

Ujink

Autism-Europe N° 81 / June 2024



**“We are not invisible”:
the lived realities of autistic
people in Ukraine**

What is accessible tourism?

**« Not Invisible »
discover the campaign**

**Facts and myths
about bilingualism**

**AE International Congress 2025
(Dublin) - meet the keynote
speakers!**



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More info: www.autismeurope.org



Rue Montoyer 39, B-1000, Brussels, Belgium
Tel.: +32-2-6757505
E-mail: secretariat@autismeurope.org
Bank Account BGL BNP Paribas
IBAN : LU12 0030 0913 1082 3000 / BIC : BGLLLULL



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Collaborators

Editorial Committee: Aurélie Baranger, Harald Neerland, Zsuzsanna Szilvasy, Marta Roca, Stéf. Bonnot-Briey, Liga Berzina, Monique Post, Adam Harris.

Writing, editing and coordination: Fernanda Buriola, Anne Rensma, Christian Takow, Aoife McGarry, David Eaton, Aurélie Baranger.

Translation: Aurélie Baranger and Magali Vlayen.

Layout & Printing: mmteam sprl - +32-495-52-32-92 - Frédéric Maigret.

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Edito

Dear readers,

Last April, Autism-Europe (AE) launched its new multiannual campaign 'Not invisible' that aims at promoting the visibility for and full inclusion of autistic people in society. We ask that autistic people and their families are meaningfully involved in policymaking to bring about the necessary changes for the realisation of their rights. In the context of the recent European elections, AE was delighted that many newly elected Members of the European Parliament have pledged to support and cooperate with us in their upcoming mandate.

Our campaign aligns with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD), advocating for the removal of barriers and the promotion of equal opportunities in all areas of life. Tourism is one of these areas: indeed, autistic people have the right to participate fully in travel and leisure activities. Businesses and institutions should aim to be universally accessible and create barrier-free tourism.

As we promote the 'Not invisible campaign', it is essential to remember that accessibility – in tourism as well as in other sectors – extends beyond physical spaces and infrastructure. It involves creating an environment where autistic people feel welcomed and valued, where their needs are considered and met with empathy and understanding. By doing so, we uphold their rights and equally benefit society at large.

In the context of our 'Not invisible' campaign, it was also crucial for us to recall that fellow autistic people and families continue to experience difficult and precarious situations in war-torn Ukraine. Despite facing significant obstacles, they have shown remarkable courage and adaptability. We wholeheartedly support the Autism Ukraine Project initiative of autistic filmmaker David Higgs, who has committed to highlight their stories and experiences to foster greater understanding and support and to display a broader and more accurate perception of autistic people and their families' lives. The initiative exposes the urgent need for accessible services and support systems, not only in times of peace but also in crisis situations.

Best regards,

Director,
Aurélie Baranger



President,
Harald T. Neerland





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Promoting accessible tourism for autistic people

Autistic people face numerous accessibility barriers when it comes to tourism and culture. This article attempts to provide a general overview of the issue and provides some examples of good practices. However, it is not exhaustive, as every autistic person is unique with their own needs. In all cases, when designing accessible places and services for autistic people, it is best to ask the person about their accommodation needs.

Accessibility barriers are often a result of a society that is inaccessible to autistic people, where they are misunderstood and where their behaviours are viewed as problematic. Overall, the best way to reduce the impacts of these barriers is to include autistic people into conversations and to be patient and empathetic. Next to this, education and awareness on accommodations that can help accessibility issues – in tourism, and generally – are key.

We hope you will be inspired by the examples of existing initiatives across Europe to promote access to tourism and culture. Finally, while travelling across Europe, it is key to remember the EU rights and initiatives that can facilitate your journey.

What are the most common accessibility barriers for autism?

Many autistic people find it difficult to engage in **social interactions**. This usually involves them misunderstanding others or being misunderstood. It is important to note that social communication, social interaction skills, and related needs may vary.

Many autistic people find it difficult to break routines and schedules. This is often concretised as **repetitive and restrictive behaviour**. A new situation can bring a lot of stress, and routines

are an important accommodation to manage anxiety. These factors can often be a significant barrier and can prevent autistic people from engaging in tourism and related activities.

Sensory sensitivities are a common aspect of the autistic experience. Autistic people tend to be hypersensitive or hyposensitive to certain sensory stimuli. Sensory information can be overwhelming for some autistic people, for example, bright lights, warm temperatures, noise, and the texture of clothing can influence an individual's decision to engage in specific activities. Each autistic person is different and may react differently to different sensory stimuli.

Many autistic people may have highly **specific interests and hobbies**. For some autistic people, the level of focus on their interests can significantly influence the kind of activities they engage in and can seem heavily restrictive. Regardless, these highly focused interests and hobbies are an expression of the individual's identity and are something they should be supported to engage in.

Many autistic people experience **anxiety** which can make it difficult for them to enjoy their vacation activities and make going to a cultural venue, on a holiday, or even doing something new extremely difficult.

Meltdowns and shutdowns are what happens when a person becomes overwhelmed. Autistic people can be more vulnerable to these as they live in a world not built for them. Sensory overload, routine changes, anxiety about something new or different, and an inability to 'stim' can all trigger meltdowns and shutdowns. A meltdown is when the sensory overload is expressed outwards, it involves a temporary loss of behavioural control. A shutdown is an inward expression of a sensory overload, this means autistic people might become disengaged and disinterested: they might decide to stop speaking or withdraw from the overwhelming environment.

What accommodations would help autistic people to manage accessibility issues?

Sensory sensitive environments

To address sensory sensitivities and avoid sensory overload, there are several activities that can be undertaken to make an environment accessible to autistic people.

The first thing to consider is to not try and force an autistic person to go to an overwhelming place. Be empathetic and ask them about their needs. Sensory sensitivities can be addressed by targeting the specific sensory stimuli and presenting a solution. It is important that autistic persons' voices and preferences are understood and listened to in order to facilitate a solution.



Clear communication and precise language

To help facilitate communication with autistic people, it is important to tailor your communication style to their needs. This can vary from person to person, however, the following steps should help:

1. Be aware of the environment you are in. It is harder to hear people talk if you are in a loud place.
2. Be clear and concise, avoid using abstract, vague language, and slang.
3. Don't ask too many questions or demand responses to multiple things at once.
4. Use less nonverbal communication to get your message across.
5. Avoid overloading someone with requests, statements, or conversations. Take it slow and be patient.

Providing a guide of what to expect attending events or venues

To prepare autistic people for attending a venue or an event, it is important that they are provided with a guide of what to expect. This guide could list things like the physical space, what to expect to see while at the venue or an event, what sensory stimuli to expect, and how long they should expect to be at the venue of the event. Keep it straightforward, specific, and achievable.

Safe sensory spaces for meltdowns

Safe spaces for meltdowns or shutdowns should be areas with low levels of sensory stimuli and provide a secure place for an autistic person to calm down. This is usually a quiet place, with few or no people, where they can regulate their emotions and recover from the meltdown or shutdown. Sensory friendly locations have been used for instance in Dublin airport in Ireland to help autistic people cope with the stress of traveling.

Virtual tours or pre-tours when there are less people attending a venue

Virtual tours or doing pre-familiarisation tours for autistic people to help them manage anxiety around new environments. Some museums, airports, and cultural venues provide such a service to facilitate accessible services for autistic people.

Examples of accessible tourist venues or cities for autistic people

Many tourist spaces have started to cater to the accessibility needs of autistic people. These pioneering cities and venues should inspire the tourism sector at large to strive for accessibility.

Here are some that Autism-Europe believes are meeting the needs of autistic people:

Ireland

One of Autism-Europe's Irish members AsIAM works closely with autistic people, their families and public authorities across Ireland to make towns and cities autism-friendly. Among their achievements has been collaborating with Dublin City Council to make Ireland's capital city the first autism friendly capital in Europe. Building an accessible city involves identifying common barriers faced by the autism community in Dublin and develop practical solutions that could be implemented. Among the more innovative projects that have emerged from this process was 'Sensoria Ireland's first-ever Neurodivergent Friendly Festival'. Targeted towards children and young people, Sensoria built a sensory-friendly, inclusive and enjoyable experience for young autistic people. This was done by identifying the shared common barriers faced by autistic young people in feasible environments, and then tailoring the festival to address these barriers.

Italy

Several of our Italian members have been actively involved in various initiatives to make air travel more accessible to autistic people, notably under the umbrella of the ENAC (Italian Civil Aviation Authority) project 'Autismo – In viaggio attraverso l'aeroporto' (Autism – Moving through the airport) as part of its institutional mission to protect the rights of disabled passengers and persons.

