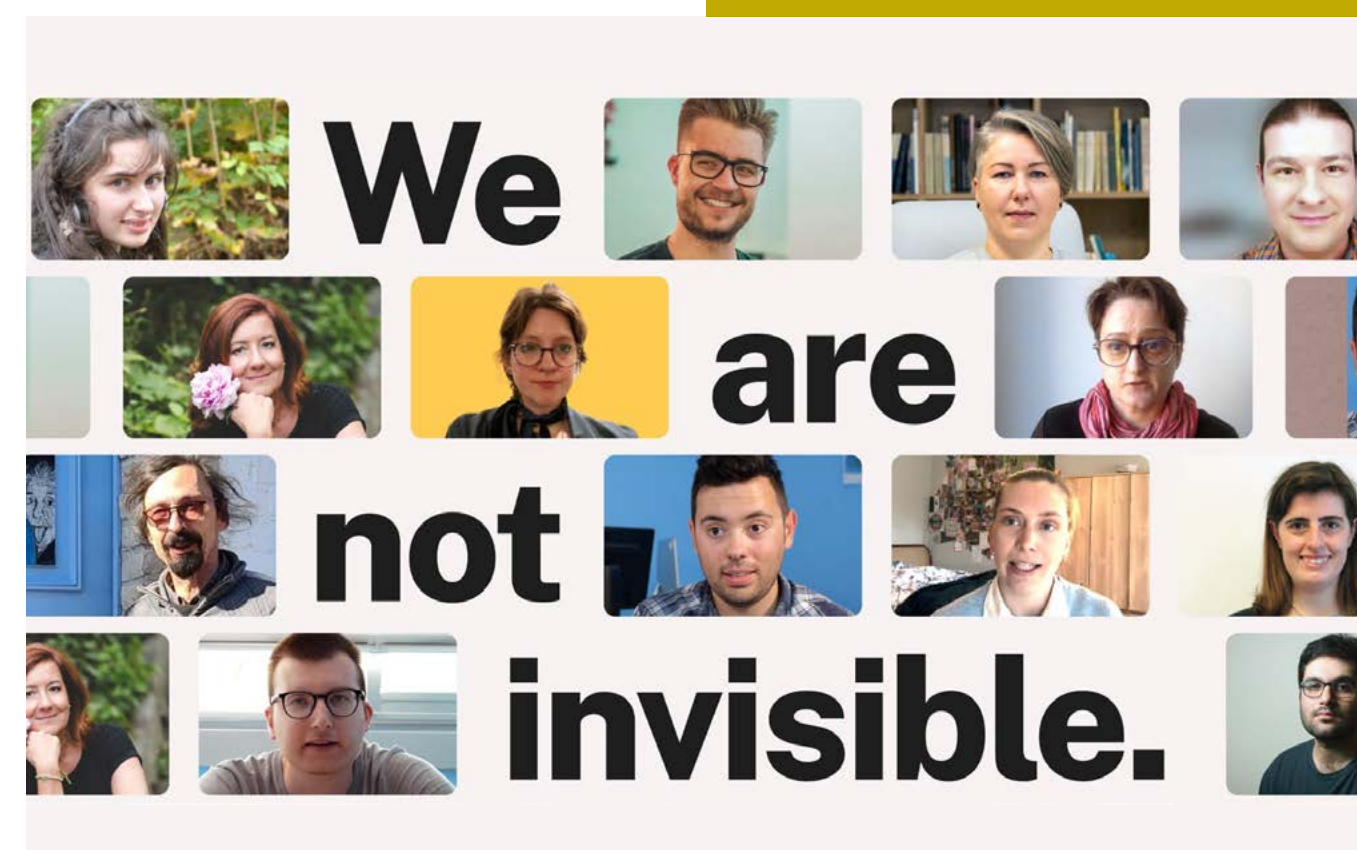
Autism-Europe’s Not invisible campaign is a powerful call to action, inviting the autism community to share their voices and experiences in an effort to promote greater inclusion, awareness, and change. The campaign emphasizes the importance of listening to autistic people, recognizing their rights, and creating an environment where they are not only visible but valued. By raising awareness about the invisible barriers faced by autistic individuals, Autism-Europe and its members aim to lay the groundwork for a more equitable and inclusive future for all.

Let’s challenge perceptions, reduce stigma, and foster a deeper understanding of autism together. The stories of autistic people and their communities deserve to be heard, and true change can only come when everyone is given a seat at the table. The Not invisible campaign is more than just about visibility; it’s about creating a world where autistic people can live and thrive.

**Join the campaign,
share your story!**



**Discover all the stories here:
[Not-invisible.org](https://not-invisible.org)**



Hadja Lahbib, European Commissioner for Equality, Preparedness and Crisis Management (Belgium), speaks at the European Parliament in December 2024



European elections: what is at stake for autistic people and their families?

European citizens voted in the European Parliament (EP) elections in July 2024, which led to changes in the make-up of the parliament and the European Commission. In the context of its ‘Not invisible’ campaign Autism-Europe (AE) urged Members of European Parliament (MEPs) and EP candidates to pledge support for autistic people and their families. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen included autism research in the political guidelines for her re-election. European Commissioner for Health and Animal Welfare, Olivier Várhelyi from Hungary, Commissioner for Equality, Preparedness and Crises Management, Hadja Lahbib from Belgium, and re-elected EP President Roberta Metsola from Malta showed strong commitments to disability rights and autistic people.

Autism Europe’s “Not invisible” campaign reached many candidates

To improve autism visibility in the European Parliament elections in June 2024, Autism-Europe published a pledge for MEP candidates to express their support to the full realisation of autistic people’s rights. By signing the pledge, candidates indicated their commitment to cooperate with autistic people, their families and representative organisations during their time in office, and to support the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (UN CRPD) across EU policies. The pledge also was a commitment to build on the recent European

Parliament resolution adopted in October 2023 to harmonise the rights of autistic persons.

AE director Aurelie Baranger launched the pledge in the European Parliament on 2 April 2024, World Autism Awareness Day. As keynote speaker, Autism-Europe’s long-time ally and Vice Chair of the European Parliament Intergroup on Disability, MEP Rosa Estaràs from Spain was among the first to sign the pledge. Within the first week, dozens more MEPs visited Autism-Europe’s stand. By election day, 80 MEPs and EP candidates from 15 EU countries had signed the pledge. Of these, 26 MEPs from nine EU countries were (re-)elected.



At the start of the new legislature, the European Parliament re-elected Roberta Metsola from Malta as its president. Ms Metsola has been a longtime supporter of Autism-Europe. Moreover, two of the 14 newly elected EP Vice Presidents are past and recent Autism-Europe supporters: Victor Negrescu and Nicolae Ștefănuță (both from Romania). Autism-Europe 2024 pledge supporter and former Vice President of the European Parliament Marc Angel (from Luxembourg) will serve as one of the EP’s quaestors.

