

**It's no longer TABOO to talk openly about  
special needs!**

**Karen Simmons, Founder Of Autism Today  
and Co-author of:**

***Chicken Soup for the Soul: Children with  
Special Needs* Is Changing The Face Of The  
Special Needs Community!**

**An amazing story of how one woman raises six children –  
two with special needs – survives a near-death experience  
while giving birth, creates the world's largest online resource  
for those with autism and related disorders, and writes  
several books – without accepting a dime from the  
government, special interest groups or corporations!**

**Now as co-author of *Chicken Soup for the Soul: Children  
with Special Needs* Karen will offer even greater hope and  
support to those who care for children with special needs.**

**Every cent received from conference and product sales has  
been reinvested into the organization.**

<p><b>“Karen wanted her son to understand his autism, so she ended up teaching the whole community a lesson.” – <i>Woman's World Magazine</i></b></p>
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## Who is Karen Simmons?

She is the face of the newly evolving special needs community, shining new light on the special needs of others.

The LARGEST Minority – Special Needs People! With 77 of the 300 million people in North America having some type of special needs according to the US Census Bureau, how is this group missed? They cross all cultural, geographic and socio-economical borders so look around, they are everywhere. Perhaps it's the segmentation into different types of special needs that disburses this group so easily, or the fact that its been so hard for society to openly talk and accept people with special needs that the group amongst us has been ignored. Not anymore!. Karen Simmons, "The Queen Of Resiliency" has two special needs children – one with ADHD and NLD and the other with autism, as well as four other healthy, gifted children. Rather than see herself as a victim of circumstances, she was empowered to help the millions of others who are forced to confront the challenges posed by these "invisible disabilities." For more information, see "About Karen Simmons" below

## About Chicken Soup for the Soul: Children with Special Needs

When Karen Simmons first approached Mark Victor Hansen in 2003 to propose the book idea of Chicken Soup for the Autism Spectrum Soul, little did she know that she would receive a phone call July 1<sup>st</sup> 2005 to co-author an even broader title: Chicken Soup for the Soul: Children with Special Needs, Stories of Love and Understanding for Those Who Care for Children with Special Needs. *"The impact this book will have towards acceptance and understanding of people with special needs will inspire and change the mindset of the world forever"*, says Karen.

A virtual alphabet soup of physical and mental disabilities is prevalent in today's world. From ADHD to visual impairments, from autism to paralysis, 20 percent of the U.S. population has some form of special need. Multiply that number by the families, friends, teachers, caregivers, and others whose daily lives are intertwined with theirs and it becomes obvious that most of us are in some way touched by someone with a mental or physical disability. "Chicken Soup for the Soul: Children with Special Needs: Stories of Love and Understanding for Those Who Care for Children with Disabilities are truly remarkable, inspiring stories of support, understanding and triumph that tug at the heartstrings of anyone who reads them. This powerful testament to the love and strength of families, the dedication and promise of

teachers and caregivers, offer tremendous resiliency and hope for all. Excellent as a gift book or parenting and teachers support resource.

Topics include: \*Parents who are adjusting with the unexpected \*Families that work together to help their loved one meet everyday challenges \*Teens who struggle with their needs, as they deal with physical changes, relationship issues, and their desire for independence \*Empowering friendships and life transitions. Told with humor and honesty, truly these stories are candid and personal and as unique and special as the children they celebrate

## About the Chicken Soup for the Soul Authors

Jack Canfield and Mark Victor Hansen are co-creators of the national bestselling Chicken Soup for the Soul series. Independently, they are widely sought-after motivational speakers. They live in California. Heather McNamara (Sylmar, CA) has been a freelance contributor to Chicken Soup and became editor-in-chief of Chicken Soup for the Soul Enterprises in 1996. She was one of the coauthors of Chicken Soup for the "Unsinkable Soul", Karen Simmons (Sherwood Park, AB Canada) is an author and mother to six children, two with special needs. She is also the founder of Autism Today, award winning conference and resource center shining new light on autism and other special needs worldwide.

## About Autism Today

The site's concept and direction germinated through Karen's extremely frustrating process associated with finding the best quality treatments and resources for her son with special needs. That's exactly why Karen launched Autism Today in 1998, so she could help people find the much needed resources and support they so desperately need. She sifted through an overwhelming amount of material, and compiled it to create an online newspaper of sorts. This way others could learn and make up their own treatment decisions whether they were treatment methodologies or medical information. They now had a choice.

***"I know how important early intervention and proper support are to the long-term lives of my children," says Karen. "I needed to find ways to tend to the needs of all my children without completing depleting our family's physical, emotional, and financial resources." Doing nothing was not an option, yet there were times when I was paralyzed by indecision. I needed to choose a course of action now, but I was exhausting myself trying to locate and evaluate pertinent information. While I was going through this maze, I realized I was also doing so on the behalf of all the other parents and children with affected by autism and related disorders."***

Autism Today is now the world's largest information and resource center all in one place for anyone affected by autism spectrum disorders. The site features top experts like Dr. Temple Grandin, Dr. Tony Attwood, Dr. Jed Baker, Dr. Stephen Shore, Dr. Andrew Wakefield, the list goes on. It also provides much needed support to millions of parents, caregivers, para-professionals, therapists, educators, community members and those on the autism spectrum through books, CD's, online education, audio seminars, tele-seminars, webinars, on site conferences and workshops and an interactive membership based community for blogs, podcasts and forums. The theories and practices that help the autism spectrum are being used in many other special needs areas such as Down syndrome, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Non Verbal Learning Disorder, Tourette Syndrome and Fetal Alcohol Syndrome.

