

News From The Center

Information and Support for the Special Needs Community

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The Autism Society of North Carolina: Dedicated to Promoting Opportunities

2010 marks the 40th anniversary of the founding of the Autism Society of North Carolina (ASNC), which is currently the largest statewide organization in the country dedicated to supporting individuals with autism.

How It All Started

In 1970, a group of North Carolina parents with children on the autism spectrum met to discuss options for their children. At that time, autism was known as childhood schizophrenia, and the widely accepted belief was that it was a psychological disorder caused by emotionally distant parents. "I was told by the professionals that I was the reason my son had autism and I had to go to therapy to determine what I had done wrong," said JoAnn Jeffries, a parent and former Board President and Executive Director.

At that time children with autism were discouraged from attending school. The concept that the children could grow to have productive employment and lead fulfilling lives did not exist. People with autism grew up in the seclusion of their family homes, or were inappropriately institutionalized for mental illness. Since bad parenting was accepted as the cause of autism, there was no network of support for families facing a diagnosis of autism. "Of course no one knew any better at the time, but after a while they realized that my son was not getting better, and eventually through research here in North Carolina they showed the world that it was not the mother's fault, but that autism had a biological basis," said Jeffries.

In this environment, the parents who were in that meeting decided to make a difference by forming the Autism Society of North Carolina. The idea was to share information, provide support to one another, and enhance the lives of their loved ones as well as all children with autism in the state.

Celebrating 40 Years of Progress

Today, North Carolina is a national leader for supporting people on the autism spectrum and their families. The Autism Society of North Carolina has over 45 active Chapters, three affiliates, and many parent support groups. Sixteen staff Parent Advocates are stationed in each region of the state, connecting families with local resources, training, crisis services, and other families for support. In addition, Parent Advocates teach workshops on a variety of autism topics, and meet one-on-one with families to address education plans, assist with transition challenges, and refer families to additional community services.



While the focus of the Autism Society of North Carolina is family support and advocacy, the reach of ASNC's programs spans from government relations to individual services. Highlights of the agency's offerings include:

- **Awareness:** ASNC hosts an annual conference and several 5K races throughout the state, sponsors a multitude of community events and fundraisers, and collaborates with media outlets for maximum coverage of autism issues.
- **Education:** Educators are trained in appropriate instruction methods for children with autism, and classroom education for these children is now available statewide.

- **Legislative Advocacy:** ASNC gives those with autism a voice in the state legislature, including the recent successful passage of the Bullying Bill.
- **Summer Camp:** In 1972, the Autism Society of North Carolina established the nation's first overnight autism summer camp program at Camp Royall, near Pittsboro.
Today, Camp Royall provides over 350 individuals with autism a unique camp experience with 1:1 or 1:2 supervision, based on need. The summer camp program at Camp Royall allows individuals with autism to have a recreational and therapeutic camp experience which is safe and customized to their needs and abilities. This enormously popular program also provides much needed respite for families caring for an individual with autism, and a training ground for future human services professionals.
- **Bookstore:** The Autism Society of North Carolina's Bookstore (www.autismbookstore.com) is the country's largest autism-specific bookstore, with nearly 600 titles in inventory.
- **Professional Training:** Training is provided to medical professionals to raise the comfort level in treating patients with autism and to assist with identifying developmental deficits.
- **Adult Day Programs and Employment:** ASNC developed and operates two unique small businesses that employ individuals with autism. Crab Pots, Etc., in eastern North Carolina, makes and sells crab pots used by commercial and recreational crabbers. Blue Ridge Bags and More, in western North Carolina, manufactures and sells canvas bags, lunch bags, mouse pads, cards, and teaching kits. There are also several day programs for adults with autism that provide instruction and training on life skills, social skills, vocational training, art, and recreational therapy.
- **Adult Housing:** In conjunction with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, the Autism Society of North Carolina developed residential homes where over 100 adults live independently from their parents, in a community setting.



Most importantly, we now know more about autism and advances in treatment options continue to grow. And, rather than being blamed for their child's disorder, parents are necessary partners in their child's development.



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The Need Continues to Grow

This year, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention updated the autism prevalence rate to 1 in 110, from a previous rate of 1 in 150. For boys, the rate of autism incidence is even higher, at 1 in 70.

In North Carolina, there are currently over 50,000 individuals with autism, and, on average, two families receive a diagnosis of autism every day. The North Carolina Department of Instruction's annual Statistical Profile reports that the percentage of students on the autism spectrum in public schools greatly outpaces overall student population growth. Between 2007 and 2008, the school system grew 1.19% statewide, while the number of students with autism increased by 14.6%.

The rising prevalence of autism underscores the need for resources to ensure that individuals with autism meet their full potential and integrate into the communities in which they live. The Autism Society of North Carolina plans to be a proactive force in meeting this challenge and leading the nation in establishing an inclusive environment for those with disabilities.

Serving Families with Special Needs

Local MetLife agents Michael Palczuk and Mark Scarbrough have become valuable partners to the Autism Society of North Carolina. Last fall, they were instrumental in helping create and host a new regional event, Opening Doors for Autism, which benefited ASNC. The gala featured an exclusive silent auction offering home furnishings, shopping sprees, wine tastings, autographed sports memorabilia, premier event tickets, and golf packages. Opening Doors for Autism was both a community-building and financial success, and plans are underway to make this an annual event.

Mike is also collaborating with ASNC's Parent Advocates to offer financial workshops for parents of children on the autism spectrum. As a service to this growing community, they will explain how to best navigate the complex financial and legal landscape to ensure the best care for their loved ones.

MetLife Center for Special Needs PlanningSM works with national non profits and individuals to help support the mutual goal of helping individuals with special needs. The Center is dedicated to helping families plan for the future of dependents with special needs. Helping you answer those questions, directing you to the right resources, and just being there as a resource and advocate for you, is an important part of what we do. If you'd like to find out more, or you'd like to be referred to a local MetLife Special Needs Planner, please call 1-877-638-3375, or visit our website at www.metlife.com/specialneeds.

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