While the number of Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) with disabilities decreased in the current term, Autism-Europe was delighted to see continuous disability community representation in the legislative body. Re-elected MEP and Autism-Europe 2024 pledge supporter Katrin Langensiepen (from Germany) was re-appointed as one of the vice chairs of the European Parliament Committee on Employment and Social Affairs (EMPL). Ms Estaràs became one of the vice chairs of the European Parliament Committee on Women’s Rights and Gender Equality (FEMM).

The committee has in the past called out the double discrimination of women with disabilities. Re-elected MEP and Autism-Europe 2024 pledge supporter Tilly Metz (from Luxembourg) became one of the Vice Chairs of the European Parliament on Public Health (SANT). Re-elected MEP and past AE campaign supporter Dolores Montserrat (from Spain) swapped chairs with vice chair of the European Parliament Committee on Petitions (PETI).

This committee drafted the 2023 resolution on ‘Harmonising the Rights of autistic people’, which constitutes a strong call for action that Autism-Europe hopes will see concrete outcomes in the years to come. Autism-Europe 2024 pledge supporter Luke ‘Ming’ Flanagan (from Ireland) remains the only autistic MEP. At the end of 2024 the European Parliament Intergroup on Disability run by the European Disability Forum (EDF) was re-established with 65 Members of European Parliaments including most of those listed above and other key allies of AE in the EP.

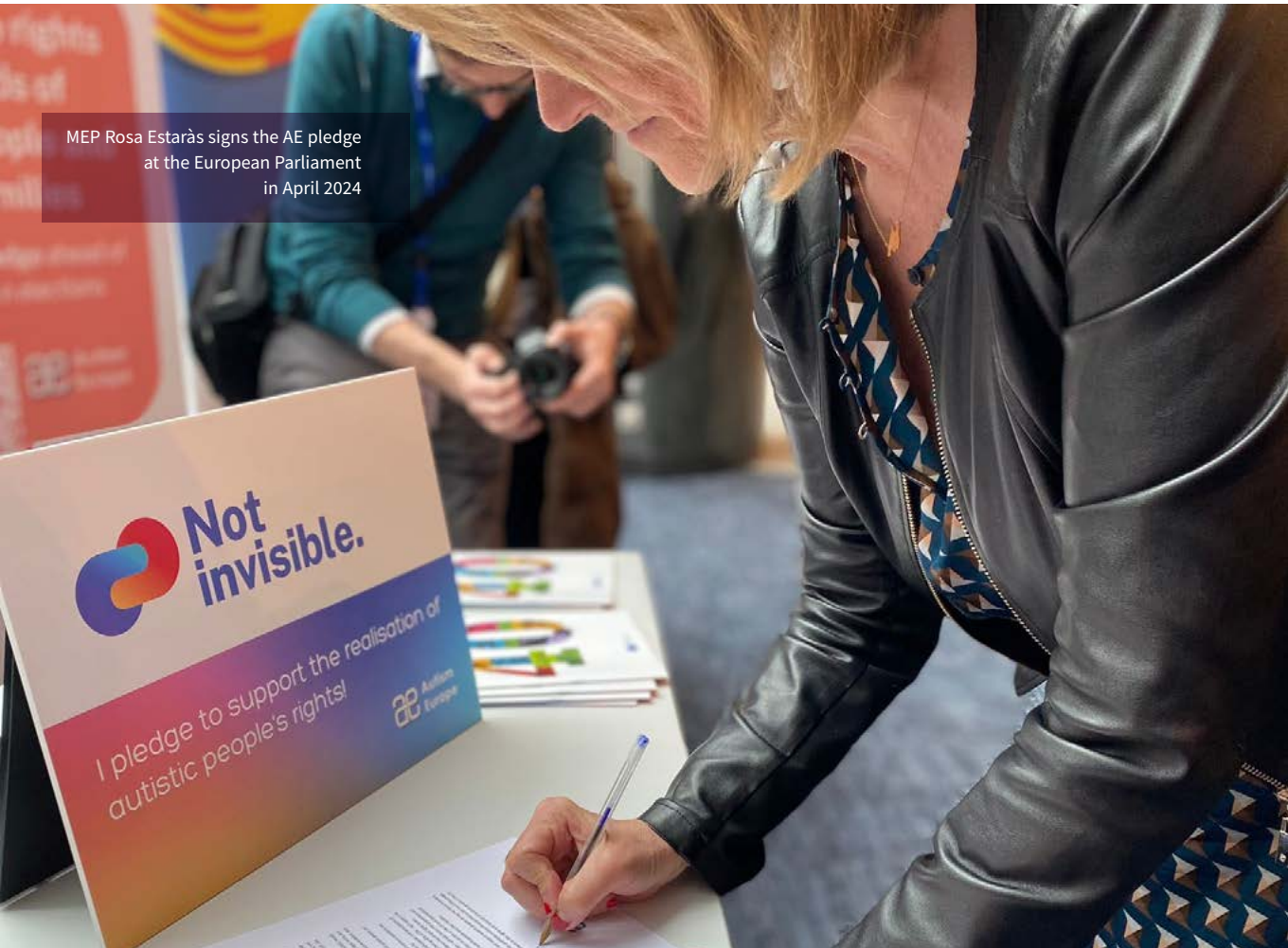
Incoming Commission highlights autism in political guidelines

The rearrangement of the European Parliament also led to a new mandate of the European Commission. After MEPs re-elected Ursula von der Leyen as president of the Commission, she released a set of political guidelines. Autism-Europe was particularly pleased to see autism research highlighted as a political priority in these guidelines. Autism-Europe had been concerned about the lack of explicit commitment to advancing disability rights and of reference to any future actions in the framework of the EU’s Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2021-2030). These items were back on the agenda in the mission letter by von der Leyen to European Commissioner for Equality, Preparedness and Crisis Management Hadja Lahbib, from Belgium. AE joined the European Disability Forum in their call to again have a standalone equality commissioner to replace outgoing Commissioner Helena Dalli from Malta, who had become a key ally of the European disability movement during her tenure.

Autism-Europe welcomed that the mission letter by von der Leyen to European Commissioner for Health and Animal Welfare, Olivér Várhelyi, included a commitment to a ‘common approach’ to autism. It echoes Autism-Europe’s demand to adopt a strategic and holistic approach at the European level to realise the rights of autistic people. Autism-Europe reaffirmed in that context that any common and comprehensive approach to autism should be in line with the UNCRPD and developed in full cooperation with the autism community. Many international organisations have recommended a holistic approach in addressing the needs of autistic people and their families, to remove barriers in the health sector and across the whole of society

EU actions on autism and disability:
what’s next?

