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Expanding Access to Recreation, Hobbies, and Leisure

Why Recreation Belongs in Education, Health, and Community Systems for Individuals with Autism and Other Disabilities

By Adrienne Robertiello, ACDS
Interim Autism Program Coordinator
and Caitlyn Foelsch, CTRS, MHA, CHM
Manager of Community Programs
Children's Specialized Hospital

Play and recreation are where many of the most important parts of human development take shape. Through shared activities, people learn how to connect with others, how to manage differences, how to experience themselves to their fullest abilities, and how to feel part of something larger than themselves. Across the lifespan from infancy through older age, participation in chosen activities supports emotional regulation, problem solving, physical well-being, and social connection. These enjoyable experiences help build identity and a sense of fulfillment that has a lasting impact through various stages of growth.

For autistic people and others with disabilities, recreation often carries meaning. It is a context where learning is guided by interest and where communication can take many forms. It is also a place where relationships develop and where people can explore individual preferences, build confidence, and experience participation in ways that are motivating and personally meaningful.

Research in psychology, occupational science, and public health consistently shows that development is strengthened through enjoyable and shared participation. Children learn through active engagement with peers and family members. Adolescents shape identity through personal interests as well as group involvement. Adults support health and purpose through movement and leisure. Older adults maintain well-being through continued community participation and meaningful roles. These patterns reflect how human growth unfolds across the lifespan.

In many educational and community systems, recreation is not always positioned as a core developmental need. It may be scheduled when time allows or organized separately from essential services. For autistic people and others with disabilities, this often limits access to the same opportunities that support connection and growth received by their peers. The challenge usually lies in how activities are structured and how participation is supported.

How staff and programs approach participation shapes who can take part. When activities are set up for only one way of communicating or moving, some people end up watching instead of actively joining along. When routines are rigid and expectations are narrow, differences are seen as problems instead of opportunities for support. When instruction is not adapted, participation drops even when interest and

see Inclusive Recreation on page 31

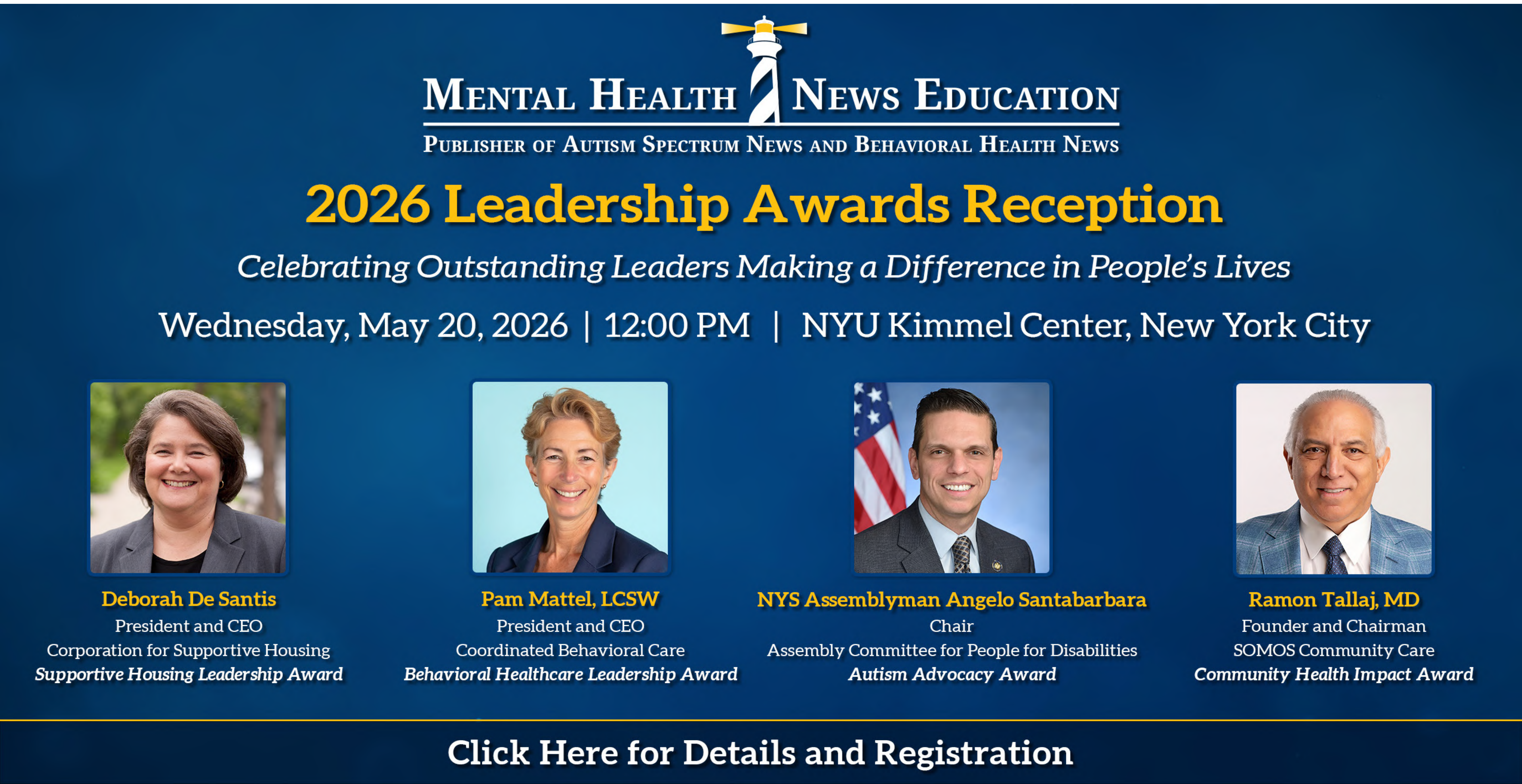

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Table of Contents

* ***Indicates an article written by an Autistic Adult***

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Summer 2026 Issue
Giving Voice to Non-Speakers:
Communication, Advocacy, and Inclusion Across Life
Deadline: June 9, 2026

Fall 2026 Issue
Financial Planning and Economic Security
for Autistic Individuals and Families
Deadline: August 26, 2026

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Innovations in Autism Supports, Services, and Programs
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The Role of Interest-Driven Experiences in Supporting Wellbeing for Autistic Individuals

By Katie Curran, MAPP
Chief Wellbeing Officer
Proof Positive: Autism Wellbeing Alliance

For much of the past several decades, autism intervention has been organized around two primary aims: increasing adaptive skills and reducing behaviors that interfere with learning and daily life. These priorities have generated important advances in education and clinical practice. However, the emphasis on remediation has often overshadowed another dimension of human development that is fundamental to long-term quality of life: the opportunity to discover and cultivate personal interests.

In the broader literature on wellbeing, activities pursued for enjoyment, curiosity, or personal meaning are recognized as powerful contributors to human flourishing. Leisure, hobbies, and recreational pursuits support emotional regulation, strengthen social bonds, and provide opportunities for mastery and identity development across the lifespan. Yet for many autistic individuals, these domains are rarely treated as central components of programming. Instead, they are frequently viewed as optional enrichment or reinforcement.

Emerging perspectives in autism research and practice suggest that this ordering may deserve reconsideration. Rather than functioning as peripheral experiences, interest-driven activities may serve as important mechanisms through which engagement, motivation, and wellbeing develop. When individuals have opportunities to explore activities that genuinely capture their attention, learning often becomes more sustained, relationships more reciprocal, and participation in community life more attainable.

Positive psychology provides a useful framework for understanding this dynamic. The PERMA model of wellbeing (Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment) suggests that flourishing arises not only from the absence of distress but from the presence of experiences that foster joy and connection. When health behaviors such as sleep, movement, and nutrition are also considered, the expanded PERMA+ framework highlights the multidimensional nature of wellbeing. Activities commonly categorized as hobbies or leisure pursuits often simultaneously enhance several of these elements. A shared recreational activity may produce positive emotion, sustain attention, foster relationships, and build a sense of competence within a single experience.

Within autism intervention, however, opportunities for this kind of integrated experience are not always systematically cultivated.

A brief case example illustrates the potential significance of this shift in perspective.

Dylan Kulkin, an autistic young man who inspired the work of Proof Positive: Autism Wellbeing Alliance, was diagnosed before the age of two and spent many years participating in traditional intervention models. Despite receiving services considered consistent with best practice at the time, Dylan struggled with communication, engagement, and increasing frustration within structured educational settings. By late childhood, he was using the limited language available to him to repeatedly tell his parents that "school was closed," a phrase they came to understand as an expression of distress and avoidance.

When Dylan's family chose to reorganize his support around a wellbeing-centered approach, the initial objective was not to accelerate skill acquisition but to understand what experiences naturally captured his interest. The team began by broadening the range of activities available to him and observing where curiosity, enjoyment, or sustained engagement emerged.

