

# Enhancing lives across the spectrum



Society for Autism  
Support and Services





Photo by Yankrukov. Cover photo by Tim Samuel.

## Champion Autistic people to live without limits

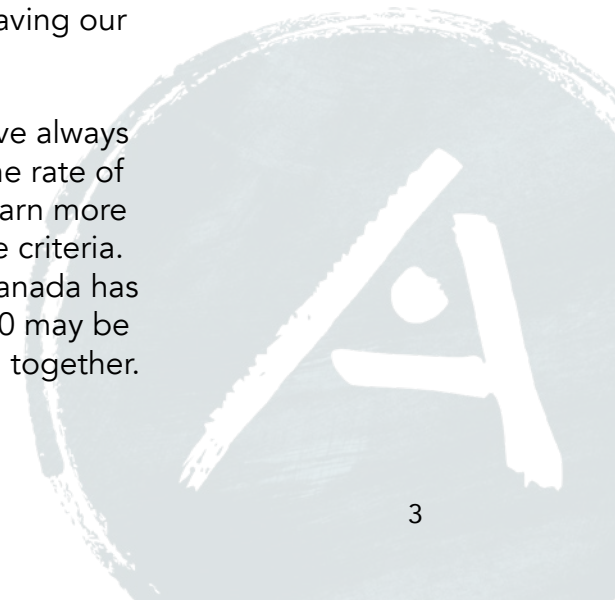
**Since 1977, Society for Autism Support and Services, affectionately known as SASS, has been enhancing lives across the Autism spectrum.**

Forty years ago, parents were often encouraged to institutionalize their child following an Autism diagnosis. At that time, a group of Calgary parents came together to form Society for Treatment of Autism (STA) based on their adamant belief that their children could live fuller lives with the right range of services in place.

Since the 1970s, tremendous strides have been made in not only our understanding of Autism, but how to best support Autistic people and their families. In 2022 STA became Society for Autism Support and Services (SASS) to reflect our evolving philosophy of care.

By staying abreast of the research and new developments in the field, SASS has been at the forefront of service delivery for Autistic people. We are privileged to work with people from the time of their Autism diagnosis through adulthood. The deep care offered by the highly trained team at SASS creates relationships of trust and fosters hope. In fact, many whom we have served stay in touch with us (their "SASS family") long after leaving our programs.

As a premier leader in Autism support, our services have always been in high demand in Southern Alberta. However, the rate of Autism diagnosis is growing around the world as we learn more and develop better diagnostic tools and more accurate criteria. Recent studies show that one in every 50 children in Canada has Autism. Accumulating evidence suggests that one in 30 may be more accurate. This is a significant reality we must face together.





More adults are now being diagnosed with Autism than in the past. What once was considered a relatively rare condition has become a pressing issue affecting 1- 2% of Canadians, or as many as 86,000 Albertans – just about the population of Airdrie. **Although SASS receives some government funding, that funding is far outpaced by the demand for care. Unfortunately, government funding priorities change and leave our programs in jeopardy.**

### No Time to Waste

Just over half (53.7%) of Autistic children and youth in Canada are diagnosed before the age of five. **Fortunately, this provides us with a significant opportunity to support and guide children through their formative stages, and set the stage for their future.**

Once diagnosed, it is imperative that children begin working with their support team at SASS right away. We know, and science has shown, that early access to interventions can change the developmental trajectory of children with Autism and improve lifelong outcomes.

Unfortunately, not every family that asks SASS for help can be served. In fact, waiting lists for toddlers can often take up to a year, creating a significant gap during the most critical period of development in a child's life.

Time is of the essence for Autistic people of all ages, not just toddlers. 33% of Autistic adults report unmet mental health needs. Access to Autism-specific counselling services and employment supports are crucial stepping stones to a happier, more fulfilling life.



Photo by Mikhail Nilov. Facing page: Photo by Jerisy.

### Our Mission

As southern Alberta's leader in individualized, empirically based services, SASS specializes in meeting the diverse needs of people on the Autism spectrum and supporting their families. We are a multidisciplinary team who tailor every program to meet the unique needs of those we serve. We are passionate about our goal to enhance lives across the spectrum.

Just as SASS's founding parents did over 40 years ago, we are once again taking the initiative to do what is best for the children and families that rely on SASS to provide the support and services they need.

We are asking YOU, as a caring community member, to help SASS provide the supports most needed today. All of us are touched by Autism, and it takes all of us to ensure that Autistic people can thrive and contribute to our communities.





Photo by Saulo Leite.

