Praise for
Seven Keys to Unlock Autism

“Thank you, Elaine and Diane! Seven Keys to Unlock Autism is extraordinarily rich in wisdom and honest, practical advice. Welcome this book into your home and you will be inspired. Miracles are never easy, but they are closer than you think.”

—Harvey Karp, MD, FAAP, creator of the DVD and book The Happiest Toddler on the Block

“Elaine Hall’s Miracle Project is a ‘miracle’—a miracle of ingenuity, human intimacy, and creativity. This magnificent work vividly demonstrates the joy and hope of discovering the creative and emotional capacities that exist in all children but especially in those children with autism and other special needs.”

—Stanley I. Greenspan, MD, author, Engaging Autism and The Child with Special Needs

“What a remarkable guide for educators and care providers of people with ASD! In Seven Keys to Unlock Autism, Elaine Hall and Diane Isaacs urge us to live the timeless advice shared by Gandhi: ‘You must be the change you want to see in the world.’ In highly readable, engaging, and practical ways, Elaine and Diane challenge professionals and care providers to deeply explore places that few approaches to autism dare to go: how can we change OUR attitudes, beliefs, and actions to profoundly impact the lives of people with ASD in the most positive ways. This book is a rare work that is creative, optimistic, and deeply reflective. It will prove to be transformational for those of us who share their lives with people with ASD.”

—Barry M. Prizant, PhD, CCC-SLP, director, Childhood Communication Services, adjunct professor, Center for the Study of Human Development, Brown University, and coauthor of The SCERTS Model
“Seven Keys to Unlock Autism summarizes what we know about kids on the spectrum and how best to help them learn and thrive, in a concise yet warm and empathetic way. This book will prove to be extremely valuable to all members of the teaching community—as well as a child’s lifelong teacher—his or her parent.”


“This unique approach seamlessly blends the depth of the human spirit with an understanding of the neuroscience of autism. The Seven Keys help teachers and families to embrace children with differences and, ultimately, develop the opportunities, interactions, and expressive inner life we desire for all children. A must-read.”

—CarolAnn Edscorn, MS, parent, advocate, educator

“Diane and Elaine packed *Seven Keys to Unlock Autism* full of great information for parents and professionals. I love that it comes with a bonus DVD for visual learners like me.”

—Alex Plank, founder of WrongPlanet.net

“*Seven Keys to Unlock Autism* is an excellent resource for any professional working with students with autism. For new teachers it is a step-by-step guide that will help minimize anxiety and provide the framework for success in the classroom. For those of us in the field for a while, it is a refreshing new perspective that excites, motivates, and challenges us to recognize and develop these special individuals’ strengths by increasing awareness of ourselves and the roadblocks we may unknowingly impose. Thankfully, Elaine and Diane help us know when to step out of the way and how to recognize, coach, and support these individuals’ strengths.”

—Debra Gordon, MS, CCC-SLP

“As children are diagnosed on the autism spectrum at ever increasing rates, *Seven Keys to Unlock Autism* is a must-read for mental health clinicians, educators, and others working with families. Anyone working with families touched by autism would be well equipped with the compassionate and commonsense approaches offered in this book.”

—Ilene Weingarten, MFT
Seven Keys to Unlock Autism
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To our inspiring messengers, Wyatt and Neal, who make miracles out of autism . . . every day
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involved in The Vista Inspire Program at Vista Del Mar for your support of innovative autism programming.

Diane is in loving gratitude of her two sons, Jackson and Wyatt, who teach her by example to live in the now, transcend all limits, and be a dedicated ambassador of truth.

Elaine thanks her son, Neal, for teaching her to listen profoundly and know unconditional love. His courage and tenacity inspires her daily. She thanks her husband, play therapist Jeff Frymer, for “holding down the fort,” cooking amazing meals, and being a wonderful husband and role model for Neal.