Movement activities such as walking, climbing, and running proved particularly motivating. Over time, Dylan developed a strong interest in athletics and physical challenges, eventually participating in endurance events with peers. In another domain, a longstanding fascination with cooking shows evolved into hands-on culinary learning, leading him to develop substantial independence in preparing meals and sharing them with others.

These experiences were not designed primarily as leisure opportunities. Instead, they became contexts in which communication, social interaction, and cognitive learning unfolded organically. As Dylan's wellbeing increased, his participation in learning expanded and many previously concerning behaviors diminished. Observations collected during this period suggested that shifts in engagement and positive emotion often preceded gains in skill acquisition rather than following them.

While a single case does not establish causality, it highlights a pattern that clinicians and families frequently observe: when individuals encounter activities that align with intrinsic interests, participation becomes more voluntary and sustained. These conditions may be particularly important for autistic learners, whose motivation can be highly sensitive to context and personal relevance.

Recognizing this, our team began developing structured tools designed to help educators, clinicians, and families more intentionally explore areas of interest within everyday environments. One such tool, the Interest and Exploration Guide, organizes a wide range of domains—such as music, art, sports, nature, science, cooking, and community engagement—to support systematic discovery of activities that may resonate with an individual learner. Rather than treating these domains as recreational add-ons, the guide frames them as potential entry points for learning, relationship development, and wellbeing.

The emphasis is not on identifying a single "preferred activity," but on cultivating a landscape of possibilities. Exposure to varied experiences allows individuals to discover not only what they enjoy, but how those interests can evolve into deeper forms of engagement. Over time, such interests can support identity formation, expand social networks, and provide meaningful ways to participate in community life.

This perspective aligns with a broader shift occurring within the field of autism toward strengths-based and wellbeing-oriented frameworks. Increasingly, researchers and practitioners are asking not only how to address challenges, but how to support flourishing. In this context, interest-driven activities offer a promising bridge between intervention and everyday life. They create environments in which skill development, emotional wellbeing, and social participation can occur simultaneously.

For autistic individuals, access to such experiences may be especially consequential. When opportunities for exploration are limited, the pathways through which engagement and belonging emerge may also narrow. Conversely, when individuals

see Wellbeing on page 31

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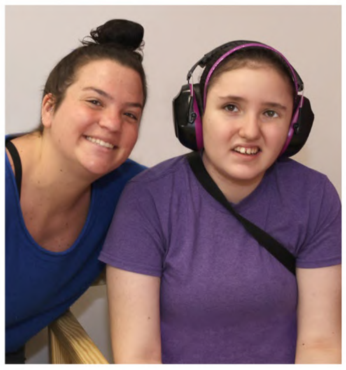

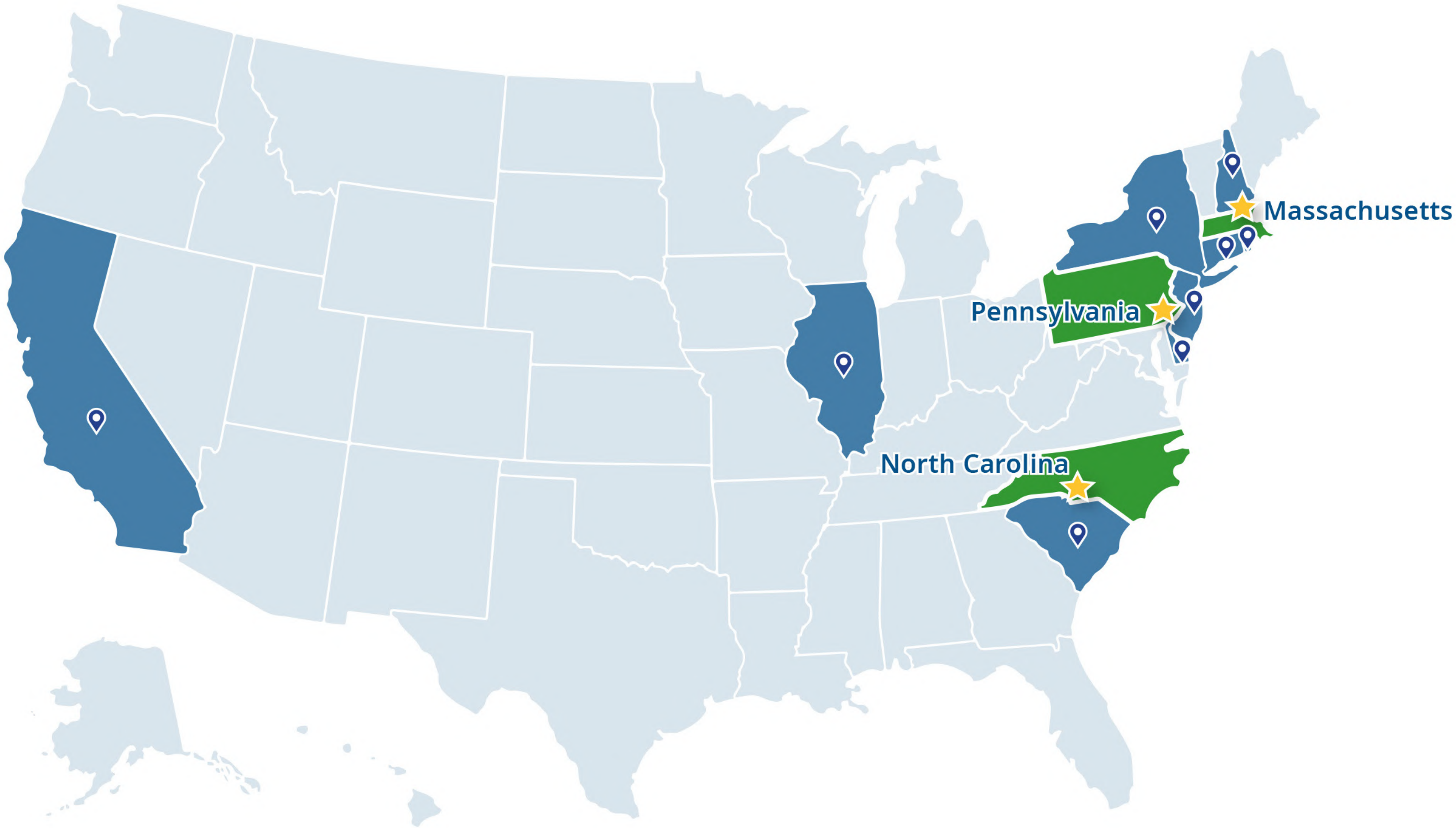

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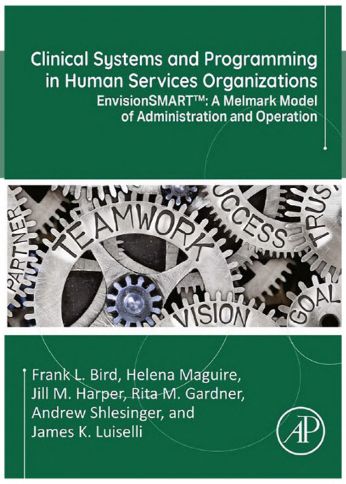

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Bringing the Arts into Direct Support: How Theatre Programs Empower People with Developmental Disabilities

By #MoreThanWork

Theatre program at Family Residences and Essential Enterprises (FREE) in Old Bethpage, NY

A career on Broadway isn't the only way to incorporate a love for theatre into a job. Direct Support Professionals (DSPs) often find meaningful ways to include the arts and performance into their work every day.

Shayna Stroh, a DSP at Family Residences and Essential Enterprises (FREE), who has been in the role for eight years, uses her college degree in theatre to help bring a creative outlet to people with developmental disabilities—teaching dance classes and theatre.

"I think working in the performing arts, we get to see that tangible progress every single show that we do," Shayna shares in her interview for the #MoreThanWork campaign.

"The participants' confidence grows with each rehearsal, and each time that they walk onto that stage and hear that applause, there's nothing like that feeling."

Shayna's approach to teaching the arts is by meeting participants where they are. Many of the people she works with may be afraid to get on stage, but that doesn't stop her from getting them involved. Instead, she finds ways to help them participate by maybe joining the stage crew or acting in videos. In this way, the people she works with can have positive experiences with the performing arts in a low-stress environment, while giving them exposure to new skills and activities.

The Arts as a Tool for Empowerment

Social interaction is a key factor influencing quality of life. Participation in theatre and other performing arts programs creates powerful opportunities for connection and personal growth. Studies exploring inclusive arts programming have found that exposure to the performing arts can help people with disabilities develop important life skills, strengthen their sense of identity, and build meaningful relationships with others (Le Roux et al., 2021).

