**The Lowdown On - Autism Anglia Charity**

**“Autism sounds complex because it is” - This may sound like an obvious statement to anyone that has even a slight understanding of Autism, but it’s one that comes loaded with meaning. In this article in the ‘Growing Up in Essex’ series we get the lowdown on Autism Anglia, from Victoria McElhinney, who is communications and marketing officer at the charity.**

Victoria is well placed to first give an insight into the condition, how it effects people, and the challenges of growing up in the autistic spectrum. To help make some sense of this lifelong condition Victoria says “It’s important to note that both strengths and weaknesses can vary massively from person to person – and people can be anywhere on the spectrum. People with [autism](https://www.autism-anglia.org.uk/aboutautism/) see the world differently to people without autism, and are affected in the way they interact with, and communicate with others. The spectrum is not fixed though, and where a person sits on it will depend on how they might be feeling, and what is going on around them.”

Common characteristics are often talked about though, including difficulties with interacting and communicating, changes in environment, responding to sensory stimulus, flexible thinking, and the way information is processed.

As there is no cure, this means a child growing up with autism in Essex will face on-going challenges and obstacles as they try and make sense of the world around them. The same goes for families as well, as they try and adapt to life living with, and caring for an autistic child. This is where Autism Anglia can step in – As a charity working across East Anglia area they offer a range of services, many of which are running in Essex, offering valuable support and opportunities, for children and adults, and their families. Some of their offerings include:

* **Doucecroft – a specialist school and F.E college.**
* **Residential services and supported living for adults.**
* **Adult study centre in Colchester called Jigsaw.**
* **Autism Advice Service – Available to families looking to find out what support is available and how to access services. Also provides guidance and advice to individuals or professionals affected in some way by autism.**

It’s their Autism Advice Service which the charity have said makes them stand out from other services, and could be one of the reasons people approach Autism Anglia over other autism specific charities or projects in the region. There is a lot of value in this free advice service as “people often come to the service with lots of different questions, and with varying degrees of need. We try to help wherever we can, and if we can’t we will signpost to other charities and organisations that can.”

Victoria describes a team that is ready and willing to offer help and [support,](http://www.autism-anglia.org.uk/get_support/get_support) but she also paints a picture that goes deeper than that – “Our autism advisors have a wealth of knowledge about the local area they are working in, and they also provide clinic style 1:1 sessions which are currently running in Essex – we hope to expand these in 2016. The team can assist with all matters relating to autism, including attending meetings or interviews, completing benefit forms, issuing free autism alert cards, and providing autism related training. Above all, our autism advisors can be an knowledgeable, listening, and sympathetic ear, which we often find is exactly what people are looking for or need.”

It all comes back to need, and like many charities Autism Anglia are able to help fulfil these needs by harnessing the power of public fundraising. Supporters can get involved in anything from a [silly sock day – happening on the 24th March 2016](https://www.autism-anglia.org.uk/get_involved/fundraising/autism_anglia__silly_sock_day), to an annual raffle, golf day or even a daring sponsored skydive. This is just a small number of ways that people can get involved with fundraising and spreading awareness of autism, volunteers are also welcome.

If this is a cause close to your heart or you’d like to find out more about the charity, their work, or autism in general then check out the charity’s website for a whole wealth of resources, we’ve already learned from it. But this is a series about ‘Growing Up In Essex’, so for now we will hand back to Victoria from Autism Anglia to re-emphasise the challenges autistic children and their families face. This is why a charity such as Autism Anglia is important:

“The biggest challenge any child on the spectrum will face, with or without a diagnosis, is trying to fit into a uniform society, where you are expected to learn, grow, and behave in a certain way, according to society’s way of living. This includes socially acceptable behaviour, learning and education, social communication (both verbal and non-verbal), and understanding the world around you. All these aspects can be difficult for someone with an autistic spectrum condition to grasp and understand, while for families learning to live with and understand, and adapt their way of living for their relative with autism is a big challenge. It affects every part of everyday life; from the moment they wake, until they go to sleep. “