**Autism Today, a free-membership site, offers the following:**

- Up-to-date medical information about autism and Aspergers Syndrome
- A public discussion forum where people can share stories, tips, ideas and blogs
- A library of articles containing thousands of pages on autism
- Poems, art, and stories by -- and for -- members of the autism community
- A store containing over 500 of books CD's and other on and offline materials
- A listing of conferences and events for the autism community
- The latest information on treatments and alternative therapies
- A database to locate physicians, psychologists, speech therapists, occupational and behavior therapists, schools, camps, programs, employment organizations, and recreation facilities that service the autistic community
- Free weekly newsletter with a summary of the latest news media articles on autism
- Enhanced membership available as well

**Autism Education Online™**

Is a program that brings world-renowned authorities into your home or office through your computer or Internet connection. Using the speakers PowerPoint presentation and their professionally recorded audio, we have developed a system for you to watch their presentation online at any time, anywhere. A sample of the topics covered include: managing feelings, making friends, language development, communication skills enhancement, understanding methodologies, advocacy for those with autism and Asperger syndrome, bridging to adulthood, and many others.

**Nearly 50 world-class experts are available on site, including:**

- **Dr. Temple Grandin**, who also suffers from autism, is a world-leading speaker on autism spectrum disorders.
- **Dr. Tony Attwood**, a world-renowned clinical psychologist, best-selling author, and expert on Aspergers Syndrome.
- **Dr. Stephen Shore**, a world leading author and speaker who also has Asperger syndrome
- **Dr. Lisa Lewis, PhD**, provides research that supports the use of dietary interventions for individuals with autism
- **Raun K. Kauffman**, diagnosed as severely and incurably autistic at age 18 months, he overcame his disorder and now has no signs of the disease.
- **Andrew S. Bondy, PhD**, has worked with children and adults with autism for 30 years and is the Director of the Delaware Autistic Program.
- **Arnold Miller, PH.D.**, a language and cognitive development specialist
- **Jackie Marquette**, a transition specialist and a family coach
- **Bart Stevens, ChLAP**, a chartered lifetime assistance planner
- **Dr. Darold Treffert**, a psychiatrist and savant syndrome expert

Karen also founded the KEEN Education Foundation, in 1996, enhancing key education for kids with special needs. The foundation seeks to help special needs children attain their fullest possible individual development and to secure social least restrictive inclusion within the community. As a speaker and organizer of conferences that are each attended by up to 750 people, coupled with her six books and CD's, and her interactions online, she has influenced no less than hundreds of thousands of people, who in turn impact many more.

## Recent news and relationships

**IPPY Award for The Official Autism 101 Manual 2007**

**Edmonton Journal Woman of Vision 2007, Edmonton, Alberta Canada**

**Global Television Woman of Vision 2007, Edmonton, Alberta Canada**

**Presentations:**

**Karen is available to the news media to discuss:**

***Chicken Soup for the Soul, Children with Special Needs*  
***lead author, co authored with Mark Victor Hansen and Jack Canfield*  
***and Heather McNamara*******

**...and other award-winnings books such as The Official Autism 101 Manual**

- Presentations since 2000
- Life As Little Rainmans Mom, ASA, Atlanta, GA, also Kananaskis, Special Needs Conference,
- Autism From The Heart, New Foundland, Nova Scotia
- May 2007 – The Will To Live, Edmonton, Alberta
- July 2007 – Resiliency, Research and Relationships, Cleveland, TN
- Sept 2007 – New York National Leadership Summit, Albany, NY
- Sept 2007 – Maple Leaf, Raise the Roof, Cleveland, OH
- Oct 2007 – Understanding Autism, Cranbrook, BC
- Fall 2007 - Other presentations throughout the year, Sep 2007 – The Gift of Inclusivity, Wachovia, Novartis, Merck, Lehman Bros, Deloitte & Touche. HSBC (Autism, Separating Fact from Fiction) and Prudential, Spring 2008
- *Upcoming conferences:*
  - Oct 2007 - Edmonton, AB
  - Nov 2007 - Ottawa, ON
  - Feb 2008 – Orlando, FL
  - Apr 2008 – Long Beach, CA
  - Aug 2008 – Oahu, HI
  - Oct 2008 – Cleveland, OH (Rainbow Babies)
- *Partnerships and Joint ventures*
  - Growth Architect
  - Self Growth
  - Exceptional Parent Magazine
  - US Autism & Asperger Assn
  - Long Beach Autism Society
  - Pace Place Inc.