## WHAT IS AUTISM?

Autism is a neurodevelopmental condition that can include impairments in speech, non-verbal communication and social interactions combined with restricted and repetitive behaviours, interests or activities. Each Autistic person is unique, and the term "spectrum" refers to the wide variation in strengths and challenges reflected among those with the disorder. Autism is a lifelong condition.

Over the years terms such as Autistic Disorder, Asperger's Syndrome, or pervasive developmental disorder have also been used to refer to Autism.

## OUR SERVICES

### EARLY INTERVENTION PROGRAM

The Early Intervention Program offers specialized services for young children with Autism (through age 6) and their families. Programming is provided in the child's home, in the community, and within a specialized classroom environment.

### OUT-OF-HOME LIVING PROGRAM

Since 1977, the Out-of-Home Living Program has offered a range of out-of-home living arrangements for children and youth ages 6 to 18 who were not successful living in the family home. SASS is the only agency in Calgary that operates Autism-specific group homes.

### ADOLESCENT & ADULT SERVICES

Our adolescent and adult services include a variety of skill building programs for individuals age 15 and older. These include vocational and life skills training, as well as work experience and employment programs.

### COMMUNITY EDUCATION & CONSULTATION

SASS offers behavioural, psychological, speech language pathology, and occupational therapy consultation on a fee-for-service basis. Services include individual assessment and intervention, group intervention, and community workshops.

### COUNSELLING ACROSS THE SPECTRUM

Counselling Across the Spectrum offers individual, family, and group counselling for people ages 10 and older. With our expertise in Autism and mental health, our team uses state-of-the-art therapies to address issues impacting well-being. We strive to foster independence and help clients lead fulfilling lives within the greater community.







Photo by Migsr87.

A nine-year government funding freeze has taken its toll on our ability to deliver personalized care to the increasing number of individuals we are asked to serve.

Between 2014 and 2023, our costs have also risen dramatically:

- Cost of utilities for our facilities has increased by 56%
- Transportation costs have increased by 22% as most Autistic children with complex needs require transportation to participate in programming
- Retaining highly trained and qualified staff is imperative to serving our mission, and comprises over 90% of our budget

While some programs receive provincial funding, others, such as our Learning, Engagement and Play (LEAP) toddler program, Counselling Across the Spectrum service and programming for adolescents and adults are at risk without long-term, sustainable funding.

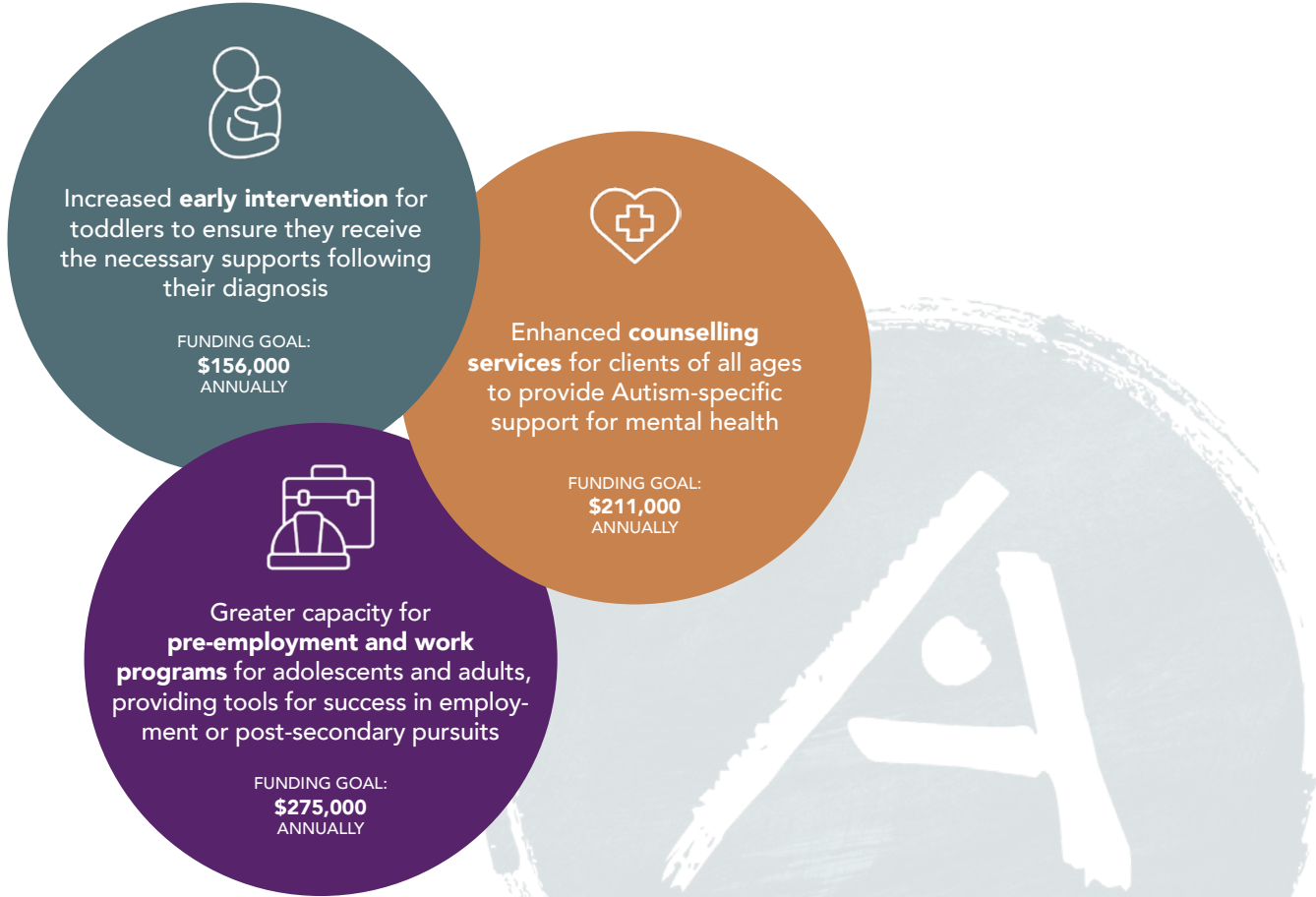
As a fiscally responsible charitable organization, we know we can not continue to draw on our reserves if we want to be here for Autistic people who need us now and in the future.

