

Inclusive support for keiki with autism

By Andrea Pettiford
and Danielle Yafuso

April is Autism Acceptance Month — a time to celebrate, educate and advocate for individuals on the autism spectrum and their families. According to a new report by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1 in 31 children is diagnosed with autism by age 8.

This month isn't just about raising awareness — it's about deepening our understanding and embracing the unique perspectives and abilities of people with autism. For many families, an autism diagnosis can feel overwhelming. The path ahead may seem uncertain, but there are ways to move forward with hope and confidence.

Early intervention is one of the most powerful tools for families. Research shows that timely access to services can help infants and toddlers develop skills that support long-term success.

Parents know their children best — if something feels off or milestones seem delayed, it's OK to ask questions and seek a developmental screening. Acting early opens the door to valuable resources.

Every child is different, and there's no one-size-fits-all solution. Families may consider speech therapy, occupational therapy, behavioral support or specialized education. The right combination takes time to discover, and it's

important to choose what aligns with a child's strengths and challenges. Local programs and community-based organizations can provide trusted guidance. Families should feel empowered to ask questions and make informed choices.

Raising a child with autism can feel isolating when others don't understand your experience. But you are not alone. Connecting with other parents, caregivers, educators and professionals can create a circle of encouragement and understanding. These relationships offer space to share insights, celebrate wins — big or small — and offer support during tough times. A strong community reminds families they are part of something bigger.

Progress may not always follow a traditional timeline — and that's OK. It can show up in small but meaningful ways: trying a new food, saying a new word or managing a routine. These moments are victories worth celebrating. Recognizing and celebrating success reinforces confidence and joy along the journey.

Supporting a child with autism takes patience and love, but caregivers must also take care of themselves. Stress and burnout can build

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Andrea Pettiford, left, is CEO of Easterseals Hawaii; Danielle Yafuso is chair of Easterseals Hawaii's board of directors.



over time, especially when families feel they have to handle everything alone. Self-care isn't a luxury — it's essential. Whether it's taking a break, finding quiet time or leaning on a friend,

these moments sustain long-term wellbeing. When caregivers are supported, the whole family benefits.

Despite increased awareness, many families still face challenges, including delayed diagnoses, limited access to services and social stigma. These barriers show why continued advocacy and inclusive support matter. Across Hawaii, there are a number of local organizations working to meet these needs to help our children and families thrive.

This Autism Acceptance Month, we invite everyone to learn more about autism, listen to the voices of autistic individuals, and take steps to foster inclusion. Whether it's in classrooms, workplaces or neighborhood parks, we all have a role in building a community where every person feels seen, valued and supported.

Inclusion benefits everyone. Together, we can create a future where all individuals are given every opportunity to thrive.