The confirmation hearings on 6 November 2024 of Ms Lahbib and Mr Várhelyi showed that both are supportive of disability rights. Ms. Lahbib highlighted two concrete initiatives: First, deinstitutionalisation, which means getting people with disabilities out of institutions to allow them to live the life they want, where they want, and when they want. This, according to her, requires changing mindsets, as strong institutions in many countries hinder the autonomy of people with disabilities. She plans to develop strategies with representatives on the ground, notably the equality bodies, which will be strengthened from 2026 to give a voice to people with disabilities. Secondly, she believes that better social care support for people with disabilities is essential for deinstitutionalization. During his opening statement, Mr Várhelyi mentioned a new common approach to autism. However, Autism-Europe expects clarification on the scope of future actions and look forward to being meaningfully involved in shaping them. Mr Várhelyi also announced the continuation of the European Commission’s important work on mental health, specifically investigating the impact of social media and excessive screen time on well-being, especially for the younger generation. During the hearing, Mr Várhelyi received a big round of applause when he backed COVID-19 vaccinations as having saved the lives of millions of Europeans. Autism-Europe also welcomes this as a strong call for an evidence-based approach and against fake news around vaccines. Autism-Europe had launched a call to include autistic people in priority groups for vaccination during the COVID pandemic.



Autism-Europe, together with the EDF, the European Union of the Deaf and the European Disability Card Fan, met with Ms Metsola on 3 December, the International Day of Persons with Disabilities, to reaffirm her commitment to disability rights and autistic people. A key focus of the discussion was the implementation of the newly adopted Directive on the European Disability Card (EDC) and European Parking Card for people with disabilities. Belgian autistic activist Pieter Paul Moens, representing EDC Fan, indicated to Ms Metsola that the EDC was a critical tool for the recognition of disability, which can also be lifesaving in cases of emergency. Mr Moens called for considering an ambitious scope for the card in the future.

During the December 2024 Strasbourg EP plenary MEPs asked Ms Lahbib to commit to further actions as part of the European Commission’s Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030. Several MEPs called on improved employment programmes for people with disabilities, among them Ms Estaràs, Ms Langensiepen, Michele Picaro (Italy), and Sean Kelly (Ireland). Ms Lahbib committed to actions for the remaining time of the Strategy in the fields of employment, accessibility, and independent living.

In 2025, the European Commission will announce concrete actions to continue how the European Union will fully implement the United Nations Convention for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Autism-Europe Congress 2025:
Advancing Quality of Life

From 11-13 September 2025, Dublin will host the 14th Autism-Europe International Congress, a biennial event uniting researchers, professionals, advocates, and autistic individuals from across the continent. Organized by Autism-Europe in collaboration with AsIAM, Ireland’s national autism charity, the congress will take place at the Royal Dublin Society under the theme “**Quality of Life – Research, Policy and Practice.**”

This year’s theme reflects a growing commitment to holistic, inclusive approaches that prioritize the lived experiences of autistic people. The programme is designed to be both diverse and participatory, featuring keynote presentations, panel discussions, and workshops that explore cutting-edge research, inclusive policy development, and practical strategies for improving everyday life.

A standout feature of the congress is **its autistic-led and co-produced structure**, ensuring that autistic voices are central to every aspect of the event—from planning to presentation. The Scientific Committee includes autistic individuals, family members, academics, and practitioners—a collaboration that sets a new standard for inclusivity.

Attendees can expect sessions on topics such as inclusive education, employment, mental health, and community living, alongside personal narratives that highlight the diversity of autistic experiences. The congress also promises a rich social programme, showcasing Dublin’s renowned hospitality and its ambition to become the world’s first accredited autism-friendly capital city.

Whether attending as a speaker, exhibitor, or delegate, participants will leave with new insights, tools, and connections to support their work and advocacy. The Autism-Europe Congress 2025 is not just a conference—it’s a movement toward a more accepting and equitable society for all.



- Congress Topics
- 1. Improving physical and mental health
 - 2. Understanding ageing in autistic people
 - 3. Supporting autistic people to thrive and find meaning in life
 - 4. Vocation and employment
 - 5. Creating safe and autism friendly environments
 - 6. Accessing learning across the lifespan
 - 7. Gender and sexuality
 - 8. Embracing intersectionality and underrepresented perspectives
 - 9. Accessing housing and autonomous living
 - 10. Autism and overlapping neurodivergence
 - 11. Autistic communication and autistic interaction
 - 12. Advancing rights: from advocacy and activism to policy changes
 - 13. Additional topics: Supporting Research / Understanding the school experience / Developing accessible supports / Parent perspectives and supports

For more information and registration, visit autismcongress2025.org.



The Royal London Hospital emergency department: leading the way to foster accessibility for autistic patients

Hospital visits are stressful for anyone, but for many autistic people, going to the emergency department of a large hospital can be so overwhelming that they instead choose not to be treated at all. The hectic environment usually found in such departments therefore creates an inherent disadvantage for patients who also happen to be autistic. Some hospitals provide quiet areas with sensory equipment, which is exactly the kind of effort recognised in the UK by the Autism Accreditation Programme of the National Autistic Society.

One facility to be accredited recently is the emergency department of The Royal London Hospital. In June 2023, it became the first such department in London to receive the Autism Inclusion Award for general health providers. The award recognised the hospital's efforts to audit and plan adaptations to enhance inclusivity for autistic children and adults.



Best practice framework

The process began when Dr Giles Armstrong, a paediatric emergency consultant, read about Manchester Airport's accreditation by the National Autistic Society on BBC News. Inspired by the airport's adjustments, the departments signed up for the award, driven by the personal experiences of staff with autistic family members. The team believed that if a busy and chaotic airport could make such adjustments, so could their Accident and Emergency departments.

The best practice framework provided by the National Autistic Society guided the departments in reflecting on their practices and identifying adjustments and developments. Initially, the team focused on purchasing sensory resources, but with the help of an autism accreditation consultant, they shifted towards adapting processes to better support autistic patients. This included understanding the NAS's framework and putting practices into context.

Individual needs and support

The service introduced autism champions and trained teams to foster a person-centred approach. Sarah Gamester, lead nurse for the paediatric emergency department, said: "The biggest thing that we can all do is care and stop and listen to our patients about their individual care needs and choices." This approach led to significant changes, such as offering alternative and quieter waiting areas for patients who struggle with crowded environments. This flexibility has been transformative, reducing the number of families who had to leave due to sensory overload. The hospital also encouraged patients to disclose they are autistic by displaying posters in initial assessment rooms asking patients to disclose any specific requirements.

Collaborating with local schools, the departments developed visual aids and hospital passports to aid communication, which were consistent with the ones used by the school in their Local authority. These tools, such as social stories with pictures explaining procedures like X-rays, have been instrumental in helping patients understand what to expect. Schools also assisted in creating hospital passports, containing details on how to communicate and support autistic patients.

