

Life as a teenager with autism



Emmanuel Muhanguzi, with his mother display a school project. He finds expression and confidence through music and structured learning as he navigates life on the autism spectrum. PHOTOS/COURTESY

April is Autism Awareness Month, a time to reflect on autism beyond childhood. As children grow into teenagers, many are now navigating identity, independence, and social expectations while families and communities learn how best to support them.

BY BEATRICE NAKIBUUKA

April is widely recognised as Autism Awareness Month. For years, much of the conversation has focused on young children, what autism is, how it presents, and how early intervention can help. But those children are growing up. They are becoming teenagers and young adults, navigating a complex stage of life that blends identity, independence, and social expectations.

For teens living with autism, this transition can be both hopeful and overwhelming. Across Uganda, families, teachers, and caregivers are learning how to support these adolescents not just to cope, but to thrive.

Finding rhythm

At Buganda College in Wakiso, 22-year-old Emmanuel Muhanguzi is in Senior Four. Though verbal, his speech is limited, and he avoids eye contact. His autism was not identified early; his delayed milestones were initially mistaken for those of the last-born child. His journey reflects quiet determination.

According to his project instructor, Isaac Lutaaya, Emmanuel thrives in structure. "He is fast at execution. He is duty-driven. He always does his assignments. It is slow, but he endeavours," he explains. "He follows instructions closely and gets things done while the teacher is teaching."

Beyond academics, Emmanuel's strength lies in music. As a choir member, he finds confidence and expression through performance.

"When he is in the choir, you see a different person; more relaxed and confident," Lutaaya says. "The choir master has even written songs for him. He has two songs on YouTube."

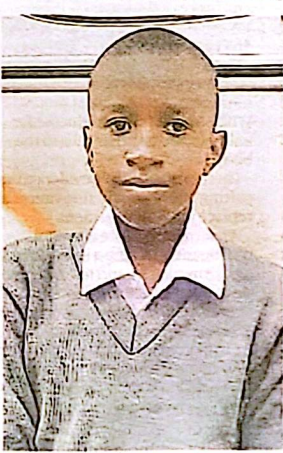
He also participates in aerobics. Over time, consistency has helped him adjust socially.

"At first, classmates did not know how to relate with him," Lutaaya recalls. "But over time, they understood him. Now they are supportive. They know when he needs space and when to involve him."

His personality remains calm and gentle. "He is disciplined and peaceful. Sometimes moody, but easy to manage."

At home, his mother, Winifred Muhanguzi, reflects on raising him into adulthood.

"As a parent, you worry about many



Ingram Alindaoha

SUPPORT

Consistency is key. Clear routines and predictable environments help reduce anxiety and make daily life easier to manage. At the same time, gradual exposure to change can help build flexibility over time.

Focusing on strengths is equally important. Many teens on the spectrum have strong abilities in areas such as music, art, technology, or languages. Encouraging these interests can boost confidence and create pathways for future skills and careers.

Patience and communication matter. Explaining tasks clearly, allowing extra time, and using simple, direct language can improve understanding and reduce frustration.

Most importantly, teens with autism benefit when they are included, respected, and given space to grow at their own pace, both at home and in school.

things, especially puberty and relationships," she says. "When I asked him about sex, he did not seem to understand it, but he told me he would build a big house and get married at 30."

"They may not understand everything at once, but they have dreams. They deserve the opportunity to pursue them," she adds.

Special interests

For 13-year-old Ingram Alindaoha, a Senior One student at Makerere College School, language has become both a passion and a pathway.

From a young age, he developed a fascination with Asian cultures and taught himself Chinese, Japanese, and Korean, including cultural practices such as using chopsticks.

"He is very good at learning languages," says his mother, Ruth Mugisha.

He began at Victorious Education Centre, scoring Aggregate 16, and is now in boarding school as his parents encourage independence.

"We want him to learn how to take care of himself," Mugisha says.

As many teens on the spectrum, he faces social and practical challenges.

"He struggles to make friends," she says. "Autism affects his hands, so he gets tired of writing, and sometimes forgets simple things."



Bill Emmanuel Ejuu who enjoys swimming and beadwork.

To cope, he turned to drawing.

"When overwhelmed in class, he draws," she says. "It has helped him regulate himself and stay calm."

He also lives with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), affecting attention and impulse control.

"As a parent, you have to be intentional," Mugisha says. "Give guidance, but also space to grow."

Her advice is grounded in experience: "Encourage independence, allow safe mistakes, and focus on strengths. Those are pathways to confidence and success."

A mother's long journey to hope

For Mary Ejuu, raising her son Bill Emmanuel Ejuu has been defined by struggle, resilience, and eventual hope.

Born prematurely at eight months, Bill showed early developmental delays. By one year, he could only sit and did not crawl until one and a half years.

"At first, we were in denial because we are both in the medical field," she recalls.

By two and a half years, doctors at Mulago National Referral Hospital confirmed he was on the autism spectrum and needed specialised care.

What followed were difficult years. "He was hyper. He broke things. He would shout and cry relentlessly," she says.

The emotional toll was heavy, wors-

ened by stigma.

"I lost weight. Neighbours did not understand. I became 'that mother' in the community."

School placements were also challenging. "He kept getting worse in some schools. It felt like we were going backwards."

She eventually stopped working to care for him full-time. A turning point came when a relative trained in special needs education supported him for four years.

"He changed. He learnt so much."

Later, an inclusive school in Entebbe helped stabilise his progress.

"Now I smile," she says. "He can sit, listen, and follow instructions. He is calm."

He also enjoys swimming and beadwork.

"My son changed my life," she says. "I now offer nutrition counselling for children with disabilities, and my husband provides free dental care for them."

Redefining ability

Fourteen-year-old Jerome Njoroge's journey highlights the need to redefine success beyond academics.

A breech baby, he walked at two years and spoke at four. He was later diagnosed with autism and dyslexia.

"He had anger outbursts and feared noise," says his mother, Susan Njoroge. At nine, the family sought treatment abroad.

"We took him to India for therapy," she says. "He improved in managing anger and fear of noise."

They now focus on practical skills over academics.

"He is concentrating on drums," she says. "He follows rhythm and instructions carefully."

He also swims and helps in the family bakery doing simple tasks such as labeling and packaging.

"These small tasks matter," she says. "They build independence."

Her outlook remains steady: "The journey may be slow, but we are getting there."



Jerome Njoroge

Closing perspective

Across these stories, autism in adolescence emerges not as a fixed limitation but as a journey shaped by support, understanding, and opportunity.

Yet the transition to adulthood remains uneven. For many families, progress depends less on systems and more on persistence, adaptation, and finding environments where these young people are understood on their own terms.

The central question remains not whether they can grow into independent adults, but how prepared society is to support them as they do.