



VAST SPECTRUM

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Involvement in the complicated topic of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) has become a way of life for Echuca resident Linke Smedts-Kreskas. Linke first became involved with the neurological impairment condition ASD about 10 years ago through her son Bayley, now 11. At the time, little was understood about autism, which was thought to occur in about one of every 10,000 people. These days, the figure is more like one in 166 or 100, with the US figure one in 66.

Linke's interest led her to start researching the condition – something which she has continued extensively over the years. When Bayley was three, the family became part of a trial Monash University research program, now called ACT NOW, which provided strategies for managing the condition and followed up with assessments.

Since then, Linke has completed training in various aspects of ASD, including behaviour therapy, a form of gesture-based sign language and using pictures as a communication tool. She played a key role in establishing the parent support group SPOCAAS (Supporting Parents of Children with Autism and Asperger's Syndrome) which has about 150 families on its contact list. As SPOCAAS co-ordinator, Linke has worked as a volunteer with Echuca-Moama's Community Living and Respite Services (CLRS) since November 2008. She also holds the paid position of project manager for Respite Loddon-Mallee, an online service, and recently completed certificate IV in disability work.

The latest step in Linke's journey to help families is her appointment to the new position of ASD case consultant practitioner for the Loddon Mallee region. The role will see her working full-time from CLRS' new office in Percy St, with travel to other parts of the region, including Mildura and Bendigo and southern parts of the region. The Department of Human Services selected CLRS to run the project for 12 months.

Linke's role is to work with case managers for people with disabilities. She will provide the case managers with secondary consultancy, such as information and referrals specific to ASD, backing up their training. The position is part of Victoria's autism plan and is supported by Carer Support Services and Autism Victoria.

As well as working with case managers on a face-to-face basis, Linke will provide consultation through phone and video conferences, emails, network meetings and an interactive website. "My role will be to provide secondary consultation to case managers to assist them in understanding the individual nature of autism spectrum disorders," Linke said.

"The autism spectrum is vast. It's an extremely individual condition. I learned over the years that other people's children were very different to what my son was like." Linke said her consultancy position would be a huge help to families.

"Through my new role I will be conducting parent/carer workshops in the regions if they are needed," she said. "I will make contact with existing support groups in the region to strengthen these networks where needed. Families will also have access to most areas of the website that will have a Loddon Mallee Focus. And I will still be the co-ordinator of SPOCAAS. It's all about management and accessing services to help with the management of the individual," she said.

For information, visit www.clrsasd.org.au

By Christine Chudley

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