One of the bigger challenges was making ICT changes, as the team was dealing with multiple competing requirements. Dr Giles Armstrong recommended having senior support at an early stage to assist with prioritising actions identified on the Autism Inclusion action plan. Once the hospital made changes to their CRS system, it became much easier to search for Hospital Passports, benefiting the triage and treatment of autistic people in the emergency departments and other teams within the Royal London Hospital.

The Covid-19 pandemic led to several physical changes in the

departments, such as replacing curtained areas with walled cubicles, creating a lower arousal environment. Coincidentally, funding became available to the paediatrics emergency department to build a sensory room and purchase portable sensory stations, reducing stress during waiting times and aiding in assessments and treatments.

The Emergency Department worked in partnership with the London Ambulance Service and the London Air Ambulance's pre-existing Physician Response Unit (which delivers care to patients at home when safe to do so and when remaining at home was beneficial to the patient). This new initiative, supported by a standard operating procedure for the care of children, young people, and autistic adults, expanded the PRU's remit to help reduce transfer of autistic patients to emergency departments whenever possible.

Tailored responses, more accessible assessments

The department documented case studies to evidence the impact of the changes they made. For example, a young autistic patient with a painful and infected toe was prioritised due to their needs and offered a quiet area with sensory equipment. This calmed the patient, allowing them to be treated in a clinical area. A follow-up appointment was organized with the Physician Response Unit to avoid the stress of returning to the hospital. This tailored response alleviated stress for the patient and their family, enabled better assessment, and resulted in a better health outcome.

The team wrote in their self-audit that they have "benefited immensely from the support from the National Autistic Society Autism Accreditation consultant in preparation for the assessment and introducing changes in the departments." Families of autistic children interviewed as part of the accreditation process reported that the service has improved exponentially in the last year. Being fast-tracked, the sensory facilities, and MDT support, including the play therapist, are "fantastic" and make waiting times much more manageable and treatment possible, the team wrote. People travel out of borough to attend this emergency department because of its autism facilities.

Since becoming accredited, the departments have continued to develop and share their journey with other London emergency departments through presentations, networking, and showing colleagues around. They tell them that small changes can make a big difference. Often, all it takes is asking patients about their needs, such as what can help them navigate the distress of a busy hospital environment. The effects of small accommodations to those needs are tangible: the emergency department reported reduced time for assessments and less diagnostic overshadowing.

Dr Giles Armstrong, paediatric emergency consultant, said, "I am very proud of all the hard work so many people in ED and the hospital have contributed to this project. This is an important point in our journey to being an inclusive department. I look forward to more improvements over the coming years."

More information about Autism Accreditation:
<https://www.autism.org.uk/what-we-do/autism-training-and-best-practice/autism-accreditation>



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An inclusive approach to disaster risk management: urban resilience for autistic people in the Türkiye earthquakes

The two earthquakes that struck Türkiye on 6 February 2023 resulted in more than 50,000 deaths and had a profound impact on the lives of autistic people and their families. More than two years after the disaster, many autistic people and their families continue to live in container cities, in circumstances that deny their fundamental human rights and dignity. This situation serves as a stark reminder of the urgent need for a disaster risk management approach that is grounded in human rights and inclusivity.

The connection between urban resilience and inclusivity is embedded in the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal: "Making cities and human settlements more inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable." Specifically, the adoption of the Sendai Framework at the United Nations World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction III in 2015 is seen as a significant milestone in the journey towards more resilient cities. Human rights-oriented and inclusive disaster approaches have reduced the devastating impact of natural disasters in several countries.

On the first anniversary of the earthquake, the Denizli Autism Association published a report entitled "Take Action for Autistic Earthquake Victims". This report, which reveals that the earthquake exacerbated the challenges faced by autistic people and their families in all domains, particularly housing, education, and health, was prepared with the support of the European Union Sivil Düşün Program. Its objective was threefold: to document the infringements of rights during and after the earthquakes, to contribute to the resolution of the issues confronting autistic people and their families by enhancing their visibility, and to delineate a roadmap for future disasters. The authors of the report conducted thirty in-depth interviews with autistic people

and their families in Hatay, Mersin, and Adana in October 2023. The field research showed numerous issues violating national and international conventions related to human rights-oriented disaster management.

Multiple forms of discrimination

Research findings by the Denizli Autism Association indicate that multiple forms of discrimination were perpetrated against autistic people and their families in the earthquake zone:

- Access to humanitarian aid, including essential items such as tents, food, and clean water, was severely limited, particularly during the initial stages of the disaster.
- Aid provided both by public institutions and non-governmental organizations was not distributed in an equitable and impartial manner. It
- Volunteers and professionals in the earthquake zone created many had little to no understanding of appropriate conduct towards autistic people.

Life does not fit in a container

Most autistic children and their families in Hatay lived in containers. These temporary housing units are three meters wide and seven meters long, placed one next to the other. It was reported that some children and their families were asked to vacate the container cities, due to the noise-making behaviours exhibited by autistic people. People interviewed also pointed out the decline in products available in the market within the container city, the persistent concerns for the safety of their autistic children, the inability to engage in the governance of the container city, the challenges in accessing humanitarian aid, and the significant loss of income, not to mention the tragic deaths of family members.

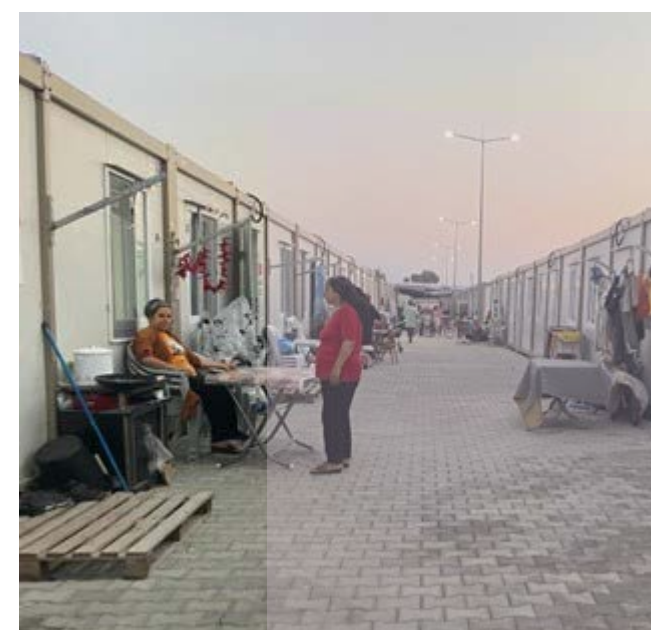
Health and transportation

Interviewees said that public transportation services in the centre of Hatay, which returned on a limited basis in October, were severely inadequate and failed to meet the needs of the population. Furthermore, the presence of asbestos adversely impacts the quality of life, resulting in a range of health issues, including burning sensations in the throat and eyes, itching, and other symptoms. Respondents said that, while access to health services had improved compared to the initial stages following the earthquake, there were still significant challenges in accessing these services due to the ongoing disruptions in public transportation. There also were significant hygiene concerns in the container cities, particularly regarding the collective washing of laundry, which can result in the transmission of allergic or contagious diseases. Interviewees reported ongoing issues with water and electricity supply.