The project was first launched as a pilot project on 23 November 2015 at Bari airport, with the support of the airport management company Società di Gestione Aeroporti di Puglia, the aim being to then extend the initiative to all the main airports.

One of the features of the initiative is to provide advice to accompanying persons to help autistic children and adults to experience their journey with greater confidence, by allowing them to visit the airport in advance, with a procedure developed by ENAC in coordination with the airport managing bodies.

ITA Airways has also inaugurated the 'Autism Program' last summer, designed in partnership with our member ANGSA (National Association of Parents of People with Autism) and in synergy with ENAC. The program has two main aspects: familiarisation prior to departure and a dedicated travel service.



Yousef Alfuhigi © Unsplash

Greece

The EMST Greek Museum of Contemporary Art in Athens allows autistic children, adolescents, and adults to cultivate skills related to exploration, organisation, recording, and transmission of information through contemporary works of art. This interactive experience offers autistic people a chance to learn about their senses, enhance their powers of observation and their memory, and stimulate their imagination to address the lack of certainty, sensory sensitivities, and unpredictability associated with going to a new location. EMST has also produced several guides to help autistic people navigate their exhibitions. These guides include a social story of the venue, a sensory map, and sign posting using sensory friendly signs. These small and effective accommodations help the museum's claim to be Europe's first autism-friendly museum.

Spain

In 2024, San Cristobál de La Laguna on the Canaries, Spain was a recipient of the European Commission's annual AccessCityAward. This was earned through a series of accessibility initiatives, one of these being 'Orange Point', providing a point-of-contact at city events and facilitating accessible leisure in the city. It provides sign language interpreters, anti-noise systems, and trained staff as well as easy-to-read materials that enable everyone to enjoy organised events. This initiative demonstrates that a specialised unit, which understands the access requirements of autistic people, can support them attend leisure events that interest them.

Malta

As part of the "Autism-friendly Spaces" project together with Autism-Europe, project coordinator and non-governmental organisation Prisms Malta certified eight different spaces across the smallest EU member state as actively striving to meet the accessibility needs of autistic people. Prisms Malta collaborated with various national agencies including the Maltese Commission for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The Autism-Friendly-Space certification allows for expert oversight of the accessibility standards being applied to venues and services across the country. A certification instils confidence in autistic people and their families that the space they want to visit can cater to their needs. The extra advantage of the initiative is the awareness-raising of the accessibility needs of autistic people among the public and service providers. When Malta International Airport received their Autism-Friendly-Space for their 'Journey Facilitation for Passengers with Autism' program, it was widely reported in national and international press.

Know your rights when travelling in Europe

From the European Health Insurance Card to consumer rights: here are some key pointers when it comes to your rights when you are on the road.

European citizens have the right to access healthcare throughout the EU/EEA. This is facilitated through the European Health Insurance Card (EHIC), allowing you to access healthcare services during a stay in a different EU country. Each member state has its own rules and procedures in place regarding how to obtain the card. Read more on: europa.eu/youreurope/citizens/health/unplanned-healthcare/ehic



The European Health Insurance Card

Transport: what are your rights as a passenger?

For more information and specific conditions on all the regulations and types of protection and compensation for the various modes of transport, visit europa.eu/youreurope/citizens/travel/passenger-rights.

• Air passenger rights

Among the consumer protection initiatives produced by the EU, numerous relate to the rights of passengers traveling by air. These include both the accessibility of airports and aircrafts and your rights in the event of a flight cancellation, delay, or denial of boarding.

• Rail passenger rights

The EU protects customers who travel by rail from cancellations and long delays.

If your train is delayed for more than 60 minutes or is cancelled, you can choose between compensation in the form of a refund within 30 days, a continuing or rerouting at the earliest opportunity, or a continuing or rerouting one day later – the latter two under comparable conditions.

• Bus passenger rights

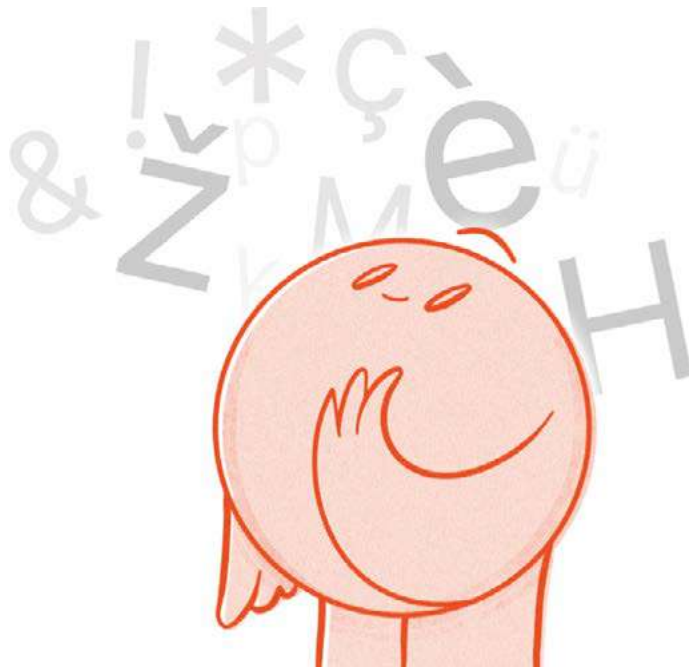
The EU sets out a number of rules if you are traveling by bus and your journey has been disrupted. If your bus trip is cancelled, for example, the operator must notify you as soon as possible before the departure time, and no later than 30 minutes before the departure.

If your journey distance was 250 kilometres or more and was cancelled or postponed, you should be given a choice on how you want to be compensated (a refund, a free-of-charge return service, or a rerouting under comparable travel conditions).

• Ship passenger rights

If a ferry is delayed or cancelled, you should be notified of the situation as soon as possible and the expected times of departure and arrival. This notification should be made no more than 30 minutes after the scheduled time of departure.

You have a right to a refund if the service is cancelled or you are delayed by more than 90 minutes. If your boat journey was cancelled or delayed by more than 90 minutes, you have a right to free snacks, meals, and refreshments and accommodation, if needed.



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Bilingualism: is it beneficial for autistic children to learn more than one language?

Dr Rachel Davis is a developmental psychologist researcher from the University of Edinburgh. Alongside Dr Bérengère Digard, she has created a website hub providing information about bilingualism and autism. Their resources aim to help parents communicate with their children: science-led evidence can enable parents to make informed decisions about their child's language environment. They aim to ensure that this information reaches autistic people, families, practitioners, and educators.

Facts and myths about bilingualism

For any parent worried about whether growing up in a bilingual household can affect their child's development, the research is clear: no, growing up with several languages does not confuse autistic children or make it harder to learn them. Even if some autistic children have language difficulties, they still can learn several languages.

Parents and children should speak the languages they are most comfortable with. Research suggests that understanding the languages spoken by one's parents is an essential part of their identity. Embracing the parent's native language helps the child connect with their family and community. Moreover, the ability to speak multiple languages opens up opportunities for work and travel, allows us to understand different cultures, and helps us connect with people globally. It also benefits the brain, improving

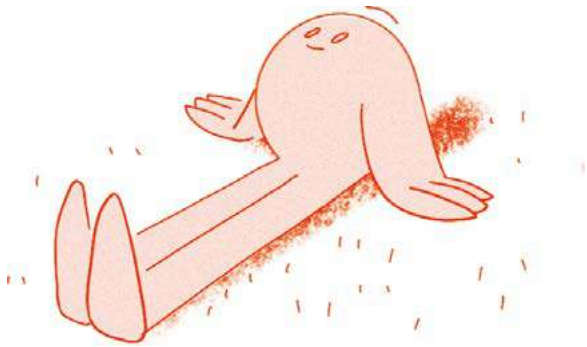
thinking skills. Bilingualism does not delay the development of cognitive skills.

We now understand that bilingualism can offer advantages and benefits for young children. Therefore, it is important for autistic children to have access to the opportunities that a bilingual household or environment can provide. Parents and educators must have access to accurate information, as assumptions and concerns about bilingualism harming autistic children are unfounded.



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“Recent findings suggest that learning two languages from early childhood can support autistic people’s social and social-cognitive skills, especially the ability to understand other people’s mind and point of view, i.e., perspective-taking.”