Family members of those involved in inclusive theatre programs have also observed noticeable changes, including increased confidence, stronger self-advocacy skills, and a greater sense of belonging within a community (Saar et al., 2025).

Theatre is uniquely suited to this kind of engagement because it relies on teamwork. It's a collaborative process that allows people to practice communication, problem-solving, and social interaction in a supportive setting. Over time, these experiences can translate into improved communication skills and greater confidence in navigating social situations.

Turning Passion into Purpose

For Shayna, the connection between theatre and direct support work feels natural. "Being able to use theatre in this role has been incredible," she says. "It's not just about the performance—it's about watching people discover what they're capable of."

The most meaningful part of the job for many DSPs is finding creative ways to help

see Theatre Programs on page 37

From Gardens to Galleries: Cultivating Confidence, Identity, and Belonging Through Inclusive Community Experiences

By Libby Traynor, LCSW,
CEO
All Abilities Beloved & Respected, Inc.
(AABR)

At AABR's Program Without Walls (PWOW) and Day Habilitation Programs, we believe that access to hobbies, recreation, and cultural exploration is not a luxury — it is a pathway to growth, confidence, identity, and belonging. For individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD), opportunities to garden, explore museums, engage in immersive art, and document their experiences through photography are powerful tools for expanding horizons and strengthening self-determination.

Through our *Move, Create & Meditate* initiative, we intentionally design experiences that push beyond routine and into discovery. The goal is to create structured opportunities for individuals to try something new, build mastery, and see themselves reflected in the broader community.

Cultivating Growth: Urban Gardening in Action

At our Day Habilitation site, participants have been tending to urban raised garden beds — planting, watering, harvesting, and learning about seasonal cycles. Gardening provides far more than fresh herbs and vegetables. It builds patience, responsibility, sensory awareness, and pride in tangible accomplishment. Watching something grow under your care reinforces a powerful internal message: *I can nurture, I can create, I can sustain.*

Our Program Without Walls participants have expanded this work through urban agriculture at Shirley Chisholm State Park, where individuals engage in hands-on farming experiences. Named for the first Black woman elected to Congress, the park itself symbolizes resilience and leadership. Participants prepare soil, plant crops, and learn sustainable growing practices while also learning about community stewardship and environmental responsibility.

Urban agriculture allows individuals to see themselves as contributors to something larger. It reinforces interdependence, teamwork, and connection to community spaces that are fully integrated into city life.

Seeing Ourselves in History: Cultural Exploration

Recreation and leisure include access to cultural institutions — spaces that haven't always been designed with true inclusion in mind.

Recently, our PWOW group visited the Jackie Robinson Museum. One participant, DJ, was skeptical at first. He assumed a museum trip would be "boring."

But as he moved through the exhibits, his attention sharpened. He learned not just about Jackie Robinson's accomplishments, but about the hostility, isolation, and relentless pressure Robinson endured to integrate Major League Baseball.

Every plant tells a story of care, consistency, and building confidence that comes from creating something with your own hands.

"I didn't know how much he had to overcome to succeed," DJ said. "Being African American, like me, it made me feel proud. I'm grateful I didn't have to struggle the same way, but it makes me want to achieve more for myself."

That's why access matters. Cultural spaces aren't just repositories of history; they are places where people locate themselves within them. For DJ, the visit wasn't passive. It connected past struggle to present possibilities and reframed what achievement can look like in his own life.

When individuals with IDD engage with spaces that affirm culture, identity, and contribution, they build a stronger narrative about who they are and what they can become.

Immersed in Creativity: Experiencing Art Differently

Our Day Program also recently visited Hall des Lumières for the immersive Gustav Klimt: Gold in Motion light exhibit featuring the work of Gustav Klimt.

Unlike traditional museum viewing, the exhibit surrounded participants with moving projections of art - walls, ceilings, and floors transformed into living canvases. The experience was sensory, expansive, and participatory. Tina described it beautifully:

"It was so different. It wasn't just an art picture — it was all around us. We were in the art. It made me feel like I could float and be part of the art."

For individuals who may process information differently or benefit from multisensory engagement, immersive art creates accessibility through design. It removes barriers to understanding and replaces them with movement, light, and embodied experience.

More importantly, it reinforces imagination. Tina didn't just observe art — she became part of it.

Documenting Our Journeys: Photography as Voice

Through newly acquired cameras, participants are now memorializing their adventures across New York City's cultural institutions. Photography empowers individuals to choose what is meaningful, frame their own perspective, and tell their own story.

The act of documenting — rather than simply attending — shifts individuals from passive participants to active creators. They are building portfolios, reflecting on experiences, and sharing their viewpoints with peers and families. In doing so, they strengthen communication skills, creative expression, and confidence.

These experiences are guided by a simple belief: people grow when they are supported through new challenges — not protected from them.

- **Move:** Physical engagement through gardening, walking tours, and active exploration.
- **Create:** Artistic expression through immersive exhibits, photography, and hands-on projects.
- **Meditate:** Intentional reflection that helps participants process what they've experienced and what it means to them.

Trying something unfamiliar — entering a museum for the first time, standing inside a room of projected digital art, or tending crops at an urban farm — can be uncomfortable. That discomfort is not a barrier; it's part of the process. With the right supports in place, participants build tolerance

see Gardens to Galleries on page 37

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Modern Autism Care Requires a New Approach to Education: Catalight Academy's Model for Clinician Training

By Brianna Fitchett, MPH, MA, BCBA
Vice President of Clinical Impact
Catalight

Autism care has evolved dramatically over the past decade but, in many cases, our training systems have not.

Those of us committed to truly personalized, evidence-based care believe we owe families more – care that is delivered efficiently, collaboration that is thoughtful and outcomes that meaningfully improve daily life. Delivering on that commitment, however, requires more than access to continuing education. It requires education that is dynamic, outcome-informed and responsive.

Catalight Academy, a newly launched online learning platform available to practitioners around the world, was created with that responsibility in mind.

Across the autism and intellectual and developmental disability (I/DD) field, research continues to advance. We know more than ever about parent-mediated models, telehealth-enabled services and scalable interventions that preserve quality while improving access. Yet many clinician training programs still rely on infrequently updated static models informed only by limited data streams.

When training doesn't keep pace with research and lived experience, quality of care inevitably stalls. If we expect care to be data-driven, education must be, as well.

Much of autism training today relies on a narrow feedback loop – research informs curriculum and learner feedback is gathered after the course is complete, if at all. That may check a box for continuing education, but it does not create a living, breathing learning ecosystem capable of evolving alongside care and the needs of the industry and patient families.

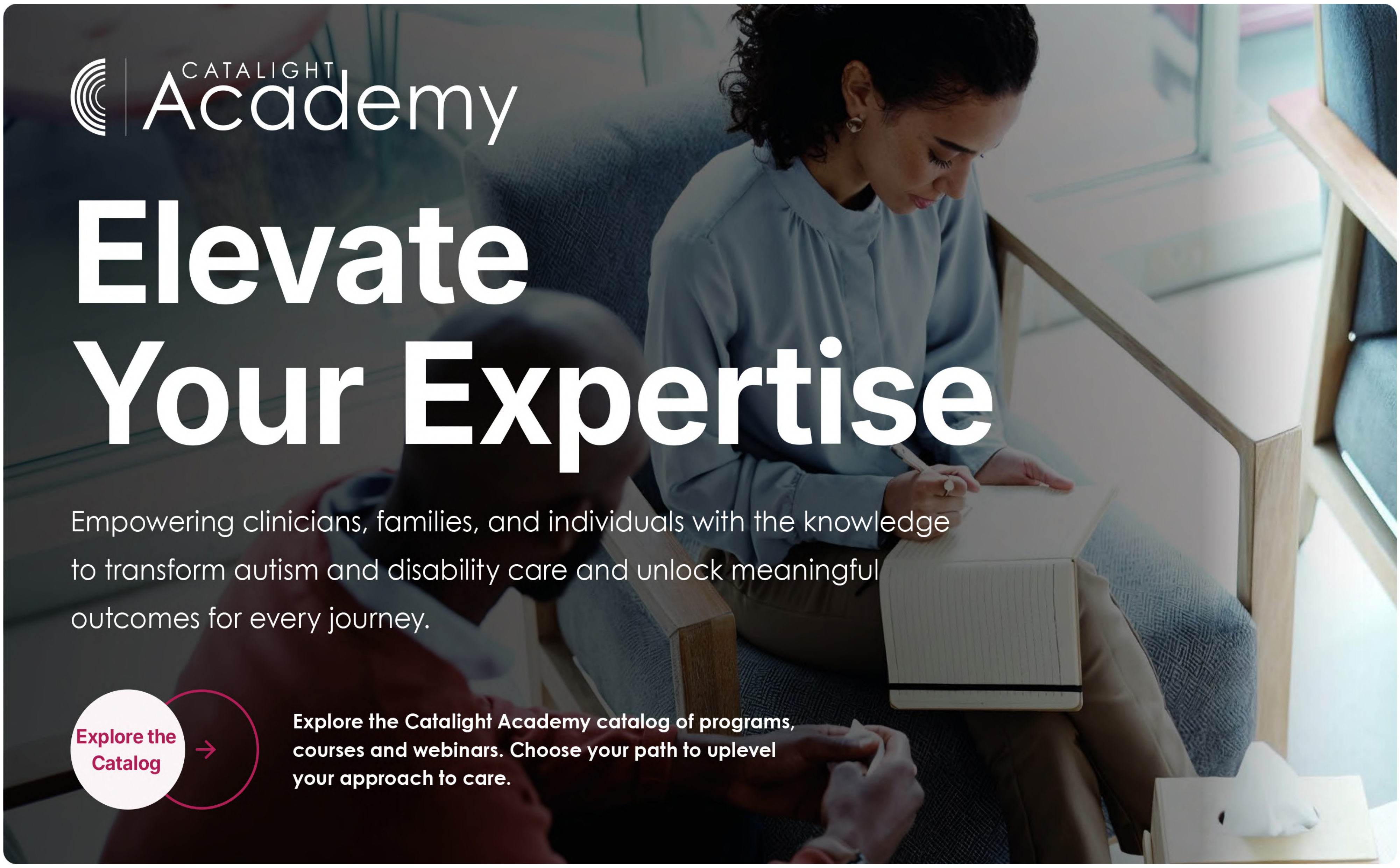
Catalight Academy integrates five data streams: current research that informs the foundation, patient outcomes to validate whether skills translate into measurable progress, learner feedback during the course which allows us to refine programs while clinicians are still engaged, learner feedback six months after completion that reveals whether knowledge endures and influences practice, and parent/caregiver feedback that ensures strategies resonate in the environments that matter most – at home, in schools and in the community, not just at a therapist's office.

