

# **1 What is ASAN?**

## **1.1 Who We Are**

The Autistic Self Advocacy Network seeks to advance the principles of the disability rights movement in the Autistic community. Drawing on the principles of the cross-disability community on issues such as inclusive education, community living supports and others, ASAN seeks to organize the community of Autistic adults and youth to have our voices heard in the national conversation about us. In addition, ASAN seeks to advance the idea of neurological diversity, putting forward the concept that the goal of autism advocacy should not be a world without Autistic people. Instead, it should be a world in which Autistic people enjoy the same access, rights and opportunities as all other citizens. Working in fields such as public policy, media representation, research and systems change, ASAN hopes to empower Autistic people across the world to take control of our own lives and the future of our common community. Nothing About Us, Without Us!

## **1.2 Neurodiversity**

Neurological diversity (or neurodiversity) is the idea that we are all neurologically different—that individuals on the autism spectrum do not have a disease but rather a difference to be recognized. Autistic people have a unique set of characteristics, which can manifest as difference, disability, or gifts/skills, from person to person and within the same person. These differences provide Autistics with many rewards and challenges, not unlike our non-Autistic peers. The neurodiversity movement works toward equal rights for those of all neurological configurations—the rights to accommodations and support services so that we all might lead fulfilling and productive lives.

## **1.3 What an ASAN Chapter Is**

- ASAN allows Autistics to be represented in governmental policies that directly affect the Autistic and disability communities.
- ASAN effects change in the Autistic and disability communities through actions such as letter writing, protesting, information dissemination, and community organizing.
- ASAN strives to effect widespread change across the various communities that intersect with our everyday lives, and to influence the way autism spectrum disorders are represented in vocational, educational, civic, and familial settings.
- ASAN chapters are also encouraged to participate in community outreach activities, as long as the outreach is unrelated to party politics and does not mix outside agendas with ASAN's mission and purpose.
- ASAN advances civil rights in the historically underrepresented Autistic and disability communities, and strives for fair treatment for people with autism spectrum differences and other related conditions.
- ASAN's support of neurodiversity defends the same basic human rights for all humans, regardless of neurological type.

- ASAN supports inclusion of Autistic people into mainstream society. ASAN's view is that people of all neurological configurations should be included in society, allowing everyone to live fulfilling and productive lives.
- Although ASAN is not intended primarily as a social group, there is a strong social and support component. Social activities are encouraged among and between the chapters, and members are encouraged to offer support to one another.

#### **1.4 What an ASAN Chapter Is Not**

- ASAN does not condone violence or extreme acts such as voluntary arrest and imprisonment. Extreme forms of civil disobedience such as voluntary arrest and imprisonment must be authorized by global ASAN leadership, and are not mandatory for all ASAN chapter members.
- ASAN chapters are not intended as a platform for supporting or condemning specific religious and political viewpoints. Chapter leaders must ensure that the chapter is neutral in all areas that do not directly affect the Autistic and disability communities.
- ASAN does not exclude members solely based on neurological type or functioning level, nor does ASAN consider one neurological type or functioning level to be superior or inferior to any others. However, to ensure Autistic representation in issues related to the Autistic community, ASAN chapter leaders must identify as Autistic.
- Although ASAN has a support component, it is not intended as a primary source of therapy.
- ASAN does not support a cure for autism, nor does it support behavior-modification techniques that are considered extreme among the general population (e.g., aversives, restraints, behavioral practices aimed at “normalizing” Autistics, etc.). ASAN is also against forced institutionalization and segregation of Autistics and other disabled people.
- ASAN is not for the promotion or endorsement of particular treatments or proprietary educational methodologies.

#### **1.5 What Role Should an ASAN Chapter Play?**

The word self-advocacy has multiple meanings. It can refer to individuals' efforts at trying to take control over their own lives, be it at home, at school, at work, or in their relationships. It can also refer to the efforts of a community to take control over the public policy, media, social, societal, cultural and other broader conversations and actions about that community, including activities such as lobbying legislators, engaging in protests, and interacting with the media. An ASAN chapter should work to advance both types of self-advocacy. ASAN's work is oriented at improving the representation of the Autistic community in the public conversation about autism and improving the reach of the Autistic community to make it accessible and meaningful for all Autistic people.

The goal of advocacy is to help defend and advance the Autistic community's interests in matters affecting the Autistic community. Examples of advocacy/social change activities include:

- Protests
- Legislative testimonies
- Meetings with legislators
- Letters to the Editor/Op-eds

- Alliances with other organizations to promote policy or social change

Social/support/Autistic culture activities are geared toward building a strong, vibrant, welcoming, inclusive, and helpful community among Autistics. These community-building activities include:

- Social activities
- Autistic Pride Day events with a purely social component
- Cooperative efforts around skills development in employment/education/etc.
- Mentoring teenagers

The examples above are simply example activities, and are not meant to be exhaustive lists. Also, some activities may include advocacy and community-building components, and may not be easily classified. These activities are to be encouraged as well.

## **1.6 Who Can Join ASAN?**

ASAN membership is not restricted based on neurological type. Autistics and non-Autistics are equally encouraged to join ASAN. However, some chapters may find it helpful to have Autistics-only meetings. Autistics-only meetings are reasonable, as long as:

- “Autistics” refers to anyone who identifies as part of the Autistic community. This includes anyone who is professionally diagnosed, self-identifies as being on the autism spectrum, or who suspects that they are on the autism spectrum.
- Non-Autistics are not excluded from general ASAN participation. In other words, all chapters must have open meetings that allow Autistics and non-Autistics, even if there are Autistics-only meetings as well.
- Non-Autistics are not allowed to lead ASAN chapters. ASAN is led by Autistics for Autistics, so non-Autistics are not typically allowed to represent chapters. One possible exception is if the chapter is at a university and must be led by a student, but none of the Autistics are students. In this case, the non-Autistic student leader must defer to the regional ASAN chapter. If there is no regional ASAN chapter, the student leader must defer to an Autistic chapter co-leader.

Membership is also available to anyone more than 18 years old. Members under the age of 18 can be considered on a case-by-case basis, based on the individuals’ maturity and overall ability to participate in an ASAN chapter on an adult level. If there is significant interest in ASAN from individuals under the age of 18, it may be expedient to form an ASAN Teen group.