

HEROINE ILANA GERSCHLOWITZ

This mom is on a mission to ensure that South African children with autism get world-class treatment.

→ **"YOUR SON HAS** severe autism. He'll never speak, go to school, hold down a job or be independent." Since Ilana Gerschlowitz, 36, heard these words seven years ago, she has set out to prove the doctor who uttered them wrong. Led from the specialist's consulting rooms without treatment options for 15 month-old David, she went straight into research mode. Driven by lion-hearted love for her son, and her tenacity as a labour lawyer, she soon learnt that autism is, in fact, treatable. Since being told he'd never talk, David, now 9, has learnt to produce single words and express himself more fully with the aid of a voice-output communication device. The life-altering treatment David receives is something Ilana and her husband, Martin, brought from the US, when the question of David's schooling led Ilana to her calling.

"We were going to emigrate, but we decided to import the expertise instead, and start our own school here." The Star Academy, which began in 2007, now has two centres in Johannesburg and one in Pretoria, with the groundwork being laid for another in Durban. As an affiliate of the US Centre for Autism and Related Disorders (CARD), the academic institution gives children specialised, one-on-one attention.

In 2009, Ilana's passion to "get the information out there" inspired her to take a step further: The first annual Challenging Children Conference introduced the wider

medical community to the fact that autism is treatable, giving more families much-needed guidance. "It was ground-breaking, as it introduced many people to the idea that autism is treatable. One parent received her child's diagnosis the week before. Without the convention, she wouldn't have known there's hope." In March this year, Ilana hosted the conference, in Durban and Johannesburg. She has made the CARD curriculum available online, and plans to give more parents access to information and motivation.

ILANA ON ...

→ **Letting go:** "Before David's diagnosis, I thought life had to be perfect. But with autism, you're stripped of even basic things like sleeping. I now know you can't plan, and there's a way to live happily within imperfect situations."

→ **Finding the humour:** "David makes me laugh quite often. Because of his condition, he's very literal, and doesn't get the grey areas. Communicating through our differences in perception makes for some amusing moments."

→ **A tough choice:** "I was pregnant with our second son, Eli, now 7, when David was diagnosed. Fortunately, he's a normal, developing boy. Deciding to have another child, with the risk of him being born with autism, was hard, but we made the decision in consultation with US medical professionals, who advised us on preventative steps."

—As told to Deidre Donnelly

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