If a training program relies on only one or two feedback points, it risks missing critical perspectives. In that instance, education is more theoretical than transformational.

Catalight Academy represents a shift toward progressive, continuously informed learning –an approach grounded in research but, on top of that, strategy that demonstrably improves family life. We've sought to create a dynamic feedback system that adapts. One that refuses to accept the status quo.

Built on more than a decade of clinical experience within one of the nation's largest behavioral health networks, Academy reflects nonprofit Catalight's longstanding focus on measurable outcomes, greater access, collaboration with experts around the world and evidenced based parent-mediated intervention that increases quality of care while reducing burnout. The platform evolved from Catalight Classroom, which educated more than 2,000 learners across 49 states and 13 countries. With Academy,

see Catalight Academy on page 51



Creating Space Where Possibility Thrives: Recreation, Belonging, and Purpose at WJCS Shelanu/Supper Club

By Nicholas R. Primavera, MS, MBA
Coordinator
WJCS Shelanu / Supper Club / Wellness

In my experience, after high school, services taper off, structured opportunities for recreation and social engagement often diminish dramatically and isolation begins with many adults on the spectrum. Research consistently shows that autistic adults are significantly more likely to experience loneliness and social isolation than their neurotypical peers (Howlin & Moss, 2012). Without intentional spaces that foster belonging, individuals can become disconnected not only from community life, but from their own sense of possibility.

The Shelanu/Supper Club, a program that is part of Westchester Jewish Community Services (WJCS) in Westchester County, NY, was created to change that reality and to show that belonging comes first.

What began as a small gathering of six or seven consistent members has steadily grown into a vibrant community averaging 16 participants at weekly programs, with major events drawing nearly 100 people. I do not believe that the growth is accidental, but reflects a deeper truth, that programs like this are needed in the community. Research and statistics alone show that when individuals are provided consistent access to recreation, peer connection, and meaningful roles, that their confidence grows, their independence strengthens, and their quality of life significantly improves to the point where they make plans on their own.

From One Small Gathering to a Thriving Community

On Valentine's Day 2026, nearly 100 individuals filled the room for an evening centered on joy, connection, and celebration. It was not simply a party. It was a demonstration of what happens when community is cultivated intentionally.

Members played customized bingo games, cheering loudly as numbers were called and erupting in celebration when someone won a prize. The applause was not subtle or restrained. It was enthusiastic, authentic, and shared. When one person won, everyone celebrated. That collective joy is not a small detail. It is fair to say that when an individual feels like they belong with a shared positive experience, the strength of the group increases, and the individual's wellbeing improves.

Throughout the evening, members also had the opportunity to take home therapeutic stuffed animal horses and have their photographs taken, thanks to the generosity of Garrett's Promise. For many, these were more than keepsakes. They were tangible reminders of being valued and seen. Photographs capture moments, but they also reinforce identity. They say, "You were here. You mattered." What is even more inspiring is that I have got feedback that the horses now play a role in some of the participants' everyday lives, as they hold the horse close to their chest when they need support.

Recreation Has Become a Bridge to Independence

For adults on the autism spectrum, structured recreational environments can provide predictable routines while still encouraging social flexibility, which is where the WJCS Shelanu/Supper Club programs come into play.

It may begin with something as simple as a shared meal at their favorite restaurant. The magic of the program is when members volunteer on their own to help set up tables, distribute food, and ensure everyone has what they need. Others assist with attendance, greeting peers at the door and checking names off the list. Some wait patiently with friends for paratransit to arrive, making sure each person boards safely. These roles are meaningful and an important part of creating independence and purpose which emerges through participation.

Studies show that meaningful activity contributes directly to positive self-esteem and perceived competence in autistic adults (Hendricks, 2010). When members are entrusted with responsibilities, they internalize the message that they are capable contributors, not passive recipients of services.

In one program, a member who struggles with verbal communication helped another participant practice reading aloud. The moment was quiet but powerful. Peer support replaced hierarchy. Strength supported vulnerability. In spaces where communication differences are understood rather than judged, individuals often discover abilities that had previously remained hidden.

Reducing Isolation Through Consistency

Consistency is one of the defining characteristics of WJCS Shelanu/Supper Club. Programs are offered regularly, at predictable times, in environments that emphasize emotional safety. Members know they will be welcomed and families know their child will be supported and cared for. Even though isolation rarely disappears overnight, it lessens gradually and is replaced by routine, familiarity, and trust.

Parents share that their adult children have found their first true friendships. Members describe looking forward to the program all week. For individuals who previously spent evenings alone, the shift is profound. Through social participation, we see the improved mental health of many individuals and reduced anxiety in many situations.

When members return week after week, relationships deepen and even some inside jokes are created. This is rooted in the feeling of belonging and the creation of a community where confidence is formed and relaxation happens.

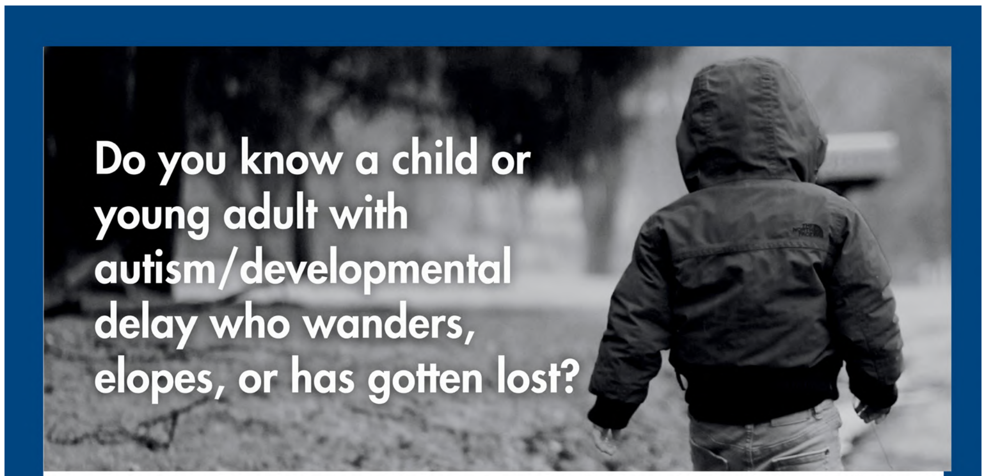
The Power of Being Seen

At large gatherings like Valentine's Day 2026 or our yearly Thanksgiving/holiday party, the room is filled not only with activity but with affirmation. Cheers during Bingo. Applause for prize winners. Smiles captured in photographs. Volunteers and staff offering encouragement. Peers helping one another navigate social moments. These experiences reinforce identity, a sense of belonging, being seen, and feeling valued.