To all of us who have hit walls, found impassable obstacles, wanted to give up . . . but didn’t. For you.
About the Authors

Elaine Hall (“CoachE!”) was a top Hollywood children’s acting coach working for Disney Studios, Universal Pictures, Nickelodeon, and others, including the film Akeelah and the Bee. Elaine’s life changed dramatically after her son, Neal, adopted from a Russian orphanage, was diagnosed with autism. When traditional therapies did not work for him, she rallied actors and other creative people to join his world, and Neal slowly emerged from his isolation. She then developed the Seven Keys training program and used these methods to create The Miracle Project, a world-renowned theater and film program for children of all abilities, profiled in the Emmy Award–winning HBO documentary Autism: The Musical.

Elaine has appeared on CNN, CBS News, Oprah Radio, and has been featured in the Los Angeles Times, the New York Times, the Boston Globe, and the Wall Street Journal. She has received awards from Holly Robinson Peete’s HollyRod Foundation, Autism Speaks, Autism Society of Los Angeles, Senator Fran Pavley, the mayor of Los Angeles, Areva Martin’s Special Needs Network, Etta Israel, and many more. Her innovative approach to working with children with autism has created a “movement,” with people requesting The Miracle Project all over the world. Workshops have been held across the United States and Canada and in India and Africa. The Miracle Project now has ongoing classes in New York City, West Los Angeles, and at The Help Group in Los Angeles.

Elaine is a keynote speaker and workshop leader at conferences throughout the United States and Canada. Her first book, Now I See the Moon: A Mother, a Son, a Miracle, was chosen by the United Nations, where she spoke to launch World Autism Awareness Month 2011. Elaine and producer Diane Isaacs created the CD
Fly: Into Autism, which pairs kids with autism and celebrity artists and was honored at Carnegie Hall. In addition to her work with The Miracle Project, Elaine created and directs an arts enrichment program and a bar/bat mitzvah program for children and teens with autism at Vista Del Mar in Los Angeles. She lives in Santa Monica, California, with the two loves of her life, her teenage son, Neal, and her newly wedded play therapist husband, Jeff.

Diane Isaacs is an award-winning producer of film, television, and music. After she received her BFA in film and BA in English from New York University, she worked as an associate producer on Miami Vice and founded Green Moon Productions with Antonio Banderas and Melanie Griffith. She produced many films, including HBO’s Emmy-nominated And Starring Pancho Villa as Himself, and worked with talented actors such as Academy Award–winners Emma Thompson and Helen Hunt, Patrick Swayze, Betty White, Mischa Barton, and Rod Steiger. She produced The Miracle Project benefit CD Fly with celebrity artists who performed duets with children with autism and directed The Miracle Project Fly Singers’ YouTube hit Sensitive with Jack Black, the grand prize music video winner for Stand Up To Cancer, as well as the DVD series Unlocking the World of Autism.

A conference presenter and workshop leader, Diane has taught The Miracle Project and the Seven Keys nationally and internationally, including in India and Africa. Diane is an all-American, world-class Ironman athlete, achieving fourth place at the world championships in Kona, Hawaii, in 2004. Featured in Sports Illustrated and Muscle & Fitness Hers, she has developed Miracles 360, a mind, body, and spirit approach to fitness and wellness. She is a mother of two inspiring sons: Jackson, who gracefully balances competitive tennis, academics, and global inquiry, and Wyatt, who reminds her daily that “autism is awesomism!”
Elaine Hall founded The Miracle Project in 2004. This transformational program had a simple yet visionary goal: to provide a loving, accepting, nurturing environment that celebrates and honors the unique and often unrecognized abilities of young people with autism and address other special needs by guiding them through creative workshops and artistic programs. In 2006, a documentary film, *Autism: The Musical*, was made that featured The Miracle Project and its methods. In 2007, *Autism: The Musical* premiered to rave reviews at the Tribeca Film Festival and was shown on HBO in April 2008, garnering two Emmy awards. Today, The Miracle Project is internationally acclaimed and uplifts thousands of children with autism.