Access to Education

The quality of life and access to education for autistic children and their families who moved from the earthquake zone to Mersin was somewhat better. In Hatay, however, access to education was identified as a significant challenge. The overwhelming majority of autistic children who had previously been enrolled in school were unable to resume their studies following the earthquake.

©Denizli Autism Association



Recommendations

- A provincial "Disaster Autism Action Plan" should be prepared. Autistic people, NGOs, and public and local administrations should cooperate in the preparation and implementation process of this plan.
- Autistic people and NGOs working with autistic people should be included in the coordination centres established in natural disasters.
- A non-discrimination framework that covers NGOs as well as public institutions providing humanitarian aid should be established and every stage of the aid process should be monitored.
- Disaggregated data on autistic people on a provincial basis should be kept by relevant institutions.
- Plans on how to reach autistic people in a disaster, how to intervene, and how to maintain their well-being should be clarified in advance.
- Seminars on rights-based disaster management and the needs of autistic people should be organized.
- The recommendations of Article 11 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities should also be taken into consideration during the implementation phase.
- Places where autistic people live should be identified and data should be accessible in emergency situations in a way that does not create a security gap.
- Evacuation protocols for autistic people should be established and developed.
- The psychological support needs of autistic people and their families should be addressed comprehensively.
- Plans should be made considering that autistic people need a designated space of their own.
- The needs of autistic people and their families should not be seen as untimely and should not be underestimated. Their needs should be met as soon as possible.
- NGOs should be able to easily cooperate with state and local governments.

About Denizli Autism Association

Denizli Autism Association (DOD) was founded on 2 April 2014 by families with autistic children living in Denizli. Defining itself as a civil society organization based on rights struggle and focused on advocacy, DOD aims to support autistic people to lead a life worthy of human rights and dignity. Its core principles are participation, benefit creation, transparency, solution orientation, anti-discrimination, accountability, and sustainability. It provides educational guidance and family counselling support to autistic people and their families locally. It works together with the Autism Council of Türkiye in determining policies on autism at the national level. DOD has been a member of Autism Europe since 2020.

More information: www.denizliotizm.org
E-mail: denizliotizmdernegi@gmail.com



Simona Palacios, president of Fundación Miradas, accepts the 'Somos Pacientes' ('We are patients') award on behalf of bbMiradas in December 2024

©Fundación Miradas

New initiative a gamechanger for autistic children in Spain

bbMiradas, an innovative programme in Spain focused on the early detection and intervention of autism, to date has screened 850 children aged 4 to 36 months, diagnosing 230 of them with autism. The programme's unique focus and diagnostic techniques have been credited with improving developmental outcomes for autistic children.

The programme runs under Spain's **National Strategy on Autism Spectrum Disorders** that was approved by the Council of Ministers in 2015. Founded by **Autismo Burgos** and **Fundación Miradas**, the program has now been expanded nationally across 10 Spanish provinces, (Burgos, Albacete, Badajoz, Ceuta, Granada, Huesca, Murcia, Segovia, Seville, and Valencia) through local associations that are members of Autismo España. This national expansion has been possible thanks to the close collaboration between Fundación Miradas and Autismo España, and the funding of the **Ministry of Social Rights and Agenda 2030**.

bbMiradas aims to identify early signs of autism and provide timely interventions to support the development of children diagnosed with autism. It targets children from 4 to 36 months of age, a critical period for social and cognitive development. This focus on early detection, diagnosis and intervention seeks to improve the long-term outcomes for children with autism.

High-tech with a human touch

The programme's unique approach combines technology with human expertise to create a robust early detection and intervention framework. Key diagnostic and supportive techniques include:

Eye-tracking technology: By tracking the babies' eye movements through a non-invasive procedure that involves showing the baby a 3-minute video and analysing their reaction, the program can detect patterns that deviate from typical development. For instance, children on the autism spectrum often exhibit reduced eye contact and an atypical focus on objects rather than faces. The eye-tracking system provides quantifiable data that can indicate these differences.

"We use data-mining tools and the neural network that we have designed to obtain useful information," said Joaquín Pacheco, a member of the research group from the University of Burgos.

Developmental assessments: Children participating in the program undergo a series of standardised tests and observations. These assessments are designed to capture a comprehensive picture of the child's development, focusing on key areas such as language, social skills, and motor abilities. Participating babies are evaluated periodically alongside regular paediatric services by multidisciplinary teams including paediatricians, psychologists, and speech therapists. The procedures include traditional psychometric testing (done by parents and professionals), observations of free play, and use of the highly effective eye-tracking technology.

Parental questionnaires and interviews: Parents provide valuable insights into their child's behaviour through detailed questionnaires and interviews. This information complements the technological and clinical assessments, ensuring a holistic understanding of the child's development.

Training workshops: bbMiradas conducts regular workshops and training sessions for parents and professionals. These sessions cover a range of topics, including recognising early signs of autism, effective communication strategies, and intervention techniques. Professionals in childcare and healthcare can therefore provide appropriate referrals and support to any family they work with.

Individual and societal impacts

bbMiradas has had success from the beginning, making strides in the early detection and support of babies and children with autism.

Early detection: One of the most significant achievements of bbMiradas is its clear success in identifying early signs of autism. Use of the eye-tracking technology combined with comprehensive assessments during this crucial developmental period has enabled the early detection of signs of autism. Early detection then allows for early intervention and for parents and professionals to take advantage of the greatest neuroplasticity between 0 and 36 months.

As numerous studies have shown, such intervention improves the quality of life of autistic people and their families.

"The programme has marked a turning point for the families and babies who benefit from it," said Simona Palacios, president of the foundation. "It allows for an approach and intervention at a key stage in a person's development."

Parental empowerment: Many parents have gained knowledge and additional tools to support their children. Parents have reported feeling more confident and capable of managing their child's needs, contributing to a more supportive and nurturing environment for the child.

Professional development: A very prevalent issue among professionals is a lack of knowledge and training around providing services to autistic people. The bbMiradas programme's training initiatives have enhanced the skills and knowledge of healthcare and childcare professionals. This has led to better identification and support of autistic children in various settings including clinics, preschools, and daycare centres.

Research contributions: By collecting and analysing data on early autism indicators, bbMiradas has made valuable contributions to autism research. The programme has shared its findings with the scientific community, aiding in the development of new diagnostic tools and intervention strategies.

Community awareness: bbMiradas has played a pivotal role in raising awareness about autism and the importance of early detection. Through community outreach and public education campaigns, the program has helped to destigmatise autism and promote understanding and acceptance.