When autistic adults are part of a community where differences are normalized and strengths are celebrated, their sense of self shifts from what they see as their own shortcomings to endless possibilities. WJCS Shelanu/Supper Club focuses on what members can do and helps them believe in themselves.

Each person brings their own unique strength to the event. One person takes attendance with precision. Another ensures everyone is fed. Someone else reminds

see Creating Space on page 38



Project Lifesaver uses radio frequency technology, employing devices worn on a wrist or ankle, to locate wandering and lost children/young adults to bring them home safely.

If interested or have any questions, please contact Isabel M. Pettersen, Project Lifesaver Program Manager, at ipettersen@wjcs.com; 914-761-0600 x2230.

wjcs Westchester Jewish Community Services

www.wjcs.com
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White Plains, NY 10603

Strengthening Lives. Shaping Futures.

The Autism Society of America Awards Felicity House the 2025 Daniel Jordan Fiddle Foundation Leader in Adult Autism Award

By Staff Writer
Autism Spectrum News

On January 7, 2026, the Autism Society of America announced Felicity House as the 2025 recipient of The Daniel Jordan Fiddle Foundation Leader in Adult Autism Award. This distinguished honor recognizes organizations and leaders who champion the autonomy of Autistic adults, celebrating those who create pathways for adult individuals to lead self-determined lives of purpose and meaning.

The Daniel Jordan Fiddle Foundation Leader in Adult Autism Award aims to inspire society to value the individuality of Autistic adults and foster awareness about outstanding strides being made by impactful leaders who have illustrated through their contributions the strengths and talents of Autistic adults. “**Felicity House is worthy of our annual honor because of its commitment to providing a community space in New York City**,” stated Linda J. Walder, Founder and CEO of The Daniel Jordan Fiddle Foundation.

Autism Society | The Daniel Jordan Fiddle Foundation for Adult Autism Trailblazing Since 2002

The Daniel Jordan Fiddle Foundation Leader in Adult Autism Award

2025 Honoree

Felicity House

Recognizing Felicity House for transformative impact and dedication to fostering autonomy and purpose within the adult Autistic community.

“**Felicity House is a remarkable organization providing an essential service to its local community**. Their focus on empowering adult Autistic women through a safe and welcoming community space directly aligns with the Autism Society of America’s mission to ensure everyone has access to the support they need. We applaud their dedication and transformative work,” shared Joe Joyce, President and CEO of the Autism Society of America.

Located in the heart of Manhattan’s Flatiron District, Felicity House is a first-of-its-kind, non-clinical community space specifically designed for adult women with Autism. Founded in 2015, the organization provides a sophisticated and sensory-friendly environment where members can socialize, pursue personal interests, and connect with a supportive peer group.

When learning about the award, Felicity House expressed, “***Felicity House is honored to accept The Daniel Jordan Fiddle Foundation Leader in Adult Autism Award for 2025. Since 2015, Felicity House has been dedicated to creating social opportunities for women with a diagnosis of Autism who live in the NYC area. Felicity House believes intentional spaces and a range of accessible social opportunities are essential for building meaningful connections and ensuring that Autistic women are seen, heard, and valued.***

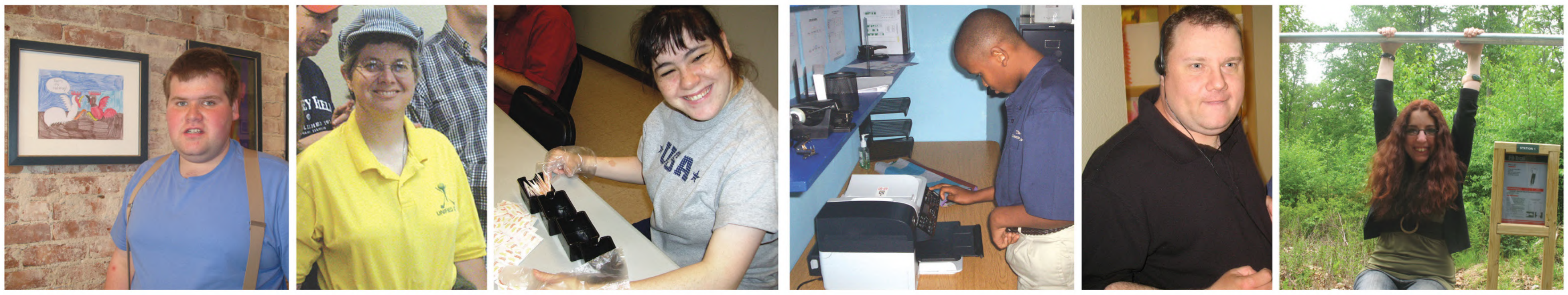
We thank The Daniel Jordan Fiddle Foundation and the entire team at the Autism Society of America for recognizing Felicity House’s work.”

Autism Society of America

The Autism Society’s mission is to create connections, empowering everyone in the Autism community with the resources needed to live fully. As the nation’s oldest leading grassroots Autism organization, the Autism Society and its approximately ~70 local affiliates serve over half a million members of the Autism community each year. It envisions a world where everyone in the Autism community is connected to the support they need, when they need it – including education, advocacy efforts, and supports and services throughout the lifespan. For more information visit the Autism Society at AutismSociety.org.

see Autism Award on page 51

THIS IS WHAT SUCCESS LOOKS LIKE



THIS IS WHAT AN ADULT WITH AUTISM LOOKS LIKE!

Adults with autism are diversely individual, and all are entitled as a matter of human rights to have opportunities to live their best lives.

The Daniel Jordan Fiddle Foundation Adult Autism Endowed Funds are trailblazing research, housing, jobs, public policy, family support, artistic expression and community life for adults with autism worldwide today, and for generations to come.

Learn more about **The Daniel Jordan Fiddle Foundation Endowed Funds** at Yale University, Brown University, Rutgers University, Arizona State University, and the University of Miami by visiting our website **www.djfiddlefoundation.org**. Stay inspired by our Daniel Jordan Fiddle Foundation Leaders in Adult Autism, signature programs and international leadership.

To make a donation, please visit **bit.ly/3OB59fx**

THE DANIEL JORDAN FIDDLE FOUNDATION® FOR ADULT AUTISM TRAILBLAZING SINCE 2002

Resilience, Resistance and Making a Difference While Cultivating Autistic Joy and Living in Community

By Robert Naseef, PhD
Clinical Psychologist, Author, and
Parent of an Adult Autistic Son

If you're feeling overwhelmed, you are not alone. Children are terrified of going to school. Families are being separated forcibly and deported. Peaceful protestors, including Renée Good and Alex Pretti, have been killed in the streets of Minneapolis. Warehouses are being converted into jails. Racial profiling has been made legal by the Supreme Court. Huge Medicaid cuts will begin in January 2027 that impact community-based services for autistic and otherwise neurodivergent people. There is a communal trauma that shatters our sense of safety and connection especially for the marginalized groups of our society. Dealing with our feelings while maintaining hope is our unavoidable task. I write not just as an observer or commentator, but as the father of an autistic son who lives in a group home funded entirely by Medicaid and as a practicing psychologist with a history of advocacy and caring for others.

Justice movements are inextricably intertwined. The disability rights movement in America did not just happen alongside the Civil Rights Movement; it was born from it. In the 1960s, civil rights organizer Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., supported Cesar Chavez who was organizing migrant farm workers in California. King was assassinated while supporting striking sanitation workers in Memphis in 1968. This intersectionality was built on acts of solidarity. Disability activists took the legal strategies, moral language, and protest tactics of the Black freedom struggle and applied them to the fight for accessibility and dignity. The crucial role of Black activists in the disability rights struggle is a powerful part of this history.

During the landmark 1977 Section 504 sit-in in San Francisco, Brad Lomax, was a key organizer who engaged the Black Panther Party who provided mutual aid in the form of hot meals and supplies to the protestors, helping them sustain their 28-day occupation of a federal building. This alliance demonstrated that the fight for justice is strongest when intersecting communities recognize that their destinies are inseparable.

The neurodiversity movement draws heavily from the 1970s Disability Rights movement. Autistic self-advocates insist "Nothing About Us Without Us" in the spirit of self-determination modeled after the Civil Rights Movement's insistence that oppressed people must be the ones to lead their own liberation. This perspective aligns autism with protected identities such as race or sexual orientation.

In 1972, Geraldo Rivera reported an exposé that documented the revolting conditions at the Willowbrook State School for children with intellectual disabilities in Staten Island, New York. The abuse and neglect revealed by Geraldo Rivera's report led to national outcry, successful legal action, and a federally mandated network of advocacy agencies protecting the rights of people with disabilities. The nation was shocked into changing its laws by the power of free press. That freedom of the press and free speech is now being dismantled by our current administration in authoritarian fashion.