To achieve this result, Elaine developed a specific, seven-pronged training program for her staff that consisted of educators, therapists, theater professionals, and carefully selected volunteers. Most had no previous experience in working with children with autism. The benefits of this training were clear to see. By learning to connect with the children and accept them for who they were, each trainee created relationships that infused the children with joy, confidence, and love. The trainees also bloomed as their newfound relationships increased their senses of empathy and compassion and brought them meaning and fulfillment.
Diane Isaacs, an accomplished television and film producer, experienced the benefits of The Miracle Project firsthand. As she traveled coast to coast and around the world, from Africa to Asia, she saw the pressing need for effective personal tools for those living and working with autism. She became determined to disseminate the inspiring Miracle Project’s protocols using her multimedia experience. She joined forces with Elaine to bring you the Seven Keys to Unlock Autism.

How do Diane and Elaine know that the seven keys work? Because they have trained hundreds of people who started out with little or no knowledge of how to work with children with autism and were, through this program, immediately able to interact with them and understand them. The seasoned professionals trained in these protocols uniformly assert that they learned more about relating to children with autism through the seven keys than they learned in twenty previous years of teaching.

This book is designed to bring the seven keys to educators. Elaine and Diane recruited Lisa Johnson, a special education pioneer, and other special educators to provide hands-on teaching experience. They also enlisted those whose voices are rarely heard: students and teachers who have autism.

One of the great things about the seven keys is those who implement them have discovered that enlivening transformation occurs in the lives of their students and in their own lives.

We work in order to help others but also we help others in order to work on ourselves.

*Pema Chödrön, Buddhist philosopher*
When the teacher is ready, the student will appear.

These were the first words that came to mind as I talked with Elaine Hall and Diane Isaacs about their book, *Seven Keys to Unlock Autism*. Borrowing from the ancient wisdom of Buddhist philosophy, which holds that students need to first be open to new ideas, thoughts, and experiences before truly learning, this book is about how teachers can open themselves up in both mind and heart to their students on the autism spectrum.

Beginning with a refreshing look at the autism spectrum, Elaine and Diane reframe kids with autism as simply different, rather than disordered. Certainly there are many aspects of autism that can be disordering, and we are duty-bound to provide support and intervention in these areas. However, the goal of intervention should be to help people with autism achieve as fulfilling and productive lives as possible with their differences—not in spite of, or in an effort toward, elimination of this condition.

Suppose a teacher has just been informed that a child with autism is joining her classroom. Typically, a deficit model would be employed—the bulk of the teacher’s preparation would be accounting for and focusing on the challenges the student. However, if the student were introduced as an individual with significant strengths in visual processing and logic or has an unusual
talent for vocal imitation, imagine how the educator’s intentions, expectations, and preparations change. This book provides the tools for teachers to appreciate children as the individuals they are, recognize their strengths, and pave the way for building productive relationships so each and every student can receive the rich education that he and she deserves.

Like a polished diamond, this brilliant book educates readers in seven vital ways to open up to what students on the spectrum have to offer us in terms of personal growth and pedagogy. This guide is chock-full of wisdom and exercises that can be implemented today—activities that are profound in their simplicity and their effectiveness, such as the idea of “rebooting the day” to start afresh as needed, at any time, to bring in positivity. These seven essential keys unlock for readers a greater awareness, acceptance, and appreciation of the gifts waiting to be reaped from relationships with people having the fascinating, sometimes vexing (but rewarding in the end), condition we call autism.

This must-read guide is a powerful resource for parents, therapists, educators at all levels of experience, and others who want to learn more about supporting people with autism: appreciating and understanding who they are while simultaneously unlocking the keys for greater fulfillment on the part of all involved.

The seven keys prepare readers for successful relationships with people on the autism spectrum. Only when the teacher is ready—when an educator is open to accepting and appreciating students with autism as they are—will the student appear, ready to engage in miraculous personal growth, and to make the world a better place for all.