# About Karen Simmons Media

## **Karen is available to the news media to discuss how:**

- Chicken Soup for the Soul: Children with Special Needs offers inspiration, understanding and triumph to everyone
- Once Size Model for anything is OBSOLETE in these times
- Resiliency is the key to greatest success in the special needs world and even corporate America!
- She launched Autism Today and offers help to the special needs community
- Relentless Persistence pays big time. Carrying the torch and never saying never
- Parents, siblings, and professionals can help those with autism
- Families can cope with the devastating impact autism can have on their children and turn it around
- Early diagnosis and intervention is crucial for those with autism
- The autism epidemic needs the attention of the Federal Government
- Popular myths surrounding autism must be discarded

Autism is a biological disorder of the brain, though the exact cause has not been determined. Three main areas of development are impaired: communication, social development, and the acquisition and use of language. There is no cure available at this time. But Karen believes a lot can be done to help those diagnosed with autism and to help decrease the severity of the disorder.

## **She will also speak about:**

- **The Gift You Are:** Telling groups of people with special needs all about the gift they have given us, making us better moms, members of society. Also celebrating the many teachers, parents and other caregivers for embracing our special children. A great big THANK YOU.
- **Shining New Light:** by celebrating the gifts...Kids and adults with autism bring to the world. They can truly survive and thrive
- **Advocate Peacefully:** To be an advocate for your child and seek the best possible treatment for them
- **The Will To Life:** How doing whatever it takes to do what you need to do in life. When no is absolutely not an option. Surrounded By Miracles.
- **The Largest Minority:** Social stigma associated with autism and special needs must be changed...now!
- **Autism From The Heart:** Nurturing and embracing the delicate soul within each person with ASD

- **Life as Little Rainmans Mom:** How to recognize and understand the differences your or others young child with autism have and to enhance their abilities
- **Spectral Relationships:**...Tips on how to enhance and create positive relationships for those with ASD

“I want to educate the public on possible causes, warning signs, potential treatments and therapies,” says Simmons. “There is an enormous impact this “invisible disability” has on families. If we can spare others of this – or lighten the burden of those living with it, we should do all that we can in this area.”

Autism has transformed from a barely diagnosed disorder to one that impacts 1 in 68 families. An estimated one in every 150 children is affected by autism, cases of which are being diagnosed 60 times more often now than two decades ago.

*“We envision a positive future for the many significant children and adults with autism in our lives, all beings of light and love regardless of where they sit on the spectrum,”* says Karen. *“Each individual is here to teach us to open our own heart and to be more understanding of others. That’s what my intention is...to bring out the stars in everyone – and to shine new light on special needs.”*

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## About Karen Simmons - Biography

Karen is the founder of Autism Today, the nation’s leading clearinghouse of information, resources, tools, and experts designed for parents, educators, doctors, therapists, and those who service the community of those afflicted with autism or Aspergers Syndrome. She is also the mother of six children, two with special needs and all of whom are special. Karen is also the author seven widely cherished titles including *“Little Rainman, Autism Through the Eyes of a Child, The Autism Experience, Stories of Hope and Love, Artism, Art By Those with Autism, Peace of Mind for Autism CD, Autism From The Soul, Surrounded By Miracles* and most recently, the 2007 Independent Publisher Book Gold Metal Award Winner for *“The Official Autism 101 Manual”* in the health, medicine and nutrition category, is a simplistic, yet comprehensive “How To Guide” for anyone faced with a new diagnosis of autism.

Now Karen is co-authoring a seventh title with Mark Victor Hansen, Jack Canfield and Heather McNamara to be released in the fall. Karen is also an active international presenter at autism conferences and workshops and also

brings in other top national experts and speakers for events that she hosts. These events attract up to 700 new and repeat attendees.

An unexpected diagnosis of autism in her two-year old son, threw Karen into an unknown world without a clue, in search of information and support to deal with the special needs of a child with autism. The journey was far from easy.

Determined to find solutions to further her son's development she delved relentlessly into the mysterious terrain of autism, accumulating knowledge, insight and information about the unusual world of people with autism.

Her experience as a mother of a child with autism inspired Karen to found the Keen Education Foundation in 1996. Their mission is to provide key education for kids with special needs through equipment, therapy, services and education. They seek to help special needs children to their fullest possible individual development and to find social inclusion.

After years of personal research, trial and error, discussions with other people creating pathways through the winding maze, Karen recognized a need for an "exceptional resource" to assist those individuals and families struggling in a world where easy answers were not readily available. The company is dedicated to making autism-related books, videos, tapes and educational resources materials easily available to parents and professionals.

Karen is active worldwide in promoting a deeper and more personal understanding of autism and Asperger's Syndrome and all types of special needs. Her main goal in life is to "shine new light" on all special needs individuals. She has been featured in international publications such as Woman's World Magazine, The Donna Seebo Show, The Vicki Gabereau Show and numerous radio talk shows and print media such as AWARE Talk Radio, Health Care News, Metro Network, ABC Radio, Powernomics, The Buffalo News, KYW-AM and WMYX-FM.

As well, Karen is an international presenter speaking to audiences on topics such as resiliency, her will to live and relentless persistence to Universities, Schools, Non-Profit Organizations, Hospital Groups, Parent groups in the special needs arena and beyond.

A former jeweler in Seattle Washington and Edmonton, Alberta, she is also related to U.S. President Woodrow Wilson and former member of the U.S. Air Force and is a dual citizen of both the United States and Canada.

Karen makes her home in Sherwood Park, Alberta Canada with her husband Jim Sicoli and their six children, Kimberly, Matthew, Christina, Jonathan, Stephen and Alexander where she rounds out her motherhood experience with her families own gifts and eccentricities. Needless to say, Karen is a busy woman!