Guided by our core values, we are looking for partners who will help us:

- Put people first, demonstrating compassion, commitment, and collaboration with the individuals we serve and for our highly trained staff and clinician teams
- Maintain the transparency and trust we have earned with those we serve as well as our donors and funders
- Make a difference with individuals and families who are touched by Autism, while maintaining a positive outlook (and having fun, too!)
- Continue our over 40-year legacy of support while striving to innovate and achieve success together

If you share these values, please join us in supporting people with Autism and helping them reach their potential.

**OUR KEY FUNDRAISING PRIORITIES**





**PRIORITY 1: \$156,000 ANNUALLY**  
Early Intervention for Toddlers

*You can ensure that no child has to wait.*

*GOAL: To improve early intervention for toddlers (from the time a diagnosis is suspected until age three) by serving 20 clients per year in our Learning, Engagement and Play (LEAP) program. Additional funds will increase our capacity to serve more children awaiting support.*

*"This program is life-changing for families at a time when they desperately need it."*

With your support, SASS can increase our ability to offer early intervention to more toddlers in our LEAP program, from 10 toddlers per year today to 20 in the future. This is a 100% increase in service – and over time, it will significantly reduce our extensive waiting list.

We know that investing resources early is critical to each child's development. Our team of speech-language pathologists, occupational therapists, clinical assistants, and social workers wraps around each Autistic child and their family with personalized care, helping them find the skills and talents that will serve them throughout their life.

When you support this project, you become part of our network of care. Your help during this window of time in childhood helps lay the critical foundation for lifetime without limits for an Autistic child.

*"I was skeptical at first about a play-based approach, but I soon became convinced as I watched my daughter develop each new skill. Her delays melted away as we did our sessions."*



**PRIORITY 2: \$211,000 ANNUALLY**  
Specialized Counselling Services

*You can help people feel valued and connected.*

*GOAL: To provide specialized counselling services, including strengthened mental health supports and group programming, to improve quality of life for Autistic people.*

Someone diagnosed with Autism is significantly more likely to experience mental health challenges that severely impact their quality of life – including being four times more likely to die by suicide. But timely and specialized therapy can significantly reduce this risk and improve quality of life.

Specialized counselling services can help people lead more fulfilling lives. SASS has a multidisciplinary team with extensive experience to provide this important service.

SASS also offers group programming such as an improv group for teens, a support group for women, and a specialized group for seniors to promote mental well-being and provide a sense of belonging and community.

We currently can't keep up with the demand – but with your support, we can help more Autistic youth and adults to feel accepted, valued, and appreciated for their unique gifts.

*"SASS fostered a community where individuals with Autism were embraced for their unique qualities, and this instilled a sense of confidence and self-worth in my daughter. She felt understood and accepted, which significantly contributed to her overall progress."*





**PRIORITY 3: \$275,000 ANNUALLY**  
**Pre-employment & Work Programs**

*You can provide tools for youth and adults to succeed.*

*GOAL: To provide skill-enhancing employment readiness and work experience programs for Autistic individuals aged 15 years and older.*

In Canada, only 14.3% of Autistic adults are employed. More than half of Autistic Canadians rely on disability benefits. Challenges with communication and social interaction affect Autistic adults' performance in interviews, and many face discrimination, both unconscious and conscious.