Support networks: The program has facilitated the creation of support networks for families, providing them with opportunities to connect with others facing similar challenges. These networks offer emotional support, practical advice, and an invaluable sense of community.

Future of the bbMiradas programme

As bbMiradas continues to expand, its potential to transform the landscape of autism detection and support remains strong. Plans include:

Expanding reach: Making the programme accessible to more families across different regions, including rural and underserved areas. Fundación Miradas is also working on implementing the program in other countries in Europe and the Americas, which have already shown interest in this model of early detection and intervention. The key commitment, said Palacios, is "to help as many families and babies as possible regardless of where they live."

Technological advancements: Continuously improving the eye-tracking technology and other assessment tools to enhance accuracy and ease of use.

Longitudinal studies: Conducting long-term studies to track the progress of children identified early through bbMiradas and evaluate the sustained impact of early intervention.

Policy advocacy: Collaborating with policymakers to advocate for the integration of early autism detection and intervention into public health initiatives and education systems.

bbMiradas represents a major change in the approach to autism detection and support. By harnessing the power of technology and combining it with comprehensive assessments and robust support systems, the program has a profound impact on the lives of many families. As bbMiradas looks to the future, its commitment to innovation and inclusivity will continue to lead to better outcomes for autistic children and their families.



The innovative programme uses eye-tracking technology to detect autism in 4-36-months-old children.

©Fundación Miradas

More information:
<https://fundacionmiradas.org/>

Autism Spectrum Pathways: Empowering Autistic Jobseekers for Sustainable Employment

Autism Spectrum Pathways (ASP) was an Erasmus+ project designed to address a significant issue faced by autistic people: the barriers to entering and thriving in the workforce. By creating innovative training resources for autistic jobseekers, vocational education, and training (VET) teachers, and employers, ASP aimed to facilitate more inclusive employment environments across Europe. The project ran until January 2025. After its completion, all created resources are accessible for free on the ASP website.



Coordinated by PAGS, the project brought together a group of educators, researchers, employment specialists, and advocacy groups to produce a comprehensive set of resources. Through tailored guidance, ASP worked to enhance the employability of autistic people, increase awareness among employers, and support VET teachers in developing autism-friendly teaching strategies.

Addressing Barriers to Employment for the Autistic Community

One of the primary challenges autistic people face is navigating a job market that often does not account for the different ways in which they communicate, process information, or interact with others. Many autistic jobseekers struggle with social communication, sensory processing, and adaptability in work environments. Despite possessing valuable skills such as attention to detail, focus, and technical abilities, autistic people experience significantly higher unemployment rates compared to their non-autistic peers.

ASP recognised these hurdles and aimed to equip both autistic jobseekers and those who work with them with the tools to create successful employment outcomes. By developing resources like the “Expert Guide for Employment” and providing vocational education trainers with a better understanding of how to support autistic students, ASP sought to create a path towards long-term employment success for autistic people.

A Comprehensive Training Platform

The heart of the ASP initiative is its online training platform, which serves three key audiences: autistic people, VET teachers, and employers. This free platform continues to provide a range of accessible training materials that can be adapted to individual learning preferences and needs. The platform is built to ensure that autistic jobseekers can gain confidence in applying for and securing jobs while also helping teachers and employers better understand and support autistic people in the workplace.

For Autistic Jobseekers

ASP’s training modules for autistic jobseekers cover essential job-seeking skills such as creating resumes, preparing for interviews, and developing workplace communication strategies. It acknowledges that autistic people may require different approaches to these tasks and offers guidance that is mindful of these differences. Autistic users are provided with self-paced modules designed to build their confidence in navigating the complexities of the job market.

In addition, the platform offers strategies for managing workplace stress and sensory sensitivities. This aspect is crucial since many autistic people face heightened anxiety in unpredictable or overstimulating environments. The resources on the ASP platform encourage self-advocacy and help people articulate their needs to potential employers so they may access the accommodations to which they are entitled.

For Vocational Education and Training (VET) Teachers

ASP also focused on supporting educators who are responsible for preparing autistic people for the workforce. VET teachers often work with diverse groups of learners, including those with disabilities, and ASP recognised the need for specialised training to support autistic learners effectively.

The training modules for teachers aim to provide practical strategies for delivering autism-friendly lessons. These include techniques for adjusting communication styles, creating structured learning environments, and offering personalised support. The platform equips teachers with the tools to help autistic students build skills that are directly applicable to the job market, such as time management, teamwork, and problem-solving.



Moreover, the platform promotes an understanding of the broader challenges autistic people face, encouraging VET teachers to foster an environment where these learners can thrive both academically and professionally. By integrating this knowledge into their teaching practices, VET teachers can ensure that autistic learners are better prepared for the challenges and expectations of the workplace.

For Employers

A core objective of the ASP project was to engage employers in creating more autism-friendly workplaces. Many companies may not be aware of the unique strengths that autistic people bring to the table and that simple adjustments can greatly help them succeed in the workplace.

ASP’s training for employers includes information on how to make hiring practices more inclusive, such as modifying interview processes or job descriptions to suit a broader range of candidates. The platform also emphasizes the importance of workplace adaptations, such as flexible working hours or quieter environments, which can help autistic employees thrive.

In addition, the training highlights the benefits of employing autistic people. Many autistic people possess valuable skills such as high levels of concentration, pattern recognition, and strong technical abilities. However, employers may not always recognise these strengths due to a lack of awareness about autism. The ASP platform encourages employers to see beyond traditional expectations and understand how to leverage the skills of autistic employees for the benefit of their organisations.

Research-Driven Solutions

To ensure the effectiveness of its training programs, ASP has conducted extensive research into the specific challenges faced by autistic jobseekers and the current gaps in vocational training. The project’s research component included surveys, interviews, and focus groups with autistic people, VET teachers, and employers across Europe. This data has been instrumental in shaping the content of the ASP platform and ensuring that it addresses real-world issues.

The research findings, which can be found on the ASP website within the “State of the Art Research Report,” have highlighted key areas where autistic people often face challenges, such as the interview process, communication in the workplace, and career progression. ASP’s training modules are designed to address these points directly, offering actionable advice and strategies for overcoming them.

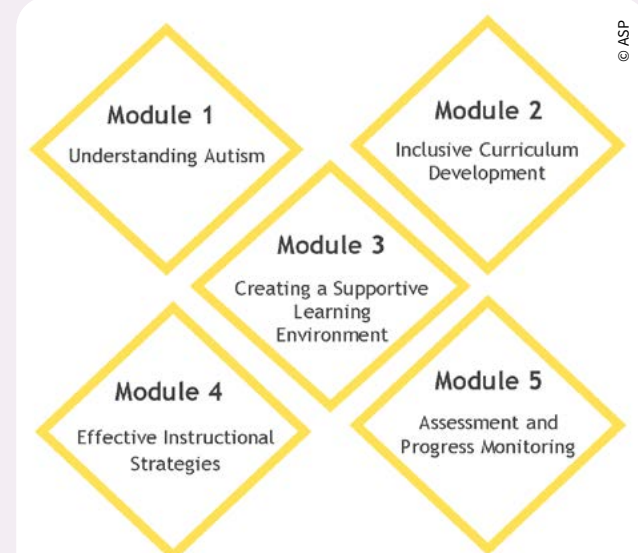
In addition to its own research, ASP drew on a wealth of existing studies that emphasize the importance of tailored support for autistic jobseekers. The project’s resources are rooted in evidence-based practices and are systematically reviewed by experts in the fields of autism, employment, and education.