## 20 Story Angles

The Largest Minority, How Special Needs individuals need to once and for all be truly included in our world especially for their many gifts they offer

There Is A Clearinghouse Of Information Available At [www.AutismToday.com](http://www.AutismToday.com)

A Look At How Parents Rise To The Occasion And Meet The Challenges Of Raising A Child With A Disability

Why Attitudes Need To Shift Toward Special Needs People—Time To Acknowledge Their Gifts, Strengths, And Unique Talents

What We Can Learn From Children With Special Needs

The Will To Live: One Woman's Powerful Story Of How She Cheated Death, Raised Two Special Needs Children, And Found Her Calling

Why Is There An Autism Epidemic? New Insights And The Latest Research On Potential Causes -- And Possible Interventions

Does Your Child Have Autism Or Aspergers Syndrome? How To Identify The Symptoms and warning signs And Get Diagnosed Now

What Are The Myths And Misconceptions The Public And Even Professionals/Doctors, Teachers, Therapist Have About Autism?

The Teen Years With Autism: How To Meet The Challenges

Will Your Special Needs Child Be Able To Live As An Independent Adult?

How Do You Raise A Mixed Family Of So Called "Normal" And Special Needs Children?

Spotlight On Children Who Rise Above Their Circumstances And Show How Those Affected With Autism Can Surprise Us

How Those Living The Autism Experience See Life's Odyssey

Why Early Diagnosis/Intervention Is Crucial When It Comes To Autism—How To Identify A Potential Problem Child

No Longer In Denial: Family And Friends Of Autistic Children Are Out In The Open And Not Hiding With Embarrassment

How The Autistic Are Artistic

Friend Or Foe: How We Should Treat And Communicate With The Members Of The Special Needs Community

What Else Should The Federal Government Do As It Relates To Autism?

Humor Is Healing: How To See The Lighter Side Of Autism

Celebrating Differences: Appreciating The Gifts And Talents Of People with Autism

Karen Simmons

Q & A

**Karen, as a parent of six children, how do you balance your time and care for your two special needs children and the four normal children?**

Oh my God, that's the single, biggest challenge I face, especially since my husband works 24-7. I guess I can say that I don't over-do the mothering role like many parents do. There's no "white glove test" in my house. The older kids help out with the younger, which helps tremendously. I also wholly believe in seeing ALL my children as "able" and to treat them just like anyone else. The special needs ones can't use their differences as an excuse. Also, letting go of "perfection" as a model of success is most important. It's more important to enjoy the journey!

**As the parent of a child with autism, what words of encouragement and guidance can you offer parents and caregivers of children with special needs?** Enjoy the brilliance your child brings to the world regardless of how hard it may be to find at times. We can always choose how we want to feel about any given situation, so a parent can say "I see peace instead of this." I'm not saying it's easy to take this attitude, but it certainly can be done. This way the parent can step out of the victim role and walk calmly into the role of empowerment to do whatever it takes to make everyone's life better. I believe it's true that what you focus on expands, so by paying attention to the strengths and positive attributes these special people possess, it will enable them to feel good about themselves and perhaps develop life-skills that will enhance their lives and the lives of others. Also its important to get to know other parents with special needs children. No one needs to do this alone and parents can share their stories of humor and the challenges while supporting each other during trying times.

**What are the five myths many of us have about children with autism?**

1. That people with autism are retarded
2. That people with autism can't have relationships and get married, have jobs and go on to live normal lives.
3. That people with autism don't have any feelings and emotions
4. That "refrigerator moms" cause autism
5. That autism can't get better

**What's the difference between autism and Aspergers Syndrome?** There are many different views even amongst the professionals in the field on this subject. Typical autism, rather than high-functioning autism, is associated with the lack of language skills, severe behavior, and the inability to function with their peers. What is more difficult to differentiate is the high-functioning autism and Aspergers. According to the DSM4, which lists the diagnostic criteria for autism, a person with high-functioning autism has significant language delays and adaptive skills when compared to the development of their "so called" normal peers. This diagnostic tool is rapidly being challenged and by the time the DSM5 is completed it will most certainly be a completely new and different set of criteria.

**How would you advise the professional community of doctors, therapists, and educators to change their approach in how they treat and view children with autism?** First I would make sure they understand exactly what the autism spectrum is and how to properly recognize and diagnose it. It is appalling in this day and age to have professionals still tell parents to come back in a year after diagnosing a young child with autism without providing intervention or direction. Also professionals have been diagnosing children incorrectly in order to obtain maximum funding, which can skew the figures for autism. I would also encourage them to be more open-minded as far as using biomedical interventions such as nutritional considerations and other types of alternative therapies when talking to parents of newly diagnosed children with autism. They need to understand the importance of early intervention in the life of the child so they can advocate and prescribe appropriate medical and non-medical interventions for the child.

