

# insights

## Find your tribe

by Kate Johnson



Earlier this week, I took my son to his Paediatrician. Sitting in that room instantly brought back memories of times when the appointments were not so rosy. I can remember clearly taking him in during crisis times and getting that all too familiar pit in the stomach and fearing the unknown for him. As we sat there, him reading an old Guinness World Record book and absorbing the information and me, quietly watching him, I reflected on the journey and wondered what we would be facing in this appointment.

That first time when we entered this office, it felt lonely. Not the space itself, but the magnitude of supporting our child and having no one in our world who understood. As a parent, we can sometimes (well, a lot of the time!) be hanging on for dear life and hoping we are doing the best job of raising our child. What I have found has changed between our first appointment and now is that I no longer feel like I am navigating this parenting journey without support.

Finding your tribe means connecting with others who are loving and leading their children on the Autism Spectrum and who welcome your differences with open arms. It is beautifully refreshing to not be confronted with awkward looks or judgemental glances. Your tribe is the soft place to land when life gets crazy or you feel like you are in over your head. They are a lovely place of comfort after challenging student support group meetings or difficult decisions. Parenting a child with special needs brings a wealth of information and resource ideas. Your tribe can be a source of ideas and strategies from a lived experience. For example, they can share their therapy experiences, which means you can learn from their ideas regarding who to access in your region instead of sitting on waiting lists for professionals whom you have no background on.

You might be reading this and have amazing friends, yet still battle with the differences in the parenting journey. I would encourage you to find a tribe. Be part of a community where you are heard, valued and not judged. How do you find a tribe?

### **Speak to your Assistant Principal**

Your Assistant Principal or Welfare Coordinator should have contacts with a local support service or council representative who will know the groups operating in your region. This is a good place to start!

### **Connect Online**

There are so many online Facebook groups in local areas that start from a proactive parent seeing a need. Or, connect with a bigger state-based group and put the call out for local Carers. The great thing about small online groups is that the 'tribe vibe' remains and can provide support, especially if you can't attend groups, go to work or

have a busy therapy schedule. Local online groups can also then put out the call to do dinners and catch ups periodically, which means you can have the joy of face to face communication over dinner!

## **Start your own**

No groups in your region? Ask your school whether they would be open to starting their own. Gather the parents from your school, meet for a cuppa and chat through the joys and the challenges of parenting. The school can provide the room and you can be part of a supportive and embracing tribe. Having a core group of parents who parent children with Autism may also support the creation of relationships between families, which can be wonderful if your beautiful young person doesn't have many peers to play with at lunch time.

When I walked out of that Paediatrician appointment, I checked my phone. Messages checking how it went and affirming our child had been sent when we were discussing his future. The beauty of being in a tribe is that you get to experience life alongside others, celebrate the wins and work through the challenges, in community. If you are feeling isolated, I encourage you to take that first step to find a tribe. It takes bold courage to step outside of your comfort zone and seek support or friendship, but the rewards of being part of a community of supportive friends and being able to support others, truly outweigh that initial hesitation.



### **Kate Johnson**

Kate is the Founder and Director of Spectrum Journeys Inc, a not for profit Autism service that equips and empowers families and educators as they support children on the Autism Spectrum to flourish. Kate leads an amazing team in the Outer East of Melbourne and focuses on practical Autism education as well as community projects and supporting carers. Kate is married to Joel and they have 4 beautiful children (their eldest being on the Autism Spectrum).