By 1975, Public Law 94-142 was passed, completely changing the landscape for

see Autistic Joy on page 32

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AHRC NYC
A chapter of The Arc New York
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S:US
SERVICES FOR THE UNDERSERVED

Building Prerequisite Skills for Spectator Participation in Community Events: Supporting Family Outings for Children with Autism

By Madhura Deshpande, PhD, BCBA-D
Proactive Behaviour Analysts, and
Tamara A. Bannon, Doctoral Student, MSW, BCBA, LMSW, LBA (NY, NJ)
Endicott College

Family activities often extend beyond the home and into the community. Participation in community events can be an important part of family life. Leisure activities such as joining a team, enrolling in a class, or developing a hobby provide opportunities for individuals to engage with their communities. Additionally, participation as a spectator can be a socially valid and accessible entry point to community belonging. This may include attending sporting events, theatrical performances, music concerts, and school-related events (e.g., science fairs), allowing loved ones to come together and cheer on a family member. Many leisure activities also involve attending events as a family, which creates opportunities to spend quality time and share memorable experiences. These experiences can strengthen family cohesion and support learning about cultural traditions and practices through active engagement (e.g., attending religious services or community celebrations).

However, some of these events can be very loud, crowded, overwhelming, or confusing for an individual with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), which may make participation difficult and stressful for both the individual and their family members. Participation as a spectator may be particularly difficult when an individual lacks the skills needed to manage the demands of these environments.

Community participation can be challenging for many individuals with autism due to a combination of individual skill demands and environmental barriers. These may include difficulty tolerating loud or crowded environments, challenges waiting for extended periods, difficulty following changing social expectations in public settings, and challenges with planning or organizing outings. Participation may also depend heavily on family members to arrange transportation, prepare for events, and provide support during activities. A systematic review by Cameron et al. (2021) identified several barriers that limit community participation for autistic adults. Although many adults participated in activities such as visiting museums, movies, and parks, attendance at live sporting and community events was reported less frequently, with approximately 25% of the studies reviewed reporting participants attending these types of events within the previous 1–3 months, suggesting that public spectator events may present additional participation barriers.

Fletcher-Watson (2015) described his experience of an autism-friendly theatre performance, often referred to as a *relaxed theatre performance*. Relaxed theatre performances address several skill challenges that can make attending live events difficult for individuals with autism, including tolerating loud or unpredictable noises, waiting or remaining seated for long periods, and navigating crowded or unfamiliar environments. Accommodation such as visual guides before the event, reduced sound and lighting intensity, warnings before loud effects, flexible audience movement, and access to quiet spaces help reduce these demands. These supports are

see Community Events on page 33

The Importance of Leisure Activities for Individuals with Autism

By Dr. Monica E. Carr, PhD
Professor
Wenzhou Kean University, China

When families first learn of their child's autism, it is not uncommon to concentrate on early intervention efforts to help their child develop the requisite skills to support their least restrictive placement during the school years. Early studies that reported on the efficacy of these intensive behavioral interventions (Lovaas, 1987) demonstrated success in improving language development and adaptive behavior in young children with autism.

However, a child's formative years are not only about what happens during the approximately 30 hours of structured schooling each week. There are easily as many waking hours during the school week spent outside of the classroom, and entire weekends and school holidays that present a significant opportunity to engage in a myriad of leisure time activities.

Although various descriptions of leisure exist, any dictionary definition of "leisure" typically describes the time when you are free from work or other duties and can relax. By extension, activities that are essential for living such as sleeping, working, and housework, are typically not included in descriptions of leisure. The purpose of leisure activities is also diverse and may include activities such as relaxing, enjoying an activity, acquiring skills, or contributing to a community. While no two individuals with autism may choose the same leisure time activity, arguably the purpose and beneficial gains of these activities may be similar.

Drawing from broader research conducted within the general population can assist in understanding potential benefits of leisure activities for people with autism, for whom less research has been conducted. Research on participation in leisure activities amongst older people has been reported to play an essential role in maintaining good mental health (Hou et al., 2024). Participating in leisure activities may alleviate the negative effects of stressful experiences that threaten physical and mental health (Iwasaki et al., 2005; Lawton et al., 2002). In addition, spending more time participating in leisure activities has been identified as a predictor of improved life satisfaction (Menec & Chipperfield, 1997). Takiguchi and colleagues (2022) reported that leisure activities may function as a buffer against stressful experiences by promoting positive emotions that are related to self-fulfillment and well-being. As such, enjoying leisure activities may help develop resilience, and in-turn this elevated sense of resilience may contribute to the prevention of mental illness or depression (Takiguchi et al., 2022). While various definitions of resilience exist, it may be generally understood as a part of cognitive functioning that encompasses stress-coping dynamics such as one's ability to adapt to challenging life events or adversarial situations (Nishi et al., 2010; Richardson, 2002). Greater resilience may enhance one's effective coping skills, promote receptive attitudes, enhance positive ruminations, and encourage behavior planning that improves mental health (Kleiber et al., 2002). Participation in leisure activities provides individuals with opportunities to develop new skills or improve existing skills and may also improve physical fitness. Many leisure activities also provide the opportunity to socialize and develop new friendships which in turn may improve resilience and foster improvements in mental health (Takiguchi et al., 2022).

see Leisure Activities on page 38

Bringing Fitness to an Already Safe Place: Integrating Exercise into Behavioral Health Care

By Kenn Mann, PsyD
and Massiel Farrell, LMHC, CASAC
Westchester Jewish Community Services

Research has clearly supported the connection between mental health and fitness for all people. In fact, its positive impact on mental health is so significant that it can be viewed as a useful adjunct for mental health and substance abuse disorder treatment interventions (Ashdown-Franks et al., 2020). At Westchester Jewish Community Services (WJCS), the largest provider of licensed community-based outpatient behavioral health services in Westchester County, NY, a unique program is being implemented that brings the importance and value of fitness and exercise directly into the treatment space. This program, reserved for participants aged 18 and older, expands on the clinical staff's ability to implement a wellness perspective into treatment in a real way.

There are several aspects of this fitness program that are significant:

1. It is being conducted in the very place where the participants receive therapy.
2. It is open to all clients in the behavioral health clinic and brings together neurodivergent and neurotypical individuals to work together and support each other.

3. The facilitators of the program are certified personal trainers who have additional certification in adaptive physical fitness paired with therapists. The facilitators have extensive experience of working with both differently abled and neurodivergent individuals.

Providing the fitness and exercise programming in the community mental health center that the participants are attending increases the likelihood that the individual will access the service (Rasmus et al., 2021). A 30-year-old participant with ASD and Anxiety told me, "There are only three places I feel safe: here (at the clinic), in my room at home, and at church." It would be a herculean task to attempt to support this individual to go to a gym in the community. In addition, the gym itself often has negative connotations for individuals. One participant told me that "going to the gym is right up there with going to the dentist." Even the most welcoming environment cannot fully escape the anxiety we project onto it.

For the participants in this program, they are sure they are stepping into a safe space in a safe environment, based on where they are physically and their trust in staff that we have put in place a program designed to meet their needs. In addition, before a client begins participating in this group, they meet with the program coordinator to learn about the group and its mission and to begin to identify what they would like to work on in terms of fitness. The coordinator and the client can also problem-solve any issues that the client views as being an obstacle to commitment.

There are different divisions within WJCS with expertise in treatment in particular challenges. For example, there is a Trauma division, a Substance Abuse and Co-Occurring Mental Health Disorders division, and a Developmental Disabilities division. In addition, as a Certified Behavioral Health Clinic, peer services, case management, and care coordination

see Integrating Exercise on page 36

When Puberty Meets Autism: The Hidden Struggles of Autistic Girls

By Dr. Zain Haris
Autism Advocate & Parent Educator,
Independent Researcher

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a complex neurodevelopmental condition characterized by differences in social interaction, communication, and patterns of behavior (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). These differences often include challenges in nonverbal communication, relationship development, and a strong reliance on routines and predictability. However, the development of diagnostic criteria and much of the existing research on autism have historically been shaped by a male-centered perspective (Happé & Frith, 2020). For decades, autism was widely viewed as a predominantly male condition, resulting in limited understanding of how autism presents in girls and women (Estrin et al., 2021; Moore et al., 2022; Saxe, 2017).

Adolescence is marked by rapid biological, psychological, and social change as individuals transition from childhood to adulthood (Collins & Steinberg, 2006; Steinberg, 2020). Puberty, a central component of this stage, involves significant hormonal and physical changes, including breast development, the onset of menstruation, and the growth of body hair. These biological changes occur alongside cognitive and emotional development, making adolescence a period of heightened vulnerability even for typically developing youth.

