

SPECIAL REPORTS

Untold stories of adults with autism

BY SPECTRUM

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Most of the conversation about autism — whether about services or science — concerns children with the condition. But what happens when children with autism grow up? That’s the focus of this special report, “Untold stories of adults with autism.”

The report covers issues that affect a majority of adults with the condition — as well as issues that touch just a few. We made an effort to feature the perspectives not just of scientists, but of the true experts: people with autism.

Many children fall off a ‘social cliff’ after leaving high school and becoming adults, as journalist **Deborah Rudacille** describes in “**The twenty-something free fall.**” But a few manage to do well. Those who fare best are the ones who participated in organized activities as students, writes **Julie Lounds Taylor**.

Some of the social difficulties people with autism face stem from lack of eye contact. **Craig Erickson** and **Rebecca Shaffer** explore whether adults with autism are **uninterested in others’ eyes** or actively avoid them. The answer may help shape therapies for the condition.

Artist **Leironica Hawkins**, who has autism, depicts her occasional aversion to eye contact in a series of evocative cartoons. Another artist on the spectrum, **Nicole Appel**, creates unconventional portraits that have appeared in prominent art shows.

For **Brooks Wolfner**, a young man on the spectrum, a job-training program has led to **stable employment** and an entrée to a new social life. Brooks lives with family, but when his grandmother is in Florida, he is by himself, adhering to a strict schedule that gets him to work by 6 a.m.

Housing can be more complicated for others on the spectrum. And states are increasingly refusing to pay for disabled adults to live in **large residential communities** designed for them. **Amy S.F. Lutz** reports that these communities are a particularly good option for those who need extensive support.

For most people with autism, isolation is unwelcome. **Liz Pellicano** and **Felicity Sedgewick** describe the difficulties women with autism have making friends because they struggle to interpret the subtle social cues that form the glue of **female friendships**.

People with autism may similarly find romantic relationships challenging. In “**Sex and other foreign words**,” reporter **Ann Griswold** describes the complications that make sex and romance difficult for those on the spectrum, and the sweet success many have found.

This is the first generation of people with autism who have a diagnosis and are choosing to become parents. Although raising children poses its own set of problems for any parent, many are finding “**the unexpected plus of parenting with autism**.”

One pitfall of parenting on the spectrum can be an inability to respond appropriately to a child’s emotions. **Nathan Caruna** and **Jon Brock** discuss technology that brings a better understanding of **social cognition** in adults with autism, and the promise of virtual reality for helping these individuals hone social skills.

Adults with autism often have multiple health conditions. At a few **healthcare centers** designed for this population, specialists coordinate their care to consider all of an individual’s health issues before deciding on treatment.

In other cases, the healthcare of adults with autism is compromised by a late-in-life diagnosis. **Judith Miller** suggests potential ways to uncover cases of autism that go undiagnosed in community health centers.

You can hear some of these voices in our **Spectrum Stories podcast** (below). Articles from our archives round out this special report, which we hope captures some of the experience of being an adult with autism.

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