**What should a parent keep in mind when it comes to helping the siblings of a special needs child to understand the limits—as well as the feelings—of their less-able brother or sister?** In real estate, it's about location. In special needs, it's about communication, because when the special needs child has difficulty communicating their thoughts, ideas and feelings, they become quite frustrated, which can result in a behavioral meltdown. This can lead to ridicule and they can become targets for bullying. What is most important is that the siblings realize that their special needs brother or sister isn't always less abled, rather, they are differently abled. For example we focused on Jonathan reading to his older brother's grade 4 class when he was 4 years old, which was very good for his self-esteem and their relationship as brothers. Matt was very proud of his

brother. It is difficult at times for siblings to see that there are actual limitations, especially in the case of an invisible disability like autism or ADHD. You must clearly explain, as far as the sibling is capable of understanding, what the disability is and what the biggest challenges are in minute detail. Role-model appropriate interactions when possible, and at the same time, teach both the special needs child and the sibling to treat each other like any other human being, with respect. They must defend their special needs sibling to the bitter end especially when they are bullied.

**What are the symptoms of autism and when do they develop?** Autism can be detected in children as young as six months but is not usually recognized until around the age of two. Some of the earliest signs include a certain gaze they have and towards people while lying in their crib. They may be fascinated by a swirling fan staring at it as if they're hypnotized. When the child is around 3 to 5 years old, typical signs of autism include spinning in circles, flapping their hands in the air, lining objects up on the floor, watching the same movie over and over, displaying an apparent lack of fear in dangerous situations and so on.

**How is an autistic person treated, medically?** There is really nothing medically wrong with people just because they have autism since it is a neurological difference in the brain's wiring. However, many people with autism have gastrointestinal disturbances that should be looked into because if they go undetected they may result in behavioral, interactive and learning difficulties. Sometimes medications are prescribed for children so they can attend better during school and at home. Many people have also had success using vitamins and nutritional therapy in treating their child's autism.

**What causes autism and how can we reverse the epidemic that has seen us go from 1 in 10,000 in 1985 to 1 in 166 in 2005 being diagnosed with autism?** The most current research suggests a probable genetic factor, which in some children can be triggered by a number of possible factors such as vaccines, heavy metal toxicity and other prenatal conditions occurring prior to birth. Most professionals in the field believe you can't reverse autism but you can implement certain treatments and methodologies that will help the child cope and overcome many characteristics of autism. There are however, some people who believe autism can be cured, though the jury is still out on this one.

**How did you find the resources—time, strength and money—to create Autism Today?** Slow and steady wins the race! It evolved over time starting out like all other sites, one member at a time while working from my home. I created it because when my son was diagnosed, it was close to impossible to find what I needed, so when I did carve a pathway I didn't want it to be just for one child. I wanted it to be for every child. So far, all the revenue I have generated has gone right back into the Website to make it even better for the members and supporters. Time, well since my mission is also my passion, it seems to flow right into my life. I find the time to work

on it and time finds me. My thinking of the ideas to implement happens when I'm driving in the car or even when I'm in the shower. I just keep a stack of post-it notes handy to write down the ideas as they pop into my head. Strength, well it isn't always easy. Sometimes I have to escape from all the distractions of my life to build up my strength just to think. I must always ascertain what my priority is and stick with it. Most importantly, as long as I hold my vision on what I am doing, it unfolds as it should, synchronistically leading me down a pathway to what the parents, professionals, people with autism, and educators truly need and want.

**Karen, you nearly died giving birth to one of your children. How did that event change your perspective on life?** Until I went through that experience following the birth of my sixth child, I was working in the gemology/jewelry field. My focus was selling jewelry and while I was happy doing what I was doing, I didn't feel like I had a true mission and purpose for my life aside from my children and family. After I recovered, I was drawn to become the founder of a non-profit organization, write books, host conferences and of course, creating Autism Today. The experience helped me see the true meaning and value of life, which is to live fully and completely, learn as much as you can, help others along the way, and leave a legacy. My father just passed away and though he will be remembered by some, the effect of his life will not have an impact on humanity. My great Uncle, George Lacy, was one of the three people who donated the granite to the Texas State Capitol in Austin. I know how he will be remembered for many years to come.

**Is the Federal Government doing enough to support the families with special needs children? What can we do better or differently?** There is a tremendous lack of interest and resources allocated through the government and other agencies towards a solution. This includes actively determining the cause of autism and implementing adequate research towards curative and helpful measures. The US Government will happily spend 1.9 billion dollars for a single Trident nuclear submarine in a fleet of around fifty, yet is only spending 66 million on the entire special education area, which includes special teachers, training and proper equipment and supports. Much needs to be done in this area.

**Let's face it; most people don't want to be you. They pray to have normal, healthy children and to avoid what you've had to go through. But now that you have lived through raising children with special needs, can you help explain to us how you are able to do it?** Believe me, I prayed for healthy children too! When I first discovered the challenges I would face and that my 2 special needs children would face, I was devastated. That was a turning point in my life because at that point I could have chosen to deny there was anything wrong, or feel victimized by the situation, so I chose to embrace the difficulty and make the commitment to do whatever it took to help my children and others along the way. I knew that others were facing similar problems and maybe they didn't have the support or resources

to help their children so I decided to commit to helping them as much as I could along the way.