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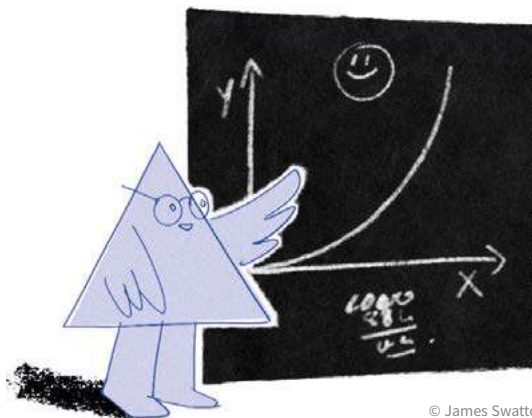
Reaching as many people as possible

In addition to a website containing crucial information for parents, an animated video has been produced to raise awareness about the research findings. A video for children in 9 languages, explaining the connection between autism and bilingualism is also available. On May 28, 2024, a free online session was held for practitioners, which attracted three hundred people from 28 countries. The website also offers practitioners access to a variety of resources, including "Evidence and Recommendations for Clinical Practice" and numerous other papers that explore the connection between bilingualism and autism.

"Bilingualism can increase autistic people's self-esteem, help them to better understand themselves, and access leisure, education, and professional opportunities."

Autism-Europe is happy to collaborate with this project. We believe that communicating research results that inform key aspects of day-to-day life and practice is essential for the well-being of autistic people.

Access the platform:



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Meet the researchers:



Dr Rachael Davis:

Rachael is a lecturer and researcher at Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh. Rachael is a developmental psychologist whose research focuses on neurodivergent lived experiences, bilingualism, and education.

Central to her work is a commitment to involving the communities she works with in the research process, ensuring this research has a strong participatory ethos and real-world relevance to the people that matter.



Dr Bérengère Digard :

Bérengère is an early-career researcher interested in autism and neurodiversity.

After studying Biology and Neurobiology in Lyon, France, she went to Edinburgh to do a PhD researching whether being bilingual shapes the social life, mind, and brain of autistic and non-autistic people.

Since then, she has expanded her research into other aspects of the autism and bilingualism experience and is also supervising several projects looking at mental health, masking, intersectionality, social cognition, and access to healthcare for neurodivergent people.

What they have to say:

While all children should have access to language learning and the opportunities that come with it, this is not currently the case for many autistic children.

This is in part because parents and professionals often have unfounded concerns that bilingualism would be harmful for autistic children, despite there being no evidence for this. It was clear to us that we needed to provide evidence-based guidelines for families and practitioners that highlight how important and beneficial bilingualism can be.

Our online hub has dedicated information pages for practitioners and parents, with our guidelines available in animated versions and translated into 23 languages - we are keen to do more, so please get in touch if you want to collaborate or have requests for future resources!

Contact : hello@autism_bilingualism.com

14th Autism Europe International Congress
11th-13th September 2025 | Dublin, Ireland

Quality of Life - Research, Policy and Practice



14th Autism-Europe International Congress:

“Quality of life – Research, policy, and practice”

From 11 till 13 September 2025: Autism-Europe’s International Congress will take place in Dublin, Ireland, hosted by AE member AsIAM. With the theme “Quality of Life – Research, Policy and Practice” – selected for and with the autism community – this significant gathering promises diverse discussions and opportunities for experts, advocates, and individuals across Europe to come together to foster understanding and a better quality of life for autistic people.

“We are happy to invite you to join us in Ireland for Autism-Europe’s 14th International Congress.”

In September 2025, the AE International Congress, hosted by Irish member organisation AsIAM, takes place in Dublin. Attendees may expect a diverse and inclusive programme, featuring discussions on research, best practices, and personal experiences in the field of autism. Speakers, visitors, exhibitors, or delegates, everyone is encouraged to join this journey towards acceptance and equality.

The theme for the congress, “Quality of life – Research, policy, and practice”, was identified through a European-wide, consultative process.

Practical information

Our 2025 congress takes place in the iconic Royal Dublin Society (RDS). The RDS is located in the heart of Dublin, with easy road access and extensive public transportation links that include bus and tram lines.

Dublin is a vibrant, modern city which is leading the way, having recently committed to work with AsIAM to become the world’s first accredited autism-friendly capital city.

Subscribe to the congress newsletter and get email updates to stay up to date with all aspects of the Congress in Dublin.

Key dates to keep in mind

- Call for abstracts is currently open until 10 January 2025
– submit your proposals for registrations!
- Registration to the congress opens on 14th December
– register early and get the best fees!

More information: <https://autismcongress2025.org/>

14th Autism-Europe International Congress: Discover the Keynote speakers



Jeroen Dewinter is a clinical psychologist and currently works as clinical manager of the Child and Youth Unit of GGzE in Eindhoven, The Netherlands. He is a senior researcher at Tranzo, the scientific center for care and wellbeing at Tilburg University (The Netherlands), and at the Parenting and Special Education Unit of KU Leuven in Belgium.

Dr Mary Doherty is an Irish Consultant Anaesthetist and Clinical Associate Professor at the School of Medicine, University College Dublin. She is also Honorary Associate Professor at the University of Exeter and Honorary Clinical Research Fellow at Brighton and Sussex Medical School. Diagnosed as autistic over a decade ago, she is parent to two neurodivergent young people. Mary is founder of Autistic Doctors International, an organisation dedicated to peer support, advocacy, research, and training. Her research interests focus on autism and healthcare, including both autistic people accessing healthcare services as well as autistic healthcare providers. She has developed the Autistic SPACE framework to address autistic needs in healthcare and beyond.



Kara Dymond, OCT, Ph.D, is a late-diagnosed autistic/ADHD advocate, author, educator, presenter, and award-winning teacher educator from Canada. Kara is an experienced teacher whose work supporting autistic students inspired her books *The Autism Lens* and *Creating a Neurodiversity-Affirming Classroom: Easy Ways to Achieve Access, Agency and Wellbeing for All*. At the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (University of Toronto), Kara teaches graduate courses in accessible education, classroom neurodiversity, and mental health. Nominated by colleagues and 21 graduate students, Kara recently earned the 2024 Award for Excellence in Initial Teacher Education. She is a co-investigator in an ongoing study on Universal Design for Learning and accessibility in graduate teacher education. She regularly presents to teachers, caregivers, and organisations on neurodiversity-affirming spaces, allyship, and accessibility needs. Kara co-hosts the “Autistic Tidbits & Tangents” podcast with Canadian autistic advocate Bruce Petherick and Maja Toudal, an autistic psychologist from Denmark. Listen on Spotify, Google Podcasts, Apple Podcasts, and YouTube.

Dr Jessica Eccles is a Consultant Psychiatrist in the Neurodevelopmental Service at Sussex Partnership NHS Foundation Trust, specialising in adult ADHD, autism, and Tourette syndrome. Within that service, she co-leads the world's first Neurodivergent Brain-Body Clinic. Having trained in medicine at the Universities of Cambridge and Oxford, she completed integrated academic training in Psychiatry at Brighton and Sussex Medical School, where she undertook an MRC Clinical Research Training Fellowship. She is now a Reader in Brain-Body Medicine at the BSMS Department of Clinical Neuroscience where she leads prize winning research on a broad range of projects that link differences in the body to a variety of physical and mental health conditions. She is particularly interested in the emerging link with neurodivergence. She chairs the Neurodevelopmental Psychiatry Special Interest Group of the Royal College of Psychiatrists. She is a passionate educator and committed to public engagement. She hopes to encourage curiosity and challenge stereotypes.



Professor Sue Fletcher-Watson holds a Personal Chair in Developmental Psychology at the University of Edinburgh. She is interested in how children grow and learn, with a particular focus on development and neurodiversity. Her work draws on rigorous methods from psychology and applies these to questions with clinical, educational, and societal impact. She strives to achieve meaningful partnerships with community representatives and to support neurodivergent leadership in research. She is an advocate for open science and good citizenship in research. She is currently privileged to be Director of the Salvesen Mindroom Research Centre and Dean of Equity Inclusion and Community in the College of Medicine and Veterinary Medicine.

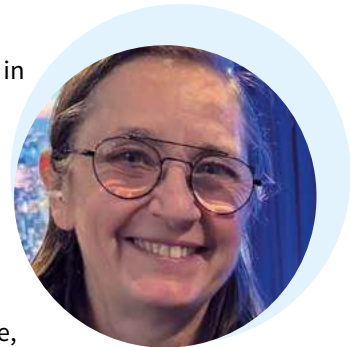


Joris Lechêne, a pioneering trainer in anti-racism, bias, and decoloniality, draws his unique insights from both his lived experiences as a marginalized individual (Black, Queer, Neurodivergent) and his expertise in the sociology of the built environment. He has not only transformed countless lives through his training but has also ignited a movement on social media. With a growing online community of engaged followers, Joris is a digital influencer who amplifies the message of equity and inclusivity to a global audience. His captivating journey, spanning five countries on three continents, has endowed him with a profound understanding of the intricate web of oppression, making him a powerful voice in the fight for equality. Joris Lechêne doesn't just teach change; he embodies it. Prepare to be inspired, educated, and moved as he guides you on a transformative journey toward a more inclusive world, both in person and across his thriving social media platforms.