Long-Term Impact and Policy Influence

ASP aimed to create lasting change not only for individual jobseekers but also for the systems that support them. By raising awareness among employers, providing specialised training for educators, and offering autistic people the tools they need to succeed, ASP sought to improve employment outcomes for the entire autism community.

The project has also made recommendations for policymakers to ensure that autistic people have equal access to employment opportunities. These include advocating for more inclusive hiring practices, better vocational education for autistic learners, and greater awareness of the unique challenges faced by autistic jobseekers.

By promoting a holistic approach that involves jobseekers, educators, employers, and policymakers, Autism Spectrum Pathways has helped pave the way for a more inclusive workforce—one where autistic people can not only find jobs but also build meaningful, fulfilling careers so they may live with independence and dignity.



The ASP Training for Educators and VET Providers consists of 5 modules.



**More information
and access to resources:**
<https://www.autismspectrumpathways.eu/>



Autism-IncluDi

Inclusive education of autistic students through distance learning

An innovative EU-funded project, which launched a series of training programs to improve inclusive distance learning in higher education, has just come to a successful conclusion. Among other results, the project, titled 'Autism Inclusion in Distance Learning' (or Autism-IncluDi), has published a web platform with courses for students, educational staff, and caregivers.

The Autism-IncluDi program sought to enhance the teaching and training techniques currently used in inclusive education systems, by employing specifically developed tools based on Information Communication Technology (ICT) and the Internet of things (IoT). Running from February 2022 until January 2025, the project was funded by the European Commission's Erasmus+ Program.

Classroom-type learning conventional teaching and training techniques long dominated the sector of inclusive education. Inclusive educators often lack the pedagogical and technical knowledge and competences to implement accessible and inclusive distance learning for autistic students. Until a few years ago, very few educators in this sector implemented any type of distance learning in their courses.

The COVID-19 pandemic showed that educators in general needed more training in the use of advanced technology and remote-teaching tools to provide high-quality education for students at home. Autistic students, and other students with specific needs, do not always get the same level of education in regular circumstances, and are therefore at an even greater disadvantage when taught remotely by educators who have received too little training for distance learning.

The goal of Autism-IncluDi was to create a tangible, innovative, and easy to integrate training framework that will allow special-needs educators to adopt distance learning and use it effectively for accessible and inclusive education of autistic students, optimise their training workflow, and keep up with the dynamically changing educational needs of children with specific needs. The use of ICT tools will help the educators create training materials that fully unlock the students' potential, support them socially, and allow students to learn in a modern, fun, and effective manner.

Specifically, the main objectives of Autism-IncluDi were:

1. To tackle the barriers that higher education students on the autism spectrum face while participating in distance learning, by increasing the capacity of higher education institutions for distance learning; developing distance learning digital pedagogy and expertise; and increasing the purposeful use of digital technologies;
2. To make higher-education staff more aware of the barriers autistic students face in distance learning, and to develop competencies for accessible and inclusive distance learning implementation;
3. To improve special-education teachers' and caregivers' competencies regarding accessible and inclusive distance learning, by modernizing higher-education programs for special-education teachers, with an emphasis on distance-learning implementation skills.

The project was led by the University of Macedonia in Thessaloniki, Greece. The consortium comprised Rezeknes Tehnologiju Akademija, a vocational school in Latvia; Agrupamento de Escolas José Estevão, a school cluster in Aveiro, Portugal; A & A Emphasys Interactive Solutions Ltd (Cyprus); Atlatis Engineering AE (Greece); Maria Grzegorzewska University, a pedagogical school in Poland; and Autism-Europe.

For information and to access the training courses: <https://autism-includi.eu/>

Anffas: Building Inclusive Communities for Over Six Decades



Anffas, the Associazione Nazionale di Famiglie e Persone con Disabilità Intellettive e Disturbi del Neurosviluppo, is the largest Italian association of families and people with intellectual disabilities and neurodevelopmental conditions. Anffas includes 167 local associations and 61 member bodies aimed at guaranteeing the care, assistance, and protection of over 30,000 people in Italy.

Maria Luisa Ubershag Menegotto, mother of a child with a disability, founded Anffas in Rome in March 1958. Along with other parents, Maria Luisa saw the challenges faced by individuals with disabilities and decided to act. In the 1950s, individuals with disabilities were often marginalized, placed in special institutions, and denied opportunities for social integration. Anffas was established to challenge these norms, aiming to shift societal perceptions and improve the quality of life of those affected. The organization focused on providing support to families, advocating for legislative changes, and promoting the rights of people with intellectual disabilities.

Over 67 years, Anffas has expanded its reach across Italy, establishing numerous local associations that work to support individuals with disabilities and their families. The organisation's mission centres on creating a world where the rights of people with disabilities are always respected and guaranteed, ensuring their full inclusion in society.

Anffas is guided by several core values that shape its activities. One of its key principles is the respect for the human, civil, social, and economic rights of individuals with disabilities. Anffas aims to ensure these rights are upheld, providing a foundation for dignity and equality. Furthermore, the organisation emphasises its support for families, recognizing that disabilities can affect the whole family.

By offering resources and assistance, Anffas works to improve the quality of life for families navigating the challenges of supporting a loved one with a disability. Anffas envisions a society where services are tailored to individual life projects, aiming to enhance abilities and promote social inclusion. The organization draws attention to the importance of community involvement, believing that inclusive communities enrich the lives of all members, including those with disabilities.



In pursuit of its mission, Anffas engages in various activities, including:

- **Advocacy:** Working with policymakers to promote laws that protect the rights of individuals with disabilities.
- **Support Services:** Providing services to enhance the abilities of individuals with disabilities to facilitate their social inclusion.
- **Education and Training:** Offering resources and training for families, professionals, and the community to promote understanding and support for individuals with disabilities.

Autism holds significant importance in the work of Anffas as approximately 35% of their associates are autistic people or family members. The organization aims to enhance the quality of life for individuals on the autism spectrum and their families, promoting and safeguarding their dignity and rights across all contexts and stages of life.