For autistic girls, puberty may begin earlier and feel more overwhelming. Research suggests that approximately 58% of autistic girls experience the onset of puberty before the age of 11 (Corbett et al., 2020). Early pubertal timing has been associated with increased anxiety and greater difficulty adapting to developmental change (Stenson et al., 2021). Despite these risks, the unique challenges autistic girls face during puberty often receive limited attention, and preparation for this transition is frequently delayed or insufficient (Larson et al., 2021). For adolescents with ASD, the convergence of biological, emotional, and social demands during puberty can intensify existing difficulties with regulation, communication, and adaptive functioning (Chan & John, 2012; Levy & Perry, 2011; Seltzer et al., 2004; Esbensen et al., 2010).

Why Autism in Girls Is Often Missed

Although boys are diagnosed with autism more frequently than girls, this difference does not indicate that autism is less prevalent among females (Loomes et al., 2017). Rather, autistic girls are less likely to present with the "classical" traits emphasized in traditional diagnostic criteria. Compared to autistic boys, girls often demonstrate stronger socio-cognitive skills, such as greater awareness of social norms, more expressive facial communication, and a stronger desire for social connection (Lehnhardt et al., 2016; Tubío-Fungueirino et al., 2020). These characteristics may mask underlying difficulties, allowing autistic girls to go unnoticed or misunderstood.

As a result, autistic girls remain understudied, unidentified, and under supported (Haney & Cullen, 2017). Research shows that girls are less likely than boys to receive an autism diagnosis even when they display comparable levels of symptom severity (Geelhand et al., 2019; Russell et al., 2011). This diagnostic disparity contributes to delayed access to supports and interventions that are critical during key developmental periods.

Gender bias in autism diagnosis has led many autistic girls to be overlooked, misdiagnosed, or identified later in life (Carpenter et al., 2019; Gould & Ashton-Smith,

see Puberty on page 34

Empowering Adults with IDD Through Outdoor Activities: A Path to Connection, Confidence, and Wellness

By Jordan Baker
Content Marketing Manager
Relias

Spending time outside offers more than just fresh air — it opens doors to physical wellness, emotional growth, and social inclusion, especially for adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). With thoughtful support from caregivers, family members, and direct support professionals (DSPs), outdoor experiences can be tailored to everyone's interests and needs, creating meaningful opportunities for self-expression and connection.

Why Outdoor Engagement Matters for Adults with IDD

Incorporating outdoor activities into daily or weekly routines can significantly enhance the lives of individuals with IDD. Movement-based activities like walking or gardening support overall health and mobility, while creative outdoor experiences outdoors foster emotional well-being and personal growth.

Natural environments can help reduce stress and provide sensory-rich experiences. Feeling the breeze, noticing wildlife, or simply listening to outdoor sounds can offer calming, grounding effects. These small but powerful encounters with nature can make a big difference in day-to-day quality of life.

Engaging in outdoor group activities also nurtures social bonds and a sense of belonging. Whether it's participating in a shared hobby or simply enjoying time together outside, these experiences build trust, communication, and community.

Outdoor Activities That Promote Growth and Joy

When outdoor activities are chosen and adapted with intention, they can meet a wide range of abilities and preferences. The goal is not just to have fun — though fun is certainly part of it — but to support independence, skill-building, and meaningful engagement.

Gardening is a favorite among many adults with IDD because it's both calming and empowering. Planting, watering, and harvesting provide structure, responsibility, and sensory interaction. Plus, nurturing plants over time helps cultivate patience, focus, and pride.

Outdoor art projects allow for creative exploration in nature. Whether painting in a park, crafting with natural materials, or making sidewalk chalk murals, these activities blend imagination with movement and motor skill development — all in a relaxed, pressure-free environment.

Adapted physical activity — from nature walks and yoga in the park to inclusive sports like bocce or seated movement games — is essential to health and community participation. These activities promote fitness and confidence while supporting peer relationships and reducing feelings of isolation. In fact, research has shown that exposure to nature improves cognitive function, blood pressure, and mental health, while decreasing the likelihood of cardiovascular disease.

Training Supporters to Facilitate Outdoor Success

For adults with IDD to fully benefit from

see Empowering Adults on page 33

Planning Stress-Free Vacations for Families with Autistic Kids

By Kimberly N. Smith, BCBA, LBA
Clinical Director/BCBA
Milestone Achievements

Traveling with a child with autism can present unique challenges. Changes in routine, unfamiliar environments, sensory triggers, and social interactions may cause anxiety or overwhelm a child on the autism spectrum.

For families, this can make vacations feel more stressful than relaxing. But with thoughtful preparation, many of these challenges can be minimized—or even avoided—so everyone enjoys the trip.

The key is to anticipate potential stressors, involve your child in planning when possible, and create a flexible schedule that prioritizes comfort and fun.

Start With Planning and Preparation

Choose the Right Destination - Select a destination that aligns with your child's preferences and sensory needs. Quiet beaches, nature parks, or resorts with calm spaces may be more enjoyable than crowded theme parks or busy cities.

Plan Accommodations Carefully - Look for accommodations that provide space, comfort, and predictable routines. Vacation rentals with kitchens can help maintain familiar meal routines. Hotels with private rooms or suites give your child space to decompress.

Prepare Travel Essentials - Pack comfort items your child relies on, such as favorite toys, noise-cancelling headphones, weighted blankets, or snacks. Having these familiar items on hand can reduce anxiety during transit or at unfamiliar locations.

Practice Changes in Routine - If there is a particular part of travelling your child struggles with, such as going to the airport, using the bathroom with the automatic flush, or waiting in line, practicing these activities ahead of time can make them become more familiar and less anxiety-inducing. Talk to your BCBA for help with planning these practice sessions.

Make Travel Easier

Choose the Best Travel Times - Consider traveling during times that minimize crowds and long waits. Early morning or off-peak flights, trains, or road trips can reduce stress.

Break Up Travel into Manageable Steps - Long journeys can feel overwhelming. If possible, split travel into shorter segments with planned breaks for movement, snacks, or quiet time. Use a first then schedule to show children when to expect breaks and tasks that have to be completed.

Communicate With Airlines or Transport Providers - Many airlines, trains, and buses offer accommodations for travelers with special needs. Alerting them in advance can make check-in, boarding, and seating easier. TSA Care Assistance can help with smoother screening at the airport.

Keep Your Child Informed - Explain the travel plan in advance. Use visual schedules, social stories, or simple explanations about what to expect. Knowing the steps ahead can reduce uncertainty and help your child feel more confident.

Planning Activities for Fun and Comfort

Balance Structured and Flexible Activities - Plan a mix of activities but avoid

see Stress-Free Vacations on page 44

Beyond ADA Compliance: Advancing Recreation Accessibility Standards for Autistic Adults

By Isaac Mawuko Adusu, DHA, MSNPM
Assistant Vice President of Adult Services
Seven Hills Foundation, Rhode Island

Recreation is often seen as a luxury rather than a necessity. For autistic adults, it is essential for quality of life, mental health, and social inclusion. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) ensures physical access but does not address the unique needs of autistic adults. To truly provide access, we need a new approach.

The Limits of ADA in Dealing with Autism

The ADA of 1990 was a landmark piece of legislation that fundamentally changed the field of physical accessibility in the US. From the construction of ramps and installation of lifts to the retrofitting of public buildings, the ADA has ensured greater physical access to parks, recreation centers, community facilities, and public spaces for millions of people with disabilities (U.S. Department of Justice, n.d.). While the physical access provided by the ADA is an important step forward, the needs of autistic adults go well beyond physical access. Autism is a neurological difference that affects how individuals experience and move through the physical and social world. Differences in sensory processing, communication, need for predictability, and social interaction all require a new accessibility framework.

Where ADA Falls Short in Practice

Here is how the ADA fails to meet autistic adults' needs:

- A public park can meet the ADA's physical accessibility standards yet be overwhelming and unusable due to loud noise, crowds, and unpredictable activities.
- A recreation program can be physically accessible but remain unusable due to social or communication barriers.
- Community facilities that meet physical access standards may still exclude autistic adults via unsuitable policies, programs, or practices.

Meeting ADA's minimum standards does not ensure true inclusion.

Why Recreation Matters for Autistic Adults

Recreation is crucial for autistic adults' health and quality of life but is often deprioritized.

A strong body of research confirms the benefits of recreation participation to the well-being, social skills, and quality of life of autistic adults (García-Villamisar et al., 2017, pp. 325-340).