**You also founded KEEN—Key Enrichment of Exceptional Needs.**

**What is that?** It is a non-profit organization with the following mission: *"to provide key education for kids with special needs."* Every day, millions of people worldwide are diagnosed with some sort of special need. These special needs could be autism, Down syndrome, cerebral palsy or Tourette's syndrome. Some argue that the recent increase in diagnosis is due to improved technology, higher medical awareness, improper diagnosis and environmental conditions. It's so easy to think of the label and the diagnosis rather than the real person who is struggling to contend with it. These individuals have real special needs and they face real daily struggles. Our goal is to enhance the education and life experience of these special needs individuals and their guardians where funding is otherwise not available. The outcome is to empower these individuals to become productive, independent, happy and fulfilled members of society, which will dramatically decrease the tremendous cost of their care to society while improving the quality of their lives.

**You speak of how we should celebrate the gifts of those who are different. How do you seek out the good, the creative, and the unique in others?**

Everyone who spends time with anyone can certainly find something good that they do. No matter how small it is you can focus on it and give positive reinforcement for it. Maybe it's playing a song on the piano or coloring a pretty picture or writing a poem. When I sent out an invitation for artwork submissions for my Artism book, we were inundated with artwork from people on the spectrum from around the globe. I am writing an E-Book called Autism 101. To me, the most important section in this E-Book are the comments from those with autism, which raise their self-esteem as we are talking with them, not about them. I am also developing a site for people on the ASD Spectrum called ASDCommunity.com. By doing this, we embrace people for who they are and the gifts they bring to the world.

**You also use humor as a form of coping and healing. How do you help others lighten up?**

I tell them not to take life so seriously. Watch sitcoms instead of scary movies! I share some of the funny ways Jonathan perceives the world and some of the funny things he's done. People with autism are literal thinkers, which make some of the comments they make and the perceptions they have quite funny. Like, why do we toast the bride, mom? There's a book by Wayne Gilpin called Laughing and Loving with Autism, which shares my sense of humor. It's filled with funny stories parents tell about their children and is a must-read for parents of children with special needs.

**What is it like to have autism? How do they see the world and what are their typical limitations?**

It depends on the "autie" as Stephen Shore, a dear friend of mine who is also a person with Aspergers Syndrome, would say. They perceive the world differently than we do. Stephen bases this on his

own life experiences. Of course I ask him how he knows he's different than me and he's stumped since he is also a literal thinker. People with autism vary across the autism spectrum more than the so called "neurotypicals" which is a term autistic people made up to describe us, the so called "normal" people. They have a tendency to become very focused on their interests, which allow them to hone their skills. Perhaps some of the most brilliant minds in the world had a form of autism like Albert Einstein, Marie Curie, Carl Sagan, and many more.

**What are the six things society should keep in mind in how it views, interacts with, and helps those with special needs?** 1. Inclusion for all people, regardless of their strengths and weaknesses is important. 2. It takes a community to raise a special needs child. 3. Focus on the positives they possess and help their light shine. 4. Treat them like regular people as much as is possible, not in a degrading manner. 5. Be careful not to overprotect or mollycoddle them. 6. Don't favor them simply treat them with respect.

## The Books/CDs of Karen Simmons

### ***Little Rainman: Autism Through The Eyes Of A Child***

A poignant story of autism told through the eyes of a child with autism—Karen Simmons' young son, Jonathan. This book of pictures serves as an illustration of what autism really is like for someone living with it. The pictures reveal a true portrait of how an autistic child thinks visually and perceives his world.

### ***Artism: Art By Those With Autism***

It is designed not only to inspire those who are on the autism spectrum, but all of its readers to share our uncommon experiences and our unique gifts with the world. It is a model designed to shed new light onto the all-too-often misunderstood world of autism. In this first-of-its-kind art collection,

we present the mind's eye view of individuals with autism from around the world, from ages 4 to 53. Their colorful, brilliant, often lonely worlds come to life in diverse portraits; elegant line drawings, muted watercolors, vibrant temperas, and confident acrylics.

***The Autism Experience: Stories Of Hope And Love***

This award-winning anthology is a compilation of stories, articles, and poems with universal appeal, containing messages of hope and love, from parents and siblings of autistic children, professionals who treat and counsel the autistic, and those afflicted with autism. Sharing these inspirational stories offers a positive base of compassion and understanding.

***Autism From The Soul:***

A CD to help people discover the uniqueness and joy of having a person with autism in their lives with amazing true life stories from both a mother's perspective as well as an adult with autism. Also helps people understand some of the signs, symptoms and challenges those with autism have

***Surrounded By Miracles***

This is the story of a woman who overcame great odds of survival. It's a story told by the loved ones of Karen Summons, retelling her near-death experience in an emotional and uplifting manner. Following the birth of her sixth child, Simmons almost died, and was given less than a one percent chance to live. She was even given her last rites. The hospital staff referred to her at the "Miracle Lady."

***Peace of Mind For Autism (CD)***

A series of positive affirmations is provided for parents, teachers and professionals caring for those with autism, as well as for autistic people. It raises self-esteem and provides peace and tranquility in trying situations. It also includes a 22-minute relaxing meditation.

***The Official Autism 101 Manual)***

Award winning simplistic, yet comprehensive summary of what 44 top experts in the field explain autism and what to do about it so the novice can understand and respond. It's a great beginning tool for parents, professionals, educators, community members and those with ASD.