Therefore, Anffas is involved in many projects directed at enhancing the quality of life of autistic people. At the national level, one standout project is "AI COACH," which uses AI to develop a virtual coach that supports adaptive behaviours, communication, and autonomy. Locally, numerous Anffas branches implement specialized projects tailored to their communities. For example, the "Valle Camonica Autism Friendly" project trains businesses to create inclusive environments, while the Anffas Cagliari Foundation offers services grounded in evidence-based approaches to foster autonomy. Other local efforts include job placement programmes, educational workshops, and therapeutic activities such as pet and music therapy.

In its own words, "the history of Anffas is the story of thousands of people who have fought for radical change in society, thus contributing to the improvement of the living conditions of people with disabilities and their parents and family members". Today, Anffas continues to be a pillar for people with disabilities across Italy and a leading representative association of intellectual disabilities and neurodevelopmental conditions at a national level.

More information: <https://www.anffas.net/>

ANFFAS is a full member of Autism-Europe

Autismo Andalucía:

Representing the interests of autistic people and their families throughout the Andalucía region in Spain.



Autismo Andalucía was founded in 1992 to unify and support various associations of relatives of autistic people, addressing their needs more effectively and advocating for their rights across all stages of life. The federation serves as a necessary intermediary among associations of parents, advocating for the rights and needs of autistic people in areas such as employment, education, and access to resources. Through the coordination with public administrations and private entities, Autismo Andalucía is working for autistic people to have equal access to resources and services.

Comprehensive services

Autismo Andalucía provides a wide range of services including the design and coordination of social projects, resource search and management, and providing information, trainings, and counselling. For professionals, the organisation offers specialised training programs in how to support autistic individuals effectively. For autistic people and their families, Autismo Andalucía provides training, employment services, and comprehensive support and counselling. Additionally, the organisation is deeply involved in community-focused initiatives, including participation in research and publications, activism, and awareness-raising campaigns.

Significant achievements

Over the years, Autismo Andalucía has helped make the region a more inclusive place for autistic people. It has successfully expanded and unified 17 local autism groups across Andalucía, creating a cohesive structure to support autistic people and their families. The organisation has also been instrumental in raising awareness and understanding of autism within the region and fostering collaboration between nonprofits and governmental entities working in the health, education, and social-policy sectors.

One of Autismo Andalucía's standout initiatives is its jobs programme, which has facilitated over 700 employment contracts, helping more than 200 autistic people secure jobs over the past 15 years. The organisation has successfully lobbied the Public Health Service to include autism screenings in its Healthy Child Protocol to ensure that all children are evaluated for early signs of autism. In early childhood education, Autismo Andalucía has promoted the specialised attention to children with autism, which has resulted in more hours of care and more centres for children with autism.

In education, Autismo Andalucía has an agreement with the regional government that allows the organisation and/or its partners to advise and support schools with autistic students, and to train educational staff. Moreover, Autismo Andalucía has successfully pushed for the creation of day centres and specific homes for autistic people, with differentiated costs per place, adapted facilities and specialised staff. Autismo Andalucía also participates in commissions and working groups of the Andalusian health administration, so that autistic people may make better use of the Andalusian public health system. The organisation also advocates for universal accessibility and the development of autism-friendly public spaces.

Future goals

Autismo Andalucía wants to expand its positive impact on the lives of autistic people in Andalucía. The organisation is committed to supporting personal autonomy and access to independent living as well as promoting the sustainability of services aimed at autistic people and their families. In the health sector, Autismo Andalucía seeks to enhance early diagnosis and access to appropriate services, review and update care protocols, and advocate for better training of health professionals in the care of autistic people.

In education, the organisation's priority is to secure an inclusive environment that provides the necessary resources and specialisation to support autistic students at all educational levels. Autismo Andalucía also advocates for greater flexibility in curricula to better meet the individual needs of autistic students. Regarding employment, the aim is to review and adapt labour regulations to incorporate the needs of autistic people and design policies that promote supported employment. The overarching goal is to achieve inclusive legislation that guarantees equal opportunities and non-discrimination for autistic individuals in Andalucía.

More information: www.autismoandalucia.org



Autismo Andalucía
is a affiliated member
of Autism-Europe.

Autism Unlimited:

working together to create possibilities



Autism Unlimited is a UK-based organisation dedicated to supporting and empowering autistic people and their families. With a history spanning over five decades, the organisation has evolved to address the diverse needs of the autism community through tailored education, comprehensive support services, and specialised training programmes.

Established more than 50 years ago, Autism Unlimited began as an initiative aimed at providing essential services to autistic people. Over the years, it has expanded significantly, now employing over 400 people across the South of England. This growth reflects the organisation's commitment to creating opportunities and delivering personalised support to autistic people.

Educational services

Central to Autism Unlimited's mission is its dedication to offering bespoke educational experiences. The Portfield School, operated by the organisation, caters to children aged 4 to 19, providing a nurturing environment that emphasises individualised learning. The school's curriculum is designed to foster academic growth, social development, and practical life skills, ensuring that each student receives a holistic education tailored to their unique needs.

For young adults aged 18 to 25, the "Futures" programme offers a bridge between adolescence and adulthood. This initiative focuses on developing independent living skills, providing career guidance, and facilitating community integration. By addressing the specific challenges faced during this transitional period, the programme empowers participants to achieve their personal and professional aspirations.

Support at every life stage

Recognising that support needs evolve over a lifetime, Autism Unlimited offers a range of services tailored for adults. These include residential care options and assistance with independent living, all designed to promote autonomy and enhance quality of life. The organisation's person-centred approach ensures that each person receives support aligned with their goals and preferences, fostering a sense of empowerment and self-determination.

Training and professional development

Autism Unlimited is committed to raising awareness and understanding of autism through its comprehensive training programmes. These courses are co-designed by neurodiverse people, providing participants with authentic insights into the autistic experience. The training covers various topics, including effective communication strategies, sensory needs, and behaviour management. Available both online and through in-person workshops, these programmes are tailored to meet the needs of families, educators, employers, and the broader community.

Community engagement and advocacy

Beyond direct services, Autism Unlimited actively engages in community outreach and advocacy. The organisation collaborates with businesses to highlight the benefits of employing autistic people, aiming to create more inclusive workplaces. Additionally, it participates in campaigns to raise public awareness about autism, striving to foster a society that embraces neurodiversity and supports the rights and dignity of autistic people.

Looking ahead

As Autism Unlimited moves forward, it remains steadfast in its mission to adapt and respond to the evolving needs of the autism community. Plans include expanding educational programmes, enhancing adult support services, and broadening training initiatives to reach a wider audience. Through collaboration, innovation, and a deep-seated commitment to inclusivity, Autism Unlimited aspires to build a world where autistic people are understood, valued, and empowered to lead fulfilling lives.

In essence, Autism Unlimited stands as a beacon of support and advocacy, dedicated to enriching the lives of autistic people and fostering a more inclusive society.



Autism Unlimited
is an associated member
of Autism-Europe.

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