April is Autism Awareness Month. Autism impacts the normal development of the brain in the areas of social interaction, communication skills, and cognitive function. Individuals with autism typically have difficulties in verbal and non-verbal communication, social interactions, and leisure or play activities.

Individuals with autism often suffer from numerous medical conditions which may include: asthma, epilepsy, digestive disorders, persistent viral infections, sleeping disorders, and many more.

Autism’s prevalence has skyrocketed. While none us may employ a person with autism, we just might work with a parent whose child is on the spectrum, because today 1 in 68 children are diagnosed with autism.

Here are just a few facts, according to Autism Speaks Foundation, concerning autism:

- 84% of adults with autism remain living with their parents.

- Nearly half of 25-year-olds with autism have never held a paying job.

- The cost of autism across a lifetime averages $1.4 million to $2.4 million.

Karen Siff Exkorn, who is a mother of a child with autism and is on the board of New York Collaborates for Autism, compiled a list of statements she and other parents on the board wish people would and wouldn’t say to them about their autistic children:

Don’t say: “Is your child an artistic or musical genius? What special gifts does your child have?”

We’ve all seen “Rain Man” and know about the extraordinary artistic and musical gifts that some individuals on the autism spectrum possess. But the truth is that most on the spectrum do not have these gifts. In fact, only about 10 percent have savant qualities.

Do say: “How is your child doing?” This is what you’d say to the parent of a typical child, right?

Don’t say: “You’d never know by looking at her that she has autism! She looks so normal.”

While the speaker might view this as a compliment, most parents of a child on the spectrum would not take it as such. Additionally, in the world of autism, the word “normal” is usually replaced with “typical” or “neuro-typical.”

Do say: “Your daughter is adorable” Or offer any other compliment that you would use with any typical child.

Don’t say: “I know exactly what you’re going through. My cousin has a friend whose neighbor’s sister has a child with autism.”

It’s human nature to try to show empathy for the family affected by autism, but it’s not right to say that you know “exactly” what parents are going through if you don’t have a child with autism.

Do say: “I don’t know what you’re going through, but I’m willing to listen if you need to talk.”

By honestly acknowledging the gap in your knowledge and offering heartfelt help, you will be a much better support system for the parents of a child on the spectrum.

Don’t say: “What caused your child’s autism?”

Speaking about the cause of a child’s autism is a particularly sensitive subject because there is no known single cause. There are many theories about the causes of autism, which include heredity, genetics and environmental factors.

Do say: Nothing.

Even if you have a burning desire to ask this question, please don’t. It is both highly controversial and emotionally-charged. Often parents experience guilt around the cause of their child’s autism, and you’d only be adding fuel to the fire.

For more information on autism, visit the National Autism Association website. (www.nationalautismassociation.org)