***Chicken Soup for the Soul: Children with Special Needs***

A virtual alphabet soup of physical and mental disabilities is prevalent in today's world. From ADHD to visual impairments, from autism to paralysis, 20 percent of the U.S. population has some form of special need. Multiply that number by the families, friends, teachers, caregivers, and others whose daily lives are intertwined with theirs and it becomes obvious that most of us are in some way touched by someone with a mental or physical disability.

"Chicken Soup for the Soul: Children with Special Needs: Stories of Love and Understanding for Those Who Care for Children with Disabilities are truly remarkable, inspiring stories of support, understanding and triumph that tug at the heartstrings of anyone who reads them. This powerful testament to the love and strength of families, the dedication and promise of teachers and caregivers, offer tremendous resiliency and hope for all. Excellent as a gift book or parenting and teachers support resource. Truly these stories are candid and personal and as unique and special as the children they celebrate

## Autism Facts & Stats

- As often as 1 in 150 babies develop into children with autism
- A decade ago only 1 in 2,500 were diagnosed with autism. It was 1 in 10,000 in the early 80's. The disorder was first recognized in 1943.
- 1.5 million Americans have autism.
- As many as 4 million people could have autism by 2015.
- It is the fastest growing developmental disability.
- People with autism account for nearly one-fourth of the 6.2 million special needs Americans.
- 1 in 68 families are impacted by autism.
- The National Institute of Health will spend 102 million dollars in 2005 on autism research – a five-fold increase in six years.
- Growth comparisons during the 1990's:
  - U.S. population increase: 13%
  - Disabilities increase: 16%
  - Autism increase: 172%
- \$90 billion annual cost to care for those with autism
- 90% of costs are in adult services
- Cost of lifelong care can be reduced by 2/3 with early diagnosis and intervention
- In 8 years, the annual cost will be over \$200 billion annually

- People with autism usually appear outwardly normal, which has led it to be known as the “invisible disability.”
- Autism can transform a loving toddler into a detached and uncommunicative child. Researchers aren’t sure of its causes and say there is no cure. And the number of children with autism continues to rise dramatically.
- No one is sure what causes autism but research seems to suggest that it is caused by both genetic and environmental factors. There is even talk of environmental toxins and preservatives in vaccines may play a part.

### **What Is Autism?**

Autism is a lifelong developmental disorder affecting the way a person communicates and related to people around them. Autism has only been recognized since 1943. Another related condition is Aspergers Syndrome.

Autism occurs in about one of every 166 births. Two decades ago it was one in 10,000. Ten years ago it was 1 in 2,000. Symptoms usually begin to show when these children are between 12 and 30 months. Symptoms may change over the years and all children, including children with autism, learn as they grow.

Those with autism are often also mentally handicapped, which makes the disorder much more challenging for them. Many experience minor lack of muscle coordination.

People with autism are not physically disabled and “look” just like anybody without the disability. Due to this invisible nature it can be much harder to create awareness and understanding of the condition. People with autism can often have accompanying learning disabilities but everyone with the condition shares a difficulty in making sense of the world.

Reality to an autistic person is a confusing, interacting mass of events, people, places, sounds and sights. There seems to be no clear boundaries, order of meaning to anything. A large part of life is spent just trying to work out the pattern behind everything.

### **What Is Aspergers Syndrome?**

As soon as we meet a person we make all sorts of judgments. Just by looking we can often guess their age or status, and by the expression on their face or the tone of their voice we can tell immediately whether they are happy, angry or sad and so respond accordingly.

But not everyone does this naturally. People with Aspergers Syndrome find it difficult to read the signals which most of us take for granted. As a result they find it hard to communicate and interact with others.

Aspergers Syndrome is a form of autism, a disability that affects the way a person communicates and relates to others. A number of the traits of autism are common to Aspergers Syndrome including:

- Difficulty in communicating
- Difficulty in social relationships
- A lack of imagination and creative play

However, people with Aspergers Syndrome usually have fewer problems with language than those with autism, often speaking fluently though their words can sometimes sound formal or stilted. People with Aspergers Syndrome also do not have the accompanying learning disabilities often associated with autism. In fact, people with Aspergers are often of average or above average intelligence.

Because of this many children with Aspergers Syndrome enter mainstream school and, with the right support and encouragement, can make good progress and go on to further education and employment.

### **Characteristics Of Autism**

#### **You may know a child with autism....**

- Do they spin around and around?
- Is their speech repetitive, like an echo?
- Are they attracted to shows like Wheel of Fortune or Jeopardy?
- Do they like to watch the same movies over and over again?
- Are they fascinated with numbers and letters?
- Do they seem unafraid of things that they should be afraid of?
- Is it hard for them to make eye contact?
- Do they shun away from being touched?

#### **Language:**

Some never learn to use spoken language, while others will only learn the basic language specific to their needs. A child may mostly repeat what he hears (echolalia). Others develop advanced speech, but have problems if in their ability to express feelings or ideas, or in knowing the right way or time to say things.

#### **Social:**

The actions of others are confusing to these children and they may withdraw from social interactions. Many have difficulty with interactive play. They may

have difficulty picking up social clues so their action may not be appropriate for the situation.

**Activities:**

With their difficulty understanding abstract ideas, these children usually prefer and learn best through concrete activities. Some show little imaginative play, some have imaginative play, but it tends to follow set themes or interests. Many prefer to repeat the same activities over and over. The child may even “withdraw into himself”, engaging in repetitive self-stimulation such as rocking or rhythmic moving of the hands. These children often seek out the security of routines, and can become very dependent on them. They may avoid new experiences or situations.