Eva Loth is Professor of Cognitive Neuroscience at the Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology and Neuroscience, King's College London. Her main interest is in understanding the dynamic interaction between social and biological mechanisms in social, cognitive, and emotional development in autistic and neurodivergent people. She is the Deputy Lead of the AIMS-2-TRIALS consortium, which aims to develop precision medicine for autism to better predict a person's developmental outcome and tailor support to individual profiles. She co-leads their biomarker work programme, which comprises a set of large-scale multi-disciplinary longitudinal cohorts spanning infants, preschoolers, adolescents, and adults, with varying support needs. She is also the Principal Investigator of RESPECT4Neurodevelopment, a UKRI Network Plus that brings together bioengineers, physicists, psychologists, psychiatrists, and families with lived experience to develop responsible, reliable, scalable, and personalised neuro-technologies for neurodivergent children. Finally, an emergent interest is in studying the interplay between social-environmental adversities and protective factors in neurodevelopment and mental health in low- and middle-income countries. Here, the current focus is on children and young people who experience multiple poverty-related adversities in South Africa.



Dr Bernadette Grosjean has practiced psychiatry for 35 years, initially in Belgium and later in California. She has worked in various settings including private practice, community hospitals, and with the homeless population in Los Angeles. From 2005 to 2016, she held the position of Associate Professor of Psychiatry at UCLA. Since 2003, she has been involved with a nonprofit organization in Los Angeles that serves immigrants, particularly undocumented individuals who have experienced torture and trauma. Dr Grosjean is dedicated to caring for patients who are often neglected, misunderstood, or ostracised. Throughout her career, she has maintained a strong interest in supporting patients with Borderline Personality Disorder. In the last decade, she has shifted her focus to working with autistic adults without intellectual disabilities. She is a co-author of "Le Manuel du Borderline" (2014), "Le Manuel du Bipolaire" (2017), and "Le Manuel de l'Autiste" (2022), the first comprehensive guides in French on BPD, Bipolar Disorder, and Adult Autism for patients and families published by Eyrolles in Paris. Dr Grosjean is a Distinguished Fellow of the American Psychiatric Association. She has delivered numerous lectures both nationally and internationally and serves as the Psychiatric lead for Autistic Doctors International.



Professor Liz Pellicano is committed to transforming autism science so that it more accurately reflects everyday autistic life. She is Professor of Autism Research at University College London (UCL), having recently been Professor at Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia. Previously, she was Director of the Centre for Research in Autism and Education (CRAE) at UCL Institute of Education. Her most recent research identifies ways to bridge the gap between lab and life and open up research to greater involvement of Autistic people themselves, with the aim of generating scientific discoveries that bring real benefits to Autistic people and their families.

Sara Rocha is a Portuguese autistic and disabled advocate working as a Data Manager for the Public Health and Primary Care department of the University of Cambridge. She is Vice-chair of the Women's Committee of the European Disability Forum (EDF), Vice-President of the European Council of Autistic People (EUCAP), and co-founder and President of Associação Portuguesa Voz do Autista, the first autistic-led organisation in Portugal. Sara has been involved with European and international consultancy and projects topics such as community-led research, disability data, policy, and advocacy.



Maja Toudal is an autistic and ADHD psychologist, speaker, and author from Denmark. Her first book, *What Your Autistic Child Wants You To Know*, combines her personal and professional perspectives to advise parents on the inner lives of autistic children. Her second book, *Energy Accounting*, provides a practical guide to self-exploring and making adjustments to improve quality of life. Maja takes a neuro-affirmative approach in her work as a clinician and educator, acknowledging each person's strengths and resources, as well as the real-life challenges that may require adaptive strategies for the individual. Currently, she focuses on clinical work and future book projects, as well as the podcast "Autistic Tidbits and Tangents", which she hosts alongside Dr Kara Dymond and Bruce Petherick.



Peter Vermeulen, PhD in Psychology and Clinical Educational Sciences, has more than 35 years of experience in the field of autism. He is an internationally respected lecturer/trainer, working for 'Strongmakers in autism' (Belgium) and Autism in Context. Peter wrote 20 books on autism, some translated into more than 10 languages. For his +35 years contribution to the autism community in Belgium, he received in 2019 a Lifetime Achievement Award. Peter presented at every Autism-Europe conference of the last 30 years.



Dr Wenn Lawson, A/Prof. with Curtin University, WA, is an Autistic Researcher and British Psychologist living in Australia. Wenn is well published, has won a number of awards and his work is recognised in Australia and internationally. Wenn is a key theorist of the Monotropism theory of Autism, resides on a number of boards, including 'Autism in Adulthood', the Autism Research Institute (ARI) (US), and The American Autism Association. Dr Wenn is a key member of the Autism Co-operative Research Centre, (ACRC) Queensland, Australia, and is a Family man with Autistic 'offspring' and grandchildren. Wenn is passionate about all things 'Autism', being neurodivergent, loves birds and animals, writing poetry, and sharing his world with open minded and open hearted 'Others'.



More speakers are still to be confirmed in the lead-up to the Congress in September 2025. Stay tuned!

Autism Ukraine Project portrays the lived realities of autistic people in Ukraine: “We are not invisible”

In early June 2024, following 14 months of intensive research and remote engagement with Ukraine’s autistic community, autistic journalist David Higgs commenced his journey to the invaded country as part of the Autism Ukraine Project (AUP). Its main objective was to let the world in on the lived experience of autistic people in a war-torn country through a series of portraits. Higgs spoke to numerous autistic people and learned a great deal about their stories, struggles, and talents. Emergency relief was a substantial part of the plan. It included distributing sets of ear defenders to those struggling with sound sensitivities and providing ‘snuggle’ toys that help reduce anxiety and improve sleep. “By letting autistic people tell stories that have never been heard before, the project’s ambition is to present a less pathologised and refreshing portrait of autism. We want the world to know that autistic people are not invisible.”

Lived experience as a driving force

“My aim with AUP was to, simply, teach the world about autistic people and their lives. Autistic people do wonderful things, think in original ways, and have skills that others might not have. For most of my life, I, myself, had absolutely no idea that I was autistic. I am nearly 72 and I was assessed just before my 70th birthday. For me, [the diagnosis] came as a huge relief. Suddenly, all the little pieces that didn’t fit for such a long time did start to fit. It gave me a sense of identity, it helped me understand things better, and, notably, it allowed me to get access to the right support. Interestingly enough, looking back, I was surrounded by neurodivergent kids growing up. My best friend from my childhood years turned out to be autistic as well. I knew him as the most talented person. Unfortunately, life was tough on him, and he faced many obstacles. His story and the stories of other autistic people play an important role in my endeavours today.

When Russia invaded Ukraine on the 24th of February 2022, we witnessed an exodus of refugees coming from Kyiv and many other places, and the news about bombardments and devastation was everywhere. With this constant stream of horrifying updates, I began to think. I sometimes struggle to walk down the street because of the traffic noise. I have a difficult time going to the supermarket because of the Tannoy [loudspeakers], and all the background noise. What must that be like in a war zone? If you’re suddenly in a big crowd of people trying to go into a railway station – how does an autistic person cope? Are they at a bigger risk of being killed or injured? What are the disadvantages they face?

In this sense, the AUP project was born out of curiosity and sheer empathy for people who are like me, but live in a completely different context, as well as an ode to my best friend and other autistic people out there living their lives. The people I met in my project are standing proud and are, for example, combat medics, first responders, musicians making videos on YouTube to raise funds and awareness of what is going on, publishing works of art about the mental landscape and imaginings of an autistic person caught in a warzone, organising in community groups making camouflage nets – it goes on and on.”



© Autism Ukraine Project / The Environmental Press Agency

An autistic community in a war zone

With the project, I wanted to challenge the stereotypical preconceptions and stigma often associated with autism by highlighting and celebrating autistic people, ensuring they were no longer invisible and allowing them to tell their stories in their own unique way. On the other hand, the idea was to bring much needed emergency relief and comfort to autistic people in a war zone, who are often struggling with sensory issues and anxiety.



