



Elkan today.



Elkan enjoying the 'steppy blocks', while improving his balance and bilateral coordination.



Elkan working on his letters through a puzzle.

Mindstretch Accepted my Son and Me

My journey with my son Elkan started long before he was diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder at age four and a half. The late diagnosis contributed to our challenges, but our major struggles started after we moved from Maitland to Brooklyn and had to take Elkan out of his old crèche, where he was loved by teachers and friends.

It took an entire year to find a new crèche that would take him in. Then I was called 30 minutes after dropping him off on the first day and was told he was lost. They could not find him. As a parent of a non-verbal child, you ask yourself how could this happen — and just when you think you have found a place for your child.

After we found Elkan, we vowed not to take him back. It was a decision that led to many rejections from schools saying how unsuitable my son was for their facilities. One place after the next turned him down — like we chose this life. I thought how can they not see how great this boy is? How can they not give him a chance?

We got more and more anxious with every school we visited. We were a nervous family praying for a breakthrough. Then we found Mindstretch. When Jennifer told us they would take Elkan, we breathed with relief, and we knew we had found the perfect place after his first happy week.

Then, looking at his peers, I worried if he would ever catch up and talk like they do. I was amazed at how much he progressed at Mindstretch, and also amazed by the friendliness of the staff and other parents.

Mindstretch didn't just accept my son, they accepted me. The school contributed a lot to getting Elkan ready for Alpha School, where he is currently in his first year.

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Mindstretch Preschool gave Elkan words and independence. Thank you Jennifer and staff.

Joy



Not Such a Crazy Idea

The HANDLE® Institute's Crazy Straw Method is simple and fun for children, and beneficial too. We often use it at Mindstretch Preschool.

The approach is based on the importance of sucking for human development, including:

- ✓ **For inter-hemispheric integration:** By using both sides of the mouth and cheeks, sucking stimulates the two brain hemispheres in a synchronised way. Good inter-hemispheric integration is key for language processing and for balancing impulse and reason, among other abilities.
- ✓ **For speech:** Improving tongue and lip control and steady breathing patterns helps speech.
- ✓ **For auditory focus:** Sucking impacts the ear in several ways. For example, by stimulating facial nerves, sucking stimulates the middle ear structures.
- ✓ **For sphincter control:** When a sphincter muscle — any ring-like muscle surrounding and able to contract or close a bodily passage such as the lips — is strengthened, all others in the body are strengthened as well, including those affecting the bowel, bladder and oesophagus.

The Crazy Straw Method just needs the straw and a glass of water (the straws can usually be found in the party section at Pick n Pay supermarkets). The twists and turns of the crazy straw, together with the straw's small diameter, increase the resistance to sucking. If a child cannot manage it, start with a normal straw with a wider diameter and a thicker liquid such as a smoothie. It's simple to do. Here's how:

- ✓ Hold the straw in the centre of the mouth and sip and swallow in a regular pattern.
- ✓ Preferably do this with the eyes closed as it promotes binocularity. However, anyone with a tendency to squint should look at a distant object while drinking.
- ✓ Wash and rinse the straw well after each use.

Assisting Adults with Autism

By Debbie Flugel of *The Academy for Adults with Autism*

The incidence of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) was 1:68 as of 2014. There are only 5 Government ASD-specific schools in South Africa, which can accommodate fewer than 2,000 of the over 400,000 estimated children with ASD. Independent schools such as Mindstretch Preschool help fill this gap, but still more spaces are needed.

The situation for adults with autism is even more dire, with very few homes and facilities available. *The Academy for Adults with Autism* (a registered non-profit and public benefit organisation) was started in 2007 to address this need.

Adults severely impacted by autism require constant supervision. Often, they are not accepted into protective workshops and residential care facilities due to their specific needs, in particular those related to sensory sensitivities and communication difficulties. The affected person's emotional support, physical care and mental stimulation become the sole responsibility of the family. This can easily become unmanageable.

The Academy's services include an Enrichment Centre and Residential Home. We also provide information, advice and emotional support available via a phone or email 'helpline'.

Enrichment Centre

The Enrichment Centre located in Muizenberg offers a safe and supportive environment for adults and school leavers with ASD and other severe learning difficulties to attend on weekdays.

The high satisfaction and continued skills acquisition of those at the Centre demonstrate that a therapeutic environment with carefully tailored routines and programs can maintain and build on gains made in childhood.



We prioritise meaningful interaction and communication between our staff and clients, and between our clients themselves.

Meanwhile, valuable family relationships are also preserved.

We continually refine our best practices. For example, we use specialised 'visual schedules' to explain a task, rather than relying on the verbal instruction our clients struggle with. In this way, we speed up understanding and avoid frustration on both sides. We also invest in ongoing training. For example, our staff have received Mindstretch training in HANDLE® (Holistic Approach to Neuro-Development & Learning Efficiency).

Residential Home

The Academy's newest initiative *Vineyard Place* is a suburban group home for adults with ASD and other special needs and learning challenges. This developing project aims to house up to eight adults. We invite anyone interested to contact The Academy for more information.

For more information on The Academy, Enrichment Centre and Group Home, go to: www.adultswithautism.org.za

Or contact Debbie on 071 933 0535

I hope you have enjoyed issue 7 of the Mindstretch Newsletter, and thank you to Joy and Debbie for their contributions.

It has been another happy, event-filled quarter at Mindstretch. Some highlights include:

- ◆ Our annual Grade R class visit to Pinelands library, always enjoyed by the children as they learn the value of books, how to care for them, and get to choose their own book to read.
- ◆ Numerous upgrades, including laying a new lawn and investing in educational tools, puzzles, games and equipment for all classes. Both our premises have brand new balance and pedal bikes.
- ◆ We continue to work closely with Speak2me speech therapists, reinforcing their teachings on a daily basis in the classrooms. Our therapist–teacher–parent collaboration has proven highly effective. We are delighted and grateful to have recently been awarded a grant to add a dedicated speech room.
- ◆ Building on the success of our training series and speaking events — most recently our HANDLE Introductory Seminar in Johannesburg and our Educators' Workshop for the American International School in Cape Town — we are launching a Spring Expert Lecture Series, to be held at the Pinelands Library on Saturday mornings. Please watch our website and facebook pages for more information. We will be adding to the following topics already confirmed:
 - **Sep 3 • Integrating for Learning Success**
 - **Sep 17 • Nutrition Fundamentals**
 - **Nov 5 • Promoting Verbal Expressive Language**

With love and thanks, Jennifer
Mindstretch Founder and Preschool Principal



We Welcome Feedback and Subscriptions

- Email jen@mindstretch.co.za with comments or suggestions for the newsletter, and please follow us on Facebook to receive regular news updates (our page is titled 'Mindstretch Preschool, Training and Therapy').
- To receive the newsletter, please subscribe online at www.mindstretch.co.za/newsletter.