

# Let's learn to embrace the superpowers of autism

Cody  
**POTTER**



WHAT stands out to me when working with children with an autism spectrum disorder is that they tend to be quirky and giftedly different. I encourage people and parents to embrace and celebrate these eccentric traits, or better yet even to consider some of these traits as ... superpowers!

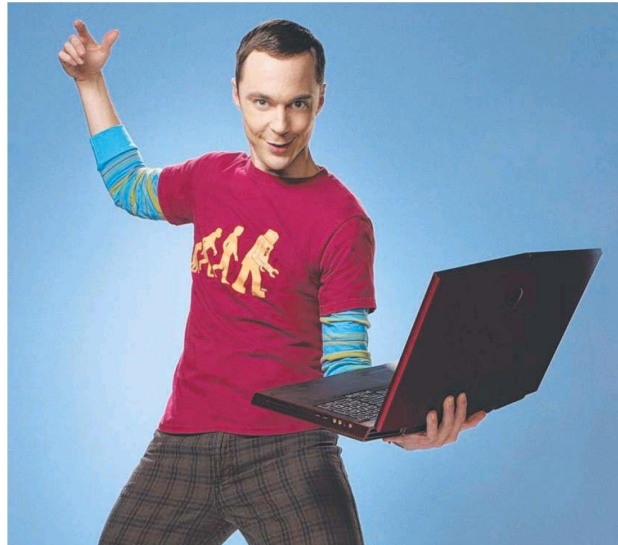
We all marvelled at the miraculous rescue of Luke Shambrook, a young boy with an ASD who had been lost in the bush for four days. This seemed to be an account of a resilient young boy who harnessed his superpowers and helped to save his own life.

Those with ASD can be extremely brave and exhibit a high tolerance for adverse circumstances (including pain threshold) and have the ability to live in the moment rather than looking too far ahead.

Although there has been a shift in more recent years, people's perceptions of those with an ASD are often negative.

Often so much of the focus is on what children and adolescents with ASD can't do and much less on what they can.

I acknowledge that ASD comes with challenges and is often associated with unusual patterns of behaviour, interpersonal difficulties, inflexible thinking, and unusual fixations, which



**BAZINGA:** Jim Parsons' portrayal of Dr Sheldon Cooper in *The Big Bang Theory* has helped show ASD characteristics in a positive light.

can make both parenting and daily activities difficult.

We know that children with ASD experience the world in a different way. John Elder Robison, author of *Be Different: Adventures of a Free-Range Aspergian*, says that "different does not mean disabled".

Autistic activist Temple Grandin says that "raising and educating children on the autism spectrum needs to be less about focusing on their weaknesses and more about fostering their unique contributions".

Children with ASD may have a unique set of talents that may allow them to excel in areas they gravitate towards. The most common superpowers I've come across include admirable resilience, great attention to detail, marked honesty, tremendous perseverance, exceptional memory and ability to live in the present moment, among others. Not to mention being incredibly passionate, courageous, non-judgmental, and less materialistic and superficial.

Focusing on some of these strengths

may help make the hurdles easier to deal with.

Many scientists and creative geniuses, such as Steve Jobs, Albert Einstein and Andy Warhol, are said to have had qualities of those with ASD. Popular film and TV characters portray features of those with ASD in a positive light and subsequently win over people's hearts.

After all, most of what people have come to love about Dr Sheldon Cooper, from *The Big Bang Theory*, is his shamelessly geeky demeanour, his enthusiasm for learning, and distinctive view of the world. These types of differences, which as children may create challenges, are ultimately what may help them succeed as adults.

More people than ever participated in the recent annual Geelong autism walk. As we continue to embrace Autism Awareness Month, I invite you to put yourself in the shoes of a child with ASD and try to see the world through their eyes.

I encourage everyone to take a more optimistic perspective, one that calls for patience, understanding, a deep appreciation, love and a good sense of humour. All children have superpowers, but it is our job to help children discover them.

My hope is for families to further recognise these unique qualities in their children and to have more hope for the future.

After all, great things can happen when superpowers are discovered!

**Dr Cody Potter is a clinically-trained psychologist at Chris Mackey and Associates. She has extensive experience with children and adolescents on the autism spectrum.**