“ What was the toll of the war on the mental health of the Ukrainian population as a result of the invasion? What was the situation of the autistic community like? I had a strong drive to learn more ”

Through the National Autistic Society, I was put in contact with Iryna Sergiyenko, director of Child with Future. We briefly spoke on the phone and soon after that, I went down to where she lives. She quickly linked me to her contacts in Ukraine. She introduced me to a Facebook group that started in Kyiv, called ‘Ask an Autistic’. Since there, previously, was no way for autistic adults in Ukraine to compare notes, to support each other, to ask questions, ‘Ask an Autistic’ was set up to counteract this dire need. The Facebook group enabled me to put out some feelers. ‘After this horrible invasion,’ I wrote, ‘I would like to be able to find out what the autistic experience is of war. How are people coping?’ For instance, I knew that autistic people are eight to nine times more likely to suffer from PTSD than the general population. What was the toll of the war on the mental health of the Ukrainian population as a result of the invasion? What was the situation of the autistic community like?

When people on the ‘Ask an Autistic’ group were starting to show interest in my appeal, I sent them a questionnaire to get an idea of their age, background, and what particular issues they would have in terms of the war. It took about 14 months to get results and to get in contact with people.

In the end, I managed to gather an interesting mix of all different types of people, spread out over the country. I first talked to them on Zoom, so that each of them had seen my face and had spoken to me personally. Then, of course, I got nearer and nearer to my actual journey to Ukraine – to meet the individuals that had shown interest in my project. As you can imagine, I was nerve-wracked because of this responsibility. I also did not have a clue about travel in Ukraine, I didn’t have a word of Ukrainian, and I could not afford a full-time interpreter. In a stroke of luck, I found some information about a gentleman who had done a photographic exhibition and travelled to Ukraine. I managed to get a hold of him. He had been there more than a dozen times, taking emergency supplies to the front line. He offered to come with me as a volunteer. He couldn’t speak Ukrainian either, but he certainly had more Ukrainian than I did and more importantly he had contacts in the military and civilian life. We travelled the country together and met the most amazing people.”



Emergency relief – local organisations key

“Next to the interviews we conducted, another key element of the project was to deliver emergency relief, tailored to the needs of the autistic community. Iryna Sergiyenko was clear: ‘We need ear defenders,’ she told me. I thought she was talking about noise-cancelling headphones, and she had to correct me because often people don’t have power and cannot keep them charged. They needed simple, analogue ear defenders. They needed hundreds. Hundreds and hundreds of them. She also told me that, for children and adults that have difficulties with sleeping and anxiety, Soothe ‘n Snuggle Otters [teddies that simulate breathing and have a small light on their bellies] are very beneficial. We dispensed the ear defenders and the toys little by little over the course of our travels.

The presence of both Child with Future and Iryna were tremendously helpful. Child with Future is a hub consisting of lots of local organisations across the country. This meant that Iryna was able to put us in touch with groups in Irpin, Kharkiv, Zaporizhzhia, and in Kyiv. We had just enough to hand out what the local organisations requested. I must say, Iryna is an absolute star, I cannot praise her enough, absolutely consistent – she and her entire network were fabulous.”

“We are not invisible”

“I suppose what was interesting about many of the individuals I spoke to is that they do exist prominently and outwardly. There were so many stand-out moments and people. I met an incredible singer and her son – both autistic and incredibly talented. I talked to a trans man, who was weaving camouflage nets and working with people with disabilities in his community. A British person in Kharkiv told me about his work as a first responder. Various people, with their own unique stories. Their voices deserve to be heard, their talents recognised, and their needs met. Autistic people tend to respond to life in a different way, which means they have such interesting life histories. That’s the interesting result of going through life on a different track. I want to propel their visibility. Autistic people deserve to feel empowered.

“There is a big need in the world for people who think differently”

I expect to hear many people say: “Wow, that is a picture of autism I did not anticipate”. Unfortunately, our view of autism and autistic people often remains pathologised and a lot of people still uphold a stereotypical framework. I think we need to look differently at autism. I want the project to be a tribute to the heroic autistic people in Ukraine. They had the courage to come forward and to be interviewed, not knowing who I am or what I will do with the material. This requires a huge amount of trust. I have the utmost respect for every single one of them.”



David Higgs is an investigative journalist, and lives in the UK. His work spans out over four decades, covering a wide range of topics in the field of human rights. He was awarded an MBE as founder of The Environmental Press Agency

(Higgs is the founder and director of The Environmental Press Agency, TEPA - www.tepagency.com) for ‘services to journalism and the environment’, an Emmy Award for ‘outstanding journalism’, and a duPont-Columbia Award for ‘excellence in broadcast reporting’ as field cameraman, director, and producer of the HBO human rights documentary “Sport of Sheikhs”. Lastly, Amnesty International recognised his work with their Human Rights Press Award.

The AUP project was launched by TEPA as Higgs’ latest research project, a documentary on the topic is currently in the first stages of production. Autism-Europe proudly supports the AUP project.

Child with Future is a Ukrainian organisation with a mission to provide comprehensive support for autistic people and their families, ensuring the protection of their rights. The organisation raises public awareness about autism, establishes effective communication between relevant stakeholders, and works on introducing best practices in Ukraine. Child with Future is a member of Autism-Europe.



Not invisible.

'Not invisible' campaign launched on Autism Day with a focus on 2024 European elections

This year, Autism-Europe launched its new Europe-wide, multiannual 'Not invisible' campaign on World Autism Awareness Day (WAAD), 2 April 2024. Co-produced with our members, the campaign seeks to draw attention to the fact that autistic people's needs are frequently made invisible in many areas. It calls for a society in which autistic people are fully valued and supported. As the 'Not invisible' campaign this year focused on the 2024 European elections, MEP candidates were asked to pledge their support to the rights and needs of autistic people and their families in the upcoming tenth legislative period of 2024-2029 and many Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) and MEP candidates did exactly this. Autism-Europe welcomes the broad and meaningful campaign participation until now and looks forward to the next phase of 'Not invisible'.

So far, the campaign recorded involvement across Belgium, Croatia, Cyprus, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Luxembourg, Malta, the Netherlands, North Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia, Spain, and Turkey.

On World Autism Awareness 2024, MEP Rosa Estaràs Ferragut from Spain hosted Autism-Europe at the European Parliament in Brussels to launch 'Not invisible' and to inaugurate the information stand. The Autism-Europe staff crewed the stand for the week, received a wide range of MEPs to sign its pledge. In addition, AE staff answered questions and raised awareness about the barriers faced by autistic people in exercising their rights as well as key areas of priority for the autism community.

With the help of our member associations, in the lead-up to the EU elections, AE gathered the support of 83 MEPs and MEP candidates from 15 EU countries. Of these, 26 MEPs from nine EU countries got (re-)elected. Autism-Europe is currently continuing to engage with newly elected MEPs.

AE supporters elected at key positions in the European Parliament

The Member of European Parliament from Malta, Roberta Metsola, a past and present Autism-Europe supporter, was re-elected for another two and a half years as the President of the European Parliament (EP) in July 2024. President Metsola notably spoke at the inauguration of AE's 2023 WAAD exhibition in the EP (cf. LINK 79)

Autism-Europe is delighted to see continuous disability community representation in the EP hemicycle and the re-election of key allies, such as Katrin Langensiepen. This MEP from Germany has been re-appointed as one of the vice chairs of the European Parliament Committee on Employment and Social Affairs (EMPL), a key committee we have addressed in the past mandate to highlight our recommendations to foster the employment of autistic people.



MEP Rosa Estaràs Ferragut signing AE's pledge

Re-elected MEP Estaràs Ferragut has become 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 Tilly Metz, from Luxembourg, became one of the vice chairs of the European Parliament Subcommittee on Health (SANT).

Re-elected MEP Dolors Montserrat from Spain swapped chair with the vice chair of the European Parliament Committee on Petitions (PETI). This committee drafted the recent resolution on Harmonising the rights of autistic people (LINK 79). This resolution is a strong call for action that we hope will materialise through

concrete actions in the years to come. Autism-Europe 2024 pledge supporter Luke 'Ming' Flanagan from Ireland remains the only openly autistic MEP in the European legislature so far.

Autism-Europe welcomes the meaningful and active campaign participation of its members, partners, relevant stakeholders, as well as Members of European Parliament. We are looking forward to the next steps by inviting our members to co-produce the next phase of the 'Not Invisible' campaign. Please approach us in your preferred mode of communication to get involved.