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Stephen M. Shore, EdD
Assistant professor of special education, Adelphi University
Internationally known consultant, presenter, and author
Person on the autism spectrum
It’s the start of a new school year. You’ve been handed your roster. Jonas Redden is in your class. Your first thoughts are, “What am I going to do? I’ve seen Jonas through the years. He can’t sit down in class; he gets up out of his seat unexpectedly, spins in circles, and blurts out inappropriate sounds. He goes everywhere with a one-on-one aide and a talking machine.”

You tell the principal that you’re worried about how a student like Jonas might disrupt the class. You don’t mention the fact that you’ve never received training in working with kids with autism! The principal says you have no choice. Like it or not, Jonas is going to be part of your class.

You wonder, “How can I possibly be successful with Jonas?” You may even feel sorry for yourself and ask, “Why me?”

Why you? Because, with an open mind, an open heart, and some understanding of autism, you will find that a boy like Jonas can be your greatest teacher. Jonas and his autism may open doors to your own inner world and teach you more than any student you have ever taught.

“But how do I work with him?” you ask. Nothing in your education has given you any clues about working with a child who has severe challenges. If you are like many teachers, there is little or no support from the administration. They, too, are overworked and juggling too many balls. Dollars are tight. The few basic
interventions you learned in the special education workshops—put the child closer to the front of the class or near a window—just aren’t working. So what do you do? What tools do you have?

Suppose you discovered that every tool you need to connect with a kid like Jonas is inside of you right now? That it isn’t about being properly credentialed, purchasing a new curriculum, investing hours to learn a new teaching style, or even finding a mentor. It’s about learning to access your own inner resources, understanding your own sensory system, and discovering how you learn and relate to others. These things will not simply help you reach “unreachable students”; they’ll also help you to become the best person that you can possibly be. Best of all, they’ll reawaken the true self that initially drew your heart to teaching.

No matter what you are doing to connect with kids with ASD (autism spectrum disorder)—or as we like to say, autism spectrum difference—and every child you teach, there is only one constant and that constant is you. Every curriculum, every methodology, every approach is funneled through you. The seven keys will show you how to prepare yourself to use all of your training and experience to bring out the best in yourself and in your students.

I cannot emphasize enough the importance of a good teacher.

Temple Grandin

The Seven Keys

As an educator, you are entrusted to make your students more capable to handle new material and to empower them with thinking techniques. You design exercises to increase interaction, engagement, and performance—to unblock the child from his or her real or imagined obstacles. You strive to open up any and all possibilities, just as a locksmith may employ various combinations and keys to open a locked vault.
This is your chosen path as a teacher. Regardless of your teaching experience, you continue to learn, often taking different continuing education programs to keep up with current theories. These courses usually require personal time, energy, and vacation time to study, as well as a financial commitment, and we have heard from teachers who are often already maxed out on all of these areas and are frustrated by the process. Teachers often remark that once they master a new technique, a new, improved version is already being marketed. For teachers who want to keep up and be the best they can be, all this makes for an exhausting and never-ending chase.

The seven keys are groundbreaking in that they bring together powers that you already have as a teacher—sensitivity, commitment, desire to be of service—just as Dorothy had the ruby slippers’ power within her all along. You became a teacher to help others, but the first keys we employ are designed to unlock you before we unlock autism. These keys, when cultivated, will bring out the highest qualities and effectiveness in your teaching prowess. And all this in less than five minutes a day.

Put your own oxygen mask on first before putting one on your child.

*Airline advice*

**How to Use This Book**

As you will see, these seven keys are simple, accessible, and easily applicable to every child with a diagnosis of autism. No matter where you are in your journey as an educator or with your understanding of autism, the seven keys will offer a fresh perspective and much-needed encouragement. You may be overwhelmed by the number of children you have this year and feeling that you just can’t deal with a special circumstance when resources are already so stretched and depleted; you may be new to the world of autism