

# ABIPA – ASHEVILLE BUNCOMBE INSTITUTE OF PARITY ACHIEVEMENT

## Autism and Parenting While Black

By JéWana Grier-McEachin, Executive Director

*Lisa Stringfellow, the parent of three autistic adult children, shared her experience in the following article from the Association for Autism and Neurodiversity.*

I don't recall the first time I heard the word autism, but I do remember the feeling I had when my first child was diagnosed in 2005... surprise.

That surprise stemmed from the way autism had been presented in the mainstream media and in the world around me, and from the narrow focus of medical research at the time. As a young Black parent, the image I had of people with autism were mostly white and male.

Disparities in research and interventions are linked to lack of data that takes into account race and ethnicity. A recent study found that only one-quarter of autism studies reported data on race, and that in studies from 1990 to 2017, over 60% of participants were white.

These numbers are especially concerning given current data from 2020 that reflects that the percentage of 8-year-old children identified as Autistic was higher in Black, Hispanic, and Asian or Pacific Islander children compared with white children.

My parenting journey has been one of growth and advocacy for my three autistic adult children, but it can only be fully understood through the lens of race.

My youngest children, twins, were born extremely premature, and I had been told to carefully monitor their developmental milestones. My daughter required a life-saving ventilator to breathe, so she qualified for intensive home services as an infant. But I also closely watched her relatively healthy twin brother.

One day I asked my daughter's occupational therapist, "What does it mean when a child doesn't make eye contact when you speak to them?" The twins were 18 months old and I had noticed my son often didn't make eye contact when I interacted with him. She gently mentioned that it could be due to several reasons, but autism was a possibility.

I have family members with physical, intellectual, and other disabilities, but no one in my circle of family or friends had a connection to autism. Naively, I thought that autism was not something that impacted my community.

That's what erasure does.

As I began my journey of understanding and learning to support my son, and later my two daughters, I felt that erasure in my interactions with clinicians, educators, and the parent community. I didn't feel seen. My



JéWana Grier-McEachin. Photo: Pro16 Productions

experiences and worries as a Black parent weren't the same as others. Resources for support weren't readily available or felt out of reach.

I learned to ask questions. Although my son was diagnosed as a toddler, I had strong suspicions that his twin sister was autistic as well. Doctors often minimized my concerns and encouraged me to prioritize attention to her physical health. When she finally became medically stable, I succeeded in getting her a neuropsychological evaluation and this time was not surprised by the finding. She was nine years old when she was diagnosed.

In hindsight, there were many signs that my oldest daughter, who is five years older than her siblings, was also on the spectrum, but I think culture played a part in the delay. Black culture so often centers on family and community. People may have opinions about those that are a little "different" but they are part of the group.

From a toddler, my oldest daughter was labeled "shy" by family and the people around us. I was encouraged by family members to get her involved in activities to build her confidence and social skills. She struggled with social awkwardness, anxiety, depression, and other concerns, none of which made sense until her autism diagnosis. She was seventeen.

As a Black parent, race is always a consideration as I try to help my children navigate the world. My son is now a teen, a tall Black boy who likes to wear hoodies to mitigate sensory overstimulation. When I think of Trayvon Martin, I think of my son. Who won't give him the benefit of a doubt in the community? Who might see him as a threat? How do I teach him to stay safe?

For my daughters, how do I help people see their potential and not make assumptions about their needs or abilities? How can I help them avoid the stereotypes so often put on Black girls and women? How can other Black families and people of color become a bigger part of the conversation—a more visible part of the community?

The answer starts with being seen.

Reprinted courtesy of the Association for Autism and Neurodiversity, aane.org.

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If you or anyone you know needs more information or support on Autism Spectrum Disorder, please reach out to the Arc of Buncombe County, arcofbuncombecounty.org.



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**Help Us Celebrate Our Birthday by Gifting ABIPA a Donation of \$20**

Tax deductible donations can be made by sending a check to ABIPA, PO Box 448, Asheville, NC 28802; or online at [www.abipa.org](http://www.abipa.org). Thank you for your support!



Kelly White, MHE, MPH. Photo: Pro16 Productions

## Stress Awareness

by Kelly White, MHE, MPH,  
ABIPA Health Education Program Manager

*April is stress awareness month.*

Time to think about stressors and how they can affect your health and well-being.

Many of us may not realize when our bodies are under some sort of stress. Most of the time it's because the loads we carry on a daily basis seem so normal that we do not know what a life without a lot of stress looks or feels like. On the outside we look normal, but on the inside that stress is wreaking havoc on our organs.

Recently, I was explaining to someone about stress and cortisol in the body. In case you aren't familiar, cortisol is a hormone that is used by the body to help regulate your bodies response to stress. It works alongside another hormone called adrenaline. When our body perceives a threatening situation, the adrenaline causes our heart rate to speed up, while the cortisol releases extra sugar into the blood. That is paired with other blood substances which are sent out to repair any damages you may receive during a fight-or-flight threatening event.

Without knowing it, most of us could be walking around with our

bodies in a constant threatened state, meaning that we never come down out of fight-or-flight mode. This, in return, potentially causes problems with our heart, blood pressure, weight, diabetes, and even issues with memory and focus, just to name a few. This is why it is so important to learn about your stress triggers, how to deal with stress, and how to cope with stress over long periods of time.

Just knowing what it feels like when you are stressed can be the first step to managing stress and learning what works best for you. You may also consider seeking professional counseling for more serious cases of stress. Some of the easier things to try could include changes to your diet, getting more exercise, finding a hobby, and organizing and focusing on the things in your life that are most important while leaving behind anything that does not mean you any good.

Stress is not the only reason that your cortisol levels can be elevated. It is always recommended that you see your healthcare provider when or if you notice changes in your body that do not seem right.

Source: [mayoclinic.org](http://mayoclinic.org)

## Women's Health Awareness Conference

**Saturday,  
April 13**

FREE health screenings, health education sessions, healthy living sessions, and health resources. What you learn could save your life!



Activities take place from 8 a.m. until 5 p.m. at Mountain Area Health Education Center (MAHEC), 121 Hendersonville Road in Asheville. Registration is free; on-site registration will be available on the day of event. To register, go to [www.niehs.nih.gov/womenshealthawareness](http://www.niehs.nih.gov/womenshealthawareness).

For more information, email [WHA@niehs.nih.gov](mailto:WHA@niehs.nih.gov), or call 919-541-3852.

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ABIPA promotes economic, social, and healthy parity achievement for African Americans and other underserved populations in Buncombe County through advocacy, education, research, and community partnerships.