Launch of WAAD and "Not invisible"
campaign in the European Parliament,
3 April 2024





My Virtual World promotes labour market inclusion of autistic job seekers using virtual reality

Running from 2022 to 2024, My Virtual World – 3D Job Training for Autism is an Erasmus+ project focused on Vocational Education and Training (VET), bringing together six partner organisations from France, Italy, Sweden, Ireland, involving also Autism-Europe, to improve VET learning experiences for autistic people. It aims at upskilling VET educators and trainers using 3D technology as well as to raise awareness of how to make the labour market autism-friendly and helping employers to adopt better practices for involving autistic employees.

© MangoStar_Studio to photo VR goggles





My Virtual World meeting in Brussels, May 2024

Autistic people are facing higher rates of unemployment than other people with disabilities, according to current estimates. Besides that, available VET programmes are not necessarily suited to autistic people's needs and abilities. Most educators and trainers in VET still do not have enough experience or resources to be able to support autistic learners. My Virtual World- 3D Job Training for Autism aims to train adult educators, VET workers, and employers to better support autistic people to get into the labour market and retain sustainable employment.

The main objective is to improve the skills of educators and trainers using 3D technology and raise awareness of the needs of autistic people throughout the job search journey as well as to help employers adopt better practices for the inclusion of employees on the autistic spectrum.

To do so, My Virtual World – 3D Job Training for Autism promotes VET programmes that are better tailored to the skills and abilities of individual autistic learners as well as to the labour market needs. It also promotes an innovative approach by developing a VET programme using digital technologies in a virtual reality that makes use of an existing platform developed in a 3D environment. This open-source platform enables VET trainers, educators, and employers to experience the struggles faced by an autistic jobseeker.

One of the first major outcomes of the project was the handbook released in September 2023 entitled "My Virtual World – 3D Job Environment for Autistic People – Methodology and Training Curriculum". It covers a range of key topics to develop awareness and understanding among employers and autistic employees for meaningful workplace inclusion.

In the last year of the project, the virtual reality was completed. The pilot VR tool contains three scenarios: one VR scenario leads an autistic job seeker through a job interview. It features reasonable accommodations, including breaks, quiet rooms, questions sent in advance, etc. Another scenario runs autistic employees through their typical first day at work, with explanations and induction pack as well as regular check-ins from the line manager. Finally, there is a scenario about social interaction taking place during lunch break at the workplace canteen. It features topics such as accommodating sensory sensitives in a crowded space among others. These VR scenarios can be experienced using the Oculus glasses as well as a phone app for the so-called cardboard version.

The consortium is composed of six partners: the project's coordinator IRIPS – Institut Régional d'Insertion Professionnelle et Sociale (France), together with School of Coding (SOC) Blended Learning (Ireland), Elderberry AB (Sweden), Autism-Europe (Belgium), IDP European Consultants by Giancarlo Costantino (Italy), and SInAPSi (Services for Active and Participated Inclusion of Students) of the University of Naples (Italy).

More information: <https://3d-autism.com/>



Nederlandse
Vereniging voor
Autisme

Nederlandse Vereniging voor Autisme (NVA) gives a voice to autistic people and their families

The Dutch Association for Autism (Nederlandse Vereniging voor Autisme – NVA) was established in 1978 and has since been pursuing its mission to improve the lives of autistic people and their families – in all phases and in every area of life.

Giving a voice to the autism community

NVA wants to give autistic people and their families a voice: “NVA is a leading organisation in the Netherlands that aims to build an autism-friendly society, starting from the perspective of autistic people and their families.” The organisation works towards a society in which autistic people can participate fully and are accepted and live as independently as possible.

NVA engages in advocacy efforts and campaigns, provides reliable information, and fosters a sense of community amongst autistic people and their families. The organisation works with ambassadors across the country, counts over 14.500 members and has regional offices in various municipalities in eleven of the twelve Dutch provinces (the region for the provinces of Groningen and Drenthe are combined), with a national office in De Bilt.

National and local initiatives

NVA coordinates a number of initiatives in the Netherlands:

- The Auti-Doe-Dagen (“Auti Do Days”), for example, are dedicated and organised days during which parks, attractions, or museums are open exclusively to the autism community, so that autistic people and their families can avoid crowds and enjoy these public places calmly and under the right circumstances.
- The Autipas (“Auti pass”) is a card that can be ordered by autistic people. It is often used in situations that create a lot of stress and in first encounters with service providers. It grants discounts for theme parks or recreational activities.
- The Autismepaspoort (“Autism passport”) allows autistic people to share their needs and requests for accommodations thanks to an easy format. The passport comes in a practical double-sided A4 sheet, giving teachers, service providers, or other professional the opportunity to understand the required accommodations at a single glance.

Besides this and much more, NVA also offers an online forum for the community and works closely with local and national organisations in the country to achieve their common goals. NVA wants autistic people and their families to be able to be themselves and achieve their full potential.

NVA – Nederlandse Vereniging voor Autisme
is a full member of Autism-Europe.

For more information: www.autisme.nl



© Nederlandse Vereniging voor Autisme



The Association AFG Autisme offers support tailored to each individual

The Association Française de Gestion de Services et Etablissements pour Personnes Autistes (AFG Autisme) was set up in 2005 by parents of autistic people in need of a high level of support, following France's condemnation before the Council of Europe for failing to educate autistic people. Its aim is to provide support solutions tailored to the individual needs of autistic people from childhood to adulthood.

Today, the association supports more than 1,100 autistic people, with more than 1,000 professionals working alongside them, in around 70 services and facilities throughout France.

AFG Autisme develops quality support adapted to each autistic person and offers a variety of services, from childhood to adulthood, in particular to facilitate inclusion, day-to-day support and, later, the transition into the world of work or a type of support more suited to adults who require it.

As a parent association, AFG Autisme does not charge any fees to families or users. Access to services is subsidised by public funds, which are admittedly complicated to obtain, but are permanent.

AFG Autisme's actions

AFG Autisme's primary motivation is to provide high-quality support tailored to each autistic person. It works daily to:

- Improve the quality of life of autistic people supported by its services, according to their skills, needs and wishes;
- Adapt support to their neurosensoriality (hypo and hypersensitivity) and their individual needs, while respecting their dignity and self-determination;
- Use alternative and augmentative educational and communication strategies to enhance their potential.

A practice rooted in a high standard of quality and ethics

The association uses non-dogmatic educational approaches and augmentative communication methods that have been validated internationally and recognised for their effectiveness. They are in line with the recommendations of the High Authority on Health in France. The various tools, programmes and methods are not mutually exclusive, but complementary, depending on the assessment of each person's needs.

Emphasis is placed on staff training, with a dedicated training organisation (Autisme Formation et Gouvernance, Qualiopi accredited) to attract and retain professionals and to develop the skills required to provide better support.

An ethics committee guarantees the right of families and professionals to appeal to a body that seeks to shed light on complex situations and leave professionals in need of advice.

AFG-Autisme

is a full member of Autisme-Europe

For more information: www.afg-autisme.com



L'AUTISME,
AU CŒUR DE
NOTRE ACTION.

Member Associations of Autism-Europe

FULL MEMBERS

National associations of autistic people and parents

ANDORRA

AUTEA
Carrer Prada Casadet, núm. 2
AD500 Andorra la Vella
Tel: +376 321 190
E-mail: correuautea@gmail.com
Website: <https://www.autea.org>

BELGIUM

Association Pour l'Epanouissement des Personnes Autistes (A.P.E.P.A.)
Rue du Fond de Malonne 127
5020 Malonne
Tel: +32-81-74.43.50
E-mail: apepa@skynet.be
Website: www.ulg.ac.be/apepa

Vlaamse Vereniging voor Autisme (V.V.A.)