Meaningful work provides a sense of purpose and independence, and it also reduces isolation – all of which contribute to greater wellbeing.

Further, in a province that continues to experience talent and staffing shortages, Alberta would benefit from greater inclusion of Autistic people in the workplace.

SASS offers a range of pre-employment supports for Autistic adolescents and adults – from training sessions on resume building and job search techniques, to disclosure of one's Autism, advocacy, and requesting accommodations. Access to consultation with an experienced multidisciplinary team sets our services apart from others in the community.

Finding the right job is important to each of us. SASS helps to place people into work roles where all parties (employer, Autistic employee, and other staff) benefit. In our experience, Autistic employees tend to follow the rules and stay out of workplace drama. Workplace accidents go down and productivity goes up, as Autistic employees focus on the right details and tasks.

Our services are highly effective, but our capacity is limited. With your support, SASS will expand our pre-employment and job coaching services and our virtual resources.

Meaningful employment is important to all of us. Your support of employment and workplace inclusion programming leads to a stronger economy and sense of community – benefitting everyone.

*"I have really benefitted from the support at SASS, when I was looking for a job, and also the regular coaching sessions once I was back at work. They provided me with a lot of encouragement and played a big role in helping me stay focused. I now have a great part-time job working from home, which is something I've always wanted. I don't believe I could have done it without them."*



Photo by Divine Techy Girl.





## MESSAGE FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

In my close to 30 years at SASS, I've witnessed a number of "firsts":

- A previously non-speaking child's first word at age four
- A child being invited to a birthday for the first time
- A teen being asked out on their first date
- An adult celebrating their first job

Each of these firsts is as exciting for my team at SASS as it is for the parents and their families, as we watch an Autistic individual do things that we might never dared to dream were possible. **Through SASS, families find hope and the confidence to raise their child with Autism and see them go on to lead fulfilling lives.**

As a lifelong learner and academic, I find the research on advances in support, services and outcomes for people with Autism fascinating. However, I often joke that **the children we serve don't read the research.** They don't know the statistics. They aren't limited by trends. Therefore, if we provide the right support at the right time, we can help each individual with Autism thrive and maximize their potential, whatever that might be.

Our community deserves to benefit from the contributions of all people, no matter where they are on the spectrum. SASS fills an important gap in serving Autistic individuals across the life span, from toddlers to adults. But over time we are seeing more children and families, requiring more time and resources from SASS and our partners.

**Simply, we need your support to be able to serve people with Autism in the most caring, effective ways possible.**

Join us in changing lives, families, and futures. Together, we will experience many more "firsts" with the Autistic people we support.

Thank you for reviewing our request for support. We appreciate you taking the time to consider how you might partner with us to make a significant difference for those people living, working, and navigating their environments with Autism.

*Dr. Kimberley Ward  
Executive Director and  
Registered Psychologist*



To support people with Autism in our community, contact Kimberley Ward, SASS Executive Director, at 403-258-5518 or [wardk@autism.ca](mailto:wardk@autism.ca). Thank you for your generous support.





*“The team at SASS saw ME. The greatest aid SASS gave me was knowledge of myself – who I am, what I want, and what environments fit me. All my life I’ve been forcing myself into situations and roles, moved by sheer will to fit a mold. At my breaking point, they said, **‘Why not be you?’** That gave me courage to pursue new paths.”*



### Diversity & Inclusion

We value equity, diversity, and inclusion within our agency culture to embrace the uniqueness of individuals and be representative of the Canadian population. We acknowledge that we are strengthened by diverse backgrounds, perspectives, and experiences. SASS does not tolerate prejudice against groups that include, but are not limited to, those represented by race, sex, age, physical disabilities, sexual orientation, gender identity, neurodiversity, and socioeconomic status. We will actively work to recognize, develop, and promote initiatives towards equity, diversity, and inclusion in our programming, hiring and promotion policies, and organized events.

### Land Acknowledgement

SASS acknowledges Treaty 7 territory – the traditional and ancestral territory of the Blackfoot Confederacy: Kainai, Piikani, and Siksika, as well as the Tsuu T’ina Nation and Stoney Nakoda First Nation. We acknowledge that this territory is home to the Métis Nation of Alberta, Region 3, within the historical Northwest Métis Homeland. We acknowledge the many First Nations, Métis, and Inuit who have lived in and cared for these lands for generations. We make this acknowledgement as an act of reconciliation and gratitude to those whose territory we reside on or are visiting.