**Perceptions:**

It appears from both the observations of others and by first person accounts that these children often experience perceptions differently. Sights, sounds, textures that we easily accept can cause anxiety and even rage in a child. One child, for example, said that red hurt his eyes. Another flew into a rage when she felt the “prickle” of wool. They may find human contact stressful at times.

**Emotion:**

Difficulties in understanding and articulating their own emotions, or those of others, may cause your child’s response in some situation to appear to be inappropriate. Emotional outbursts are common and it may be difficult for them to regain control. These outbursts may result in a child trying to hurt themselves or others.

## **Characteristics Of Aspergers Syndrome**

Aspergers Syndrome shares many of the same characteristics as autism. The key characteristics are:

**Difficulty With Social Relationships**

Unlike people with ‘classic’ autism, who often appear to be withdrawn and uninterested in the world around them, many people with Asperger syndrome try hard to be sociable and do not dislike human contact. However, they still find it hard to understand non-verbal signals, including facial expressions.

**Difficulty With Communication**

People with Asperger syndrome may speak very fluently but they may not take much notice of the reaction of people listening to them; they may talk on and on regardless of the listener’s interest or may appear insensitive to their feelings.

Despite having good language skills, people with Aspergers Syndrome may sound over-precise or over-literal-jokes can cause problems as can exaggerate language and metaphors; for example, a person with Aspergers Syndrome may be confused or frightened by a statement like 'she but my head off'.

### **Lack Of Imagination**

While they often excel at learning facts and figures, people with Aspergers Syndrome find it hard to think in abstract ways. This can cause problems for children in school where they may have difficulty with certain subjects, such as literature or religious studies.

### **Special Interests**

People with Aspergers Syndrome often develop an almost obsessive interest in a hobby or collection. Usually their interest involves arranging or memorizing facts about a specialist subject, such as train timetables, Derby winners, or the dimensions of cathedrals.

### **Love Of Routines**

For people with Aspergers Syndrome any unexpected change in routine can be upsetting. Young children may impose their own routines, such as insisting on always walking the same route to school. At school, sudden changes, such as an alteration to the timetable, may upset them. People with Aspergers Syndrome often prefer to order their day according to a set pattern. If they work set hours then any unexpected delay, such as a traffic hold-up, can make them anxious or upset.

## **Testimonials for Karen Simmons**

“*Little Rainman* shows that autism can be seen and understood by everyone. After reading this book full of miraculous pictures, I feel greater love, compassion and understanding of a situation that somehow touches us all sooner or later.” -- **Mark Victor Hansen, Co-Creator, #1 New York Times best-selling *Chicken Soup for the Soul* series**

“Autism demonstrates the genius in every human soul. This book is an absolutely genius idea!” -- **Robert G. Allen, Author of *Multiple Streams of Income and Nothing Down*, Co-Author of *The One Minute Millionaire***

“These pictures are some of the best illustrations of what autism is. They give the reader a really good picture of how a child with autism thinks. They think with pictures in their head. I use them in my presentation and lectures

to demonstrate visual thinking process.” -- **Temple Grandin, Autistic Adult, Presenter, and Author of *Thinking In Pictures***

“Thank you for allowing us to share your stories with our readers. It was one of the most touching and unforgettable I have ever worked on.”  
-- **Kathy Fitzpatrick, Writer for Woman’s World Magazine**

“There are no words to express my appreciation for your creativity. I just know it is going to help many, many people. I spent two years as a fellow in child psychiatry seeing only autistic children so you can see I have great compassion for the challengers in your life.....and how out of those challenges you are helping others.” -- **Gerald Jampolsky, MD, Author of the best-selling *Love Is Letting Go Of Fear***

“*Little Rainman* gives a more simplistic, yet comprehensive explanation of this strange disorder than any other book we have seen. Written through the eyes of her child, Karen gives the reader a unique view of autism that explains the challenge in a very ‘user friendly’ manner.” -- **R. Wayne Gilpin, President Future Horizons, Inc.**

"Our interview with Karen was intense, inspiring and educational all at the same time. For those wanting to learn what autism is all about from the mother of an autistic child, you should book Karen Simmons." **Claude "Hoot" Hooten, News/Talk 1240 KSMA, Clear Channel Central Coast, Santa Maria, California**

"Karen Simmons was a fantastic guest with so much information for families dealing with Autism. Karen is a great guest and her website is a fantastic tool for Autism Awareness and Resources!" - **Shawn Michaels Ocean County, Breakfast Show 92.7 WOBFM, Toms River, New Jersey**

Talking with Karen Simmons was a joy. She is a fountain of information and inspiration as she knows the special needs of our very special children. Karen Simmons of AUTISM TODAY has the answers to the questions we need. **John Maer, Metro Networks News, Indianapolis.**

Karen is a great interview and a tireless advocate for families dealing with autism! She is an inspiration for parents everywhere who have shown that great ideas and big things are often born out of our frustration. If you're looking for Autism information, go to her website. If you're looking for a great show segment or article, book her NOW! **Tonya J. Powers, News radio 600 WREC**