Groot Begijnhof 14
B - 9040 Gent
Tel: +32.78.152.252
E-mail: vva@autismevlaanderen.be
Website: www.autismevlaanderen.be

CZECH REPUBLIC

Národní ústav pro autismus, z.ú. (NAUTIS)
V Holešovičkách 593/1a
182 00 Praha
Tel: +420 775 195 328
E-mail: nautis@nautis.cz
Website: www.nautis.cz

CROATIA

Croatian Union of Associations for Autism
Ljudevita Posavskog 37
10000 Zagreb
Tel: +385 1 8896 527
E-mail: suzahr@gmail.com
Website: www.autizam-suzah.hr

DENMARK

Landsforeningen Autisme
Banestrøget 19-21
2630 Taastrup
Tel: +45 70 25 30 65
E-mail: kontor@autismeforening.dk
Website: www.autismeforening.dk

FINLAND

Finnish Association for Autism and Asperger's Syndrome
Pasilanraito 9 B
00240 Helsinki
Tel: +358.10.315.2800
E-mail: info@autismiliitto.fi
Website: www.autismiliitto.fi

FRANCE

AFG Autisme (Association française de gestion de services et établissements pour personnes autistes)
11, rue de la Vistule 75013 Paris
Tel.: +33 (0)1 42 73 35 20
E-mail: afg@afg-autisme.com, president@afg-autisme.com
Website: www.afg-autisme.com

Autisme France

1175 Avenue de la République
06 550 La Roquette sur Siagne
Tel: +33.4.93.46.01.77
E-mail: contact@autisme-france.fr
Website: <https://www.autisme-france.fr>

Sesame Autisme

53, rue Clisson
F - 75013 PARIS
Tel: +33.1.44.24.50.00
E-mail: contact@sesame-autisme.fr
Website: <https://sesameautisme.fr>

GERMANY

Autismus Deutschland
Rothenbaumchaussee 15
D - 20148 Hamburg
Tel: +49.40.511.56.04
Fax: +49.40.511.08.13
E-mail: info@autismus.de
Website: www.autismus.de

GREECE

Greek Society for the Protection of Autistic People (G.S.P.A.P.)
2, Athenas Street
GR-10551 Athens
Tel: +30.210.321.6550
Fax: +30.210.321.6549
E-mail: gspap@autismgreece.gr
Website: www.autismgreece.gr

HUNGARY

Hungarian Autistic Society (HAS)
Fejér György u. 10. I./23.
1053 Budapest
Tel: +36 1 301 9067/354 1073
E-mail: autist@interpont.hu or info@esoember.hu
Website: www.esoember.hu; www.autista.info.hu; www.aosz.hu

ICELAND

Einhverfusamtökin
Haaleitisbraut 11-13
IS - 108 Reykjavík
Tel: +354 562 1590
E-mail: einhverfa@einhverfa.is
Website: www.einhverfa.is

IRELAND

Irish Society For Autism (I.S.A.)
16/17 Lower, O'Connell Street
IRL - 1 Dublin
Tel: +353.1.874.46.84
E-mail: admin@autism.ie
Website: www.autism.ie

Autism Spectrum Information Advice and Meeting Point (AsIAM)

17-21 Temple Road
Blackrock / Co Dublin A94DN40
Email: info@asiam.ie
Website: <https://asiam.ie/>

ITALY

ANGSA APS Onlus
Via Casal Bruciato 13
00159 Roma
E-mail: segreteria@angsa.it
Website: www.angsa.it

LITHUANIA

Lietaus vaikai (Rain Children)
Pylimo str. 14A/37
01117 Vilnius
Tel: +370 620 206 65
E-mail: info@lietausvaikai.lt
Website: www.lietausvaikai.lt

LUXEMBOURG

Fondation Autisme Luxembourg
68, route d'Arlon
L-8310 Capellen
Tel: +352-26 91 11 1
E-mail: autisme@fal.lu;
communications@fal.lu
Website: www.fal.lu

MALTA

Autism Parents Association (APA)
P.O. BOX 30
Marsa
MTP 1001
Website: www.autismparentsassociation.com
Email: autismparentsassociation@gmail.com

THE NETHERLANDS

Nederlandse Vereniging voor Autisme (N.V.A.)
Welttevreden 4a
3731 AL De Bilt
Tel: +31.30.229.98.00
Email: info@autisme.nl
Website: www.autisme.nl

NORWAY

Autismeforeningen I Norge (A.I.N.)
Wergelandsveien 1-3
0167 Oslo
Tel: +47-23 05 45 70
Email: post@autismeforeningen.no
Website: www.autismeforeningen.no

POLAND

Autism Poland Association
Ul. Ondraszka 3
02-085 Warszawa
Poland
Tel: 48 602 359 430

E-mail: mwokacz@poczta.fm
Website: <https://autyzmpolska.org.pl/>

PORTUGAL

Federacao Portuguesa De Autismo
Rua José Luis Garcia Rodrigues
Bairro Alto da Ajuda
P-1300-565 Lisboa
Tel: +351.21.3630040
Email: fpda@fpda.pt
Website: www.fpda.pt

SERBIA

Serbian Society for Autism
Gundulicev venac Street 38
11 000 Belgrade
Tel: +381 11 3392 683
E-mail: autizamsrbija@sbb.rs
Website: www.autizam.org.rs

SLOVAKIA

Spoločnosť na pomoc osobám s autizmom (S.P.O.S.A.)
Namestie 1.maja 1.
POBOX 89
810 00 SK- Bratislava 1
Tel: +421 915 703 708
E-mail: sposa@changenet.sk
Website: www.sposa.sk

SPAIN

Asociación de padres de niños y niñas autistas de Bizkaia (APNABI)
Sabino Arana, 69
E -48012 Bilbao
Tel: +34.94.475.57.04
Email: autism@apnabi.org
Website: www.apnabi.org

Autismo Burgos

C/ Valdenunez, 8
E - 09001 Burgos
Tel: +34.947.46.12.43
Email: autismoburgos@autismoburgos.es
Website: www.autismoburgos.org

Autismo-España

C/ Garibay 7 3º izq
E - 28007 Madrid
Tel: +34.91.591.34.09
Email: confederacion@autismo.org.es
Website: www.autismo.org.es

Federacion Española De Autismo (F.E.S.P.A.U.)

c/ Garibay 7, 3º Dcha.
28007 Madrid
Tel: +34.91.290.58.06/04
Email: comunicacion@fespau.es
Website: www.fespau.es

Gautena

P.O. Box 1000
E - 20080 San Sebastian
Tel: +34.943.21.53.44
Email: info@gautena.org
Website: www.gautena.org

SWEDEN

Autism- och Aspergerförbundet
Bellmansgatan 30
S- 118 47 Stockholm
Tel: +46 8 420 030 50
Email: info@autism.se
Website: www.autism.se

SWITZERLAND

Autisme Suisse
Association de Parents
Neuengasse 19
2501 Biel
Tel: 032 322 10 25
Email: sekretariat@autism.ch
Website: www.autismesuisse.ch

UNITED KINGDOM

National Autistic Society (N.A.S.)
393 City Road
London EC1V 1NG
Tel: +44.20.7833.2299
Email: nas@nas.org.uk
Website: www.nas.org.uk

Scottish Autism

Hilton House, Alloa Business Park Whins Road
Alloa FK10 3SA - SCOTLAND
Tel: +44.1.259.72.00.44
Email: autism@scottishautism.org
Website: www.scottishautism.org

AFFILIATED MEMBERS

Regional associations of people with autism and parents

REPUBLIC OF BELARUS

LSPA A Good Deed.
Help to People with Autism
7a-1, Kozlov lane 220037 Minsk
Tel: +375 296 527497 +375 296 279415
Email: autismhelpby@gmail.com
FB: <https://www.facebook.com/dobroe.delo.pobedit/>

BULGARIA

Autism Today Association
1738 Sofia
2 Vitosha Street
Tel: +359 896699274, +359 88 736 6067
Email: autismtodayaba@gmail.com
Website: www.autismtoday-bg.eu

CYPRUS

Autism Support Famagusta
P.C. 30190
5341 Ayia Napa
CYPRUS
Tel: +357 99 454009
Email: autismfamagusta@gmail.com
Website: <https://www.autismsupportfamagusta.com/>

ESTONIA

Estonian Autism Alliance
Rahu 8
EST - Tartu 50112
Tel: +3725119685
Email: info@autismiliit.ee
Website: <https://www.autismiliit.ee/>

FRANCE

Abri Montagnard
F - 64490 Osse-en-Aspe
Tel: +33.5.59.34.70.51
Email: ritathomassin@neuf.fr
Website: <http://fratrieabri.free.fr/>

Union Régionale Autisme-France

Poitou-Charentes
Maison des Associations
12 Rue Joseph Cugnot - 79000 Niort
Tel: +33.06.52.65.41.61
Email: urafpc@autisme-poitoucharentes.fr
Website: www.autisme-poitoucharentes.fr

Dialogue Autisme

BP 248
45162 Olivet Cedex
Tel: +33 02 38 66 34 75
Email: dialogueautisme@orange.fr
Website: www.dialogueautisme.com

Association de préfiguration

de la Fondation 3A
36, la Feuverts
44110 Erbray
Tel: +33 6 85 73 58 10/ +33 6 37 38 31 12
Email: association.fondation3a@gmail.com
Website: <http://fondation3a.fr/>

ITALY

Associazione Nazionale Genitori Soggetti Autistici Lombardia (ANGSA Lombardia)
Via B. Rucellai 36
20126 Milano MI
Tel: +39-02-67.49.30.33
Email: segreteria@angsalombardia.it
Website: www.angsalombardia.it

Fondazione Oltre Il Labirinto Onlus

Mario PAGANESSI
Via Botteniga, 831100 Treviso
Tel: +39-345-5510560
Website: www.oltrelabirinto.it

Associazione Diversamente ODD

Via Caterina Segurana, 12
09134 Cagliari Pirri
Tel: 0039 (0)3338944791
Email: info@diversamenteonlus.org
Website: www.diversamenteonlus.org

Fondazione Il Domani Dell'autismo

Via Nuova 45 - 19020 - Bolano
Phone +39(0) 187 933297
Mobile +39(0) 349 3564409

Email: presidenzafondazionedomautismo@gmail.com
segreteriafondazioneautismo@gmail.com
Website: www.fondazioneildomandell'autismo.it

LATVIA

The Latvian Autism Association
Strelnieku 9-14, Rīga 1010
Email: info@autisms.lv
Website: www.autisms.lv

PORTUGAL

Associação Portuguesa para as Perturbações do Desenvolvimento e Autismo (A.P.P.D.A.-Lisboa)
Rua José Luis Garcia Rodrigues
Bairro Alto da Ajuda
P - 1300-565 Lisboa
Tel: + 351.21.361.6250
Email: info@appda-lisboa.org.pt
Website: www.appda-lisboa.org.pt

SLOVENIA

Zveza NVO za avtizem Slovenije (Association of NGOs Slovenia)
Ulica Ivanke Uranjek 1
3310 Zalec
Email: zveza.avtizem@gmail.com
Website: https://www.zveza-avtizem.eu/

SPAIN

Asperga Center-A Coruña
Avenida de Oza 240, 1º y Bajo,
15006 A Coruña
Tel: +34-881917318 & +34-633283164

Asperga Center-Santiago De Compostela

Avenida de Castela N°240, Bajo, 15705 Santiago de Compostela
Tel: +34-881165157 & +34-659485011
Email: asperga@asperga.org
Website: https://www.asperga.org/

Asociación Navarra de Autismo (ANA)

Calle Blas de la Serna 58, 1º D
31005 Pamplona
Email: info.ana@autismonavarra.com
Website: www.autismonavarra.com

Autismo Galicia

Rua Home Santo de Bonaval n° 74-bajo
E - 15703 Santiago de Compostela
Tel: + 34.981.589.365
Email: info@autismogalicia.org
Website: www.autismogalicia.org

Federación Autismo Andalucía

C/ Bergantín,2, Bloque A, Local 1
41012 Sevilla
Tel.: +34 954 24 15 65 | +34 608 73 76 09
E-Mail: federacion@autismoandalucia.org
Website: https://www.autismoandalucia.org

Federació Catalana d'Autisme

Carrer Providència 42
08024 Barcelona
Tel: +34 683 158 309
Email: info@fedcatalanautisme.org
Website: fedcatalanautisme.org

Fundació Congost Autisme

Ronda del Carril 75
08530 - La Garriga - Barcelona
Tel: +34-93-871.47.57
Email: congostautisme@autisme.com
Website: www.autisme.com

Nuevo Horizonte

Avda de la Comunidad de Madrid, s/n
E - 28230 Las Rozas de Madrid
Tel: + 34.91.637.74.55
Email: asociacion@nuevohorizonte.es
Website: www.nuevohorizonte.es

Fundación Mas Casadevall (FMCA)

Apartat de Correus 172
E-17820 Banyoles (El Pla de l'Estany-Girona)
Tel: +34.972.57.33.13
Email: info@mascasadevall.net
Site internet : www.mascasadevall.net

Autismo Sevilla

Avda. del Deporte s/. 41020 Sevilla.
Tel: +34 954 40 54 46

Email: asociacion@autismosevilla.org
Website: www.autismosevilla.org

UNITED KINGDOM

Autism Northern Ireland (N.I. Autism/PAPA)
Donard, Knockbracken Healthcare Park,
Saintfield Road
Belfast BT8 8BH
Tel: + 44.28.9040.1729
Email: info@autismni.org
Website: www.autismni.org

ASSOCIATE MEMBERS

ALBANIA

Fondacioni Femijeve Shqiptare
Rr.' Dëshmoret e 4 Shkurtit', Pall. nr. 30
Kati II, pas Akademise se Arteve
Tirane Albanie
Tel: + 355.4.2270663
Email: info@albanianchildren.org
Website: www.albanianchildren.org

AZERBAIJAN

Together and Healthy Public Union
Kamil Balakishiyev str. 23
Baku AZ1010
Tel: +994 55 988 9049
Email: info@birgesaglam.az
Website: birgesaglam.az

FINLAND

Autism Foundation Finland (Autismisäätiö)
Mannerheimintie 117
00280 Helsinki
Tel: +358 44 765 4300
Email: info@autismisaatio.fi
Website: www.autismisaatio.fi

FRANCE

E.D.I. Formation
2791 Chemin de Saint Bernard, bât. F
06220 VALLAURIS
Tel: + 33 4 93 45 53 18
Website: www.ediformation.fr

Union Nationale des Associations de Parents et Amis de Personnes Handicapées Mentales (U.N.A.P.E.I.)

15, Rue Coysevox
F - 75876 Paris Cedex 18
Tel: + 33.1.44.85.50.50
Email: public@unapei.org
Website: www.unapei.org

HUNGARY

Mars Foundation
(Mars Autistákért Alapítvány)
KUBIK Közösségi Iroda
Budapest
Jászai Mari tér 5-6
Email: hello@marsalapitvany.hu
Website: https://marsalapitvany.hu/

MALTA

Inspire (The Eden & Razzett Foundation)
Bulebel
Zejtun
ZTN 3000
Malta
Tel: +356 21807708
Website: www.inspire.org.mt\$

MOLDOVA

AO SOS Autism Moldova
Mun. Chişinău
Str. Grenoble, 191 building G
Tel: +373 68878788, +373 79021019
Email: sosautism.rm@gmail.com
Website: autismmoldova.md

THE NETHERLANDS

Dr. Leo Kannerhuis
Houtsnipiaan 1 Postbus 62
6865 ZH Doorwerth
Tel: + 31.26.33.33.037
Email: info@leokannerhuis.nl
Website: www.leokannerhuis.nl

POLAND

Fundacja Wspólnota Nadziei
(Community of Hope Foundation)
Więckowice, ul. Ogrodowa 17
32-082 Bolechowice
Tel: +48.12.378.43.58
Email: biuro@farma.org.pl
Website: www.farma.org.pl

Synapsis Foundation

Ul. Ondraszka 3
02-085 Warszawa
Tel: +48.22.825.77.57
Email: fundacja@synapsis.waw.pl
Website: www.synapsis.waw.pl

Jim Foundation

Ul. Tatrzańska 105
93-279 Łódź
Tel: 0048 42 643 46 70
Email: Help@Jim.org
Website: www.jim.org

ROMANIA

HELP AUTISM
Intrarea Graurului, nr 9
Sector 3, Bucureşti
Tel: + 40 371 184 067
Email: contact@helpautism.ro
Website: www.helpautism.ro

TURKEY

Denizli Autism Association (DAA)
Yenişehir Mah. Ferahevler Sitesi. 14. sok.
No:49
Merkezefendi/Denizli
Tel: +902583613005
Email: denizliotizmdernegi@gmail.com,
info@otizmnenizli.org
Website: http://denizliotizm.org

Tohum Foundation

Cumhuriyet Mah. Abide-i Hürriyet Cad.
No: 39
34380 Şişli-İstanbul
Email: info@tohumotizm.org.tr
Tel: +90 212 248 94 30
Website: http://www.tohumotizm.org.tr/

UKRAINE

Child With Future
21/16, Skovorody Str.
Kyiv 04070
Ukraine
Tel: +38 (044) 585 36 08
Email: info@cwf.com.ua
Website: www.cwf.com.ua

UNITED KINGDOM

AT-Autism
20-22 Wenlock Road
N1 7GU London
Email: info@atautism.org
Phone: +44 1363 85015
Website: https://www.atautism.org/

Autism Unlimited

Charity Hub, Portfield School Parley Ln
West Parley Christchurch BH23 6BP
+44 1202 483360
Email: enquiries@autism-unlimited.org
https://www.autism-unlimited.org/

NON EUROPEAN MEMBERS

MOROCCO

A.P.A.E.I.
Rue 9 Avril - Maârif
Casablanca
Tel: + 212.(0)5 22.25.81.43
E-mail: Ass_apaei@hotmail.fr



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