- Participation in structured recreational programs improves executive functioning, adaptive behavior, and social outcomes for autistic adults (Garcia-Villamisar & Dattilo, 2011).
- Autistic adults who are provided with choice and autonomy in recreation programs manifest greater social and emotional recognition skills (Préfontaine et al., 2026, pp. 123-133).

see ADA Compliance on page 37

The Missing Middle: Recreation Access for Autistic Adults in New York

By Richard Anemone, MPS, LMHC
Behavioral Mental Health Counseling

When autistic students finish high school or college in New York, the transition into adulthood often brings unexpected loss. What disappears is not only structured support, but also access to community, hobbies, and meaningful social participation. For autistic adults without intellectual disability, this shift creates a quiet but significant service gap. Many are viewed as independent enough to manage on their own yet still face real barriers to recreation and leisure. Over time, limited access can lead to isolation, anxiety, and disengagement. These outcomes rarely appear in service plans, but they show up clearly in clinical practice. In this context, recreation is closely tied to long-term mental health and community inclusion.

Recreation as a Core Part of Adult Development

Recreation is often treated as secondary to employment or therapeutic goals. Yet for many adults, hobbies and leisure activities are where identity, confidence, and social connection take shape. This is especially true for autistic adults, who often thrive in environments organized around shared interests rather than unstructured social expectations. Research has linked recreational engagement to improvements in emotional regulation and reductions in anxiety (Robertson & Simmons, 2015), but the value of these activities is evident long before any formal outcomes are measured.

In clinical work, adults describe leisure spaces very differently from therapy or social-skills groups. Hobbies allow participation without the sense of being evaluated or treated. That shift in context often changes how safe and competent people feel. Recreation offers opportunities for belonging that structured interventions rarely replicate.

Understanding the “Missing Middle”

The adults most affected by this gap are often those who appear highly capable on paper. Strong language skills, education, or independent living abilities can mask ongoing challenges with executive functioning, sensory regulation, or social navigation. Functional independence does not always translate into easy access to community life.

Many adults describe difficulty initiating activities or managing the planning demands involved in joining a group. Sensory sensitivities can make unpredictable environments overwhelming. Unspoken social rules may create anxiety, and unfamiliar groups without clear structure can feel inaccessible. Transportation adds another layer of complexity, especially outside major cities. These challenges rarely meet eligibility thresholds for intensive developmental disability supports, leaving many adults outside formal service structures despite ongoing need. The issue is usually not a lack of interest in participation, but the absence of environments with clear and welcoming entry points.

The New York Service Context

New York's service system rightly prioritizes individuals with higher support needs. At the same time, this structure can unintentionally leave autistic adults without intellectual disability with limited options. Programs designed around habilitation or intensive supervision may not align with the goals or identities of adults seeking age-appropriate community engagement.

Mainstream recreation programs are not always equipped to bridge this gap. Staff

see Recreation Access on page 36

Increasing Accessibility: Mindfulness-Based Practices for Autistic Folks

By Britt Albanese, MA, CPC-I, LPCC (they/them), Clinical Professional Counselor Intern

Mindfulness-Based practices have been shown to increase one's interoceptive abilities, present-moment awareness, and ability to regulate emotions (Simione et al., 2024). These are aspects that autistic people tend to have challenges with. Often, mindfulness and meditation practices focus on breath or other somatic sensations, and while useful, this can pose a challenge for autistic people who struggle with interoception, so by modifying practices to meet an individual where they are at, through time, autistic folks can reap the benefits that mindfulness can provide. Some examples of increasing accessibility for mindfulness-based practices include: the focus of the practice being an external source, titration, and incorporating everyday mindfulness.

"Mindfulness meditation…involves the cultivation of focused-attention to present-moment experience in a non-judgmental and non-reactive manner," (Simione et al., 2024, p.1). Mindfulness centers around increasing awareness of the present moment and meeting that present moment through a lens of curiosity (Simione et al., 2024). The sensations and thoughts are not seen as something to be fixed, rather they are seen as something to accept in the present moment because then the individual has the autonomy and power to uncover what is needed to resolve the sensations and thoughts (Kornfield, 1993). Mindfulness is only one piece in supporting autistic individuals. The impact of challenges autistic people navigate varies widely amongst the autistic population, from folks with low support needs to those with high support needs. Mindfulness cannot reasonably address all the needs of all autistic people; however, it can add one level of support in conjunction with other supports (e.g., various types of therapies, systemic changes, accommodations, etc.).

When adapted for an individual's needs, mindfulness-based practices can address interoception, present-moment awareness, and emotion regulation (Simione et al., 2024). Interoception is described as "…the perception of bodily signals…" and is "central for maintaining physiological states," (Klein et al., 2025, p 2). Due to the co-occurrence of approximately 50% with alexithymia, this can prove to be a challenging barrier to incorporating mindfulness with autistic folks (Klein et al., 2025). Through increasing interoceptive abilities and present-moment awareness, autistic individuals can increase capacity for emotion regulation (Simione et al., 2024). This is done through recognizing in real time what sensations one is experiencing, accepting the present for what it is rather than trying to change it, attuning to the underlying need, and attempting to meet the need. Mindfulness is an ongoing practice where exploration is the goal, rather than perfection— "It is from 'difficulties, mistakes, and errors' that we actually learn," (Kornfield, 1993, p. 72).

Examples of Accessible Mindfulness Practices

The following mindfulness-based practices are potentially accessible examples. Again, what is accessible for one autistic individual may not be accessible for another. It is important to consider individual needs and to modify practices while keeping the core elements of mindfulness: "…awareness of present-moment experiences…" and "fostering acceptance and curiosity towards the content of these experiences," (Simione et al., 2024, p.1).

see Mindfulness on page 41

The Role of Anime as a Special Interest in Autistic Well-Being

By Jenna Winkelman, MA
Doctorate Student, Clinical Psychology
Fielding Graduate University

Media has been a way to share stories, express ideas, and provide a sense of connection and understanding. Many individuals consider shows a special interest, and it becomes a strong topic and passion in their social lives. One example of media that is commonly discussed is cartoons and animated movies, especially those created outside of western countries. *Anime* (Ah-knee-may) is a form of animation originating from Japan. Many of the shows demonstrate high-action scenes, fantasy-based plots, and exaggerated facial expressions and social situations. While some viewers enjoy the content for the story and the characters, individuals with autism find anime deeply engaging. The vivid visuals and content that align with their own symptoms and create an immersive experience and a sense of belonging. This article will briefly overview some of the benefits of anime for individuals with Autism, in addition to ways anime has formed a welcoming community.

Despite anime being a series of shows and movies, there are some suspected reasons why individuals with autism may enjoy this form of media. One example is how the content is drawn and how anime shows emotions compared to real-life situations. In one study, researchers were curious about how individuals with autism recognized human faces compared to anime faces. Compared to human faces, individuals with autism were able to recognize emotions more often when it was a drawn anime face (Standiford & Hsu, 2025). Anime styles tend to draw facial expressions with amplified features that emphasize how the character is feeling. In doing so, autistic viewers of anime have an easier time understanding the emotions in each context and can focus more on the conversation itself.

Anime conventions provide opportunities for individuals with autism to meet fellow fans and dress up as their favorite characters. (Photo credit: John Spade)

Another benefit of anime is the opportunities for learning social interactions and understanding the different elements of a conversation. For women with ASD, anime contains structured social exchanges that also implement visual cues and exaggerated facial expressions that are easier to understand (Tzila et al., 2025). Predictable flow of conversations in anime reduces the stress of unpredictability and makes the dialogue easier to follow. On the other hand, males with autism become immersed in the dynamic animations and their pairing with emotional cues for scenes. Anime provides a more stimulating and accessible method to learn ways to engage and express emotions in each context (Tzila et al., 2025).

Most of the anime created do not specifically have a character with an established diagnosis of Autism. Compared to western media that demonstrate more externalized, exaggerated symptoms, anime tends to avoid the use of labels on characters with specific traits or diagnoses. Instead, the shows focus on their inner world and how they try to adjust to survive and overcome challenges (Davis, 2026). Any specific symptoms or habits that may come across as autistic may also be used as tokenism, or a way to help the plot or to create moments of humor that become memorable (Davis, 2026). Despite this, some characters are

see Autistic Well-Being on page 30

Who Is Caring for Whom? Rethinking Care Work and Disability

By Rhonda Cheryl Solomon, MSc, PhD (cand.), University of Toronto

I feel literally stuck between a rock and a hard place.

It's the night of my choir performance and the choir is grouped by sections and lined up in rows in the community centre auditorium. I find myself in the centre of the soprano section: there's one row in front of me, one row behind, and three of my fellow high-pitched vocalists on either side. Before the performance, a quick rehearsal. Midway through practice, I notice how physically cramped I feel. There's about six inches of space on either side of me, perhaps a bit more, but with my rocking from side to side, six inches soon feels unbearably restrictive: I can't execute a full "rock," my momentum, my rhythm, is off-kilter, and, more than this, I can sense the tense energy around me as the two choristers on either side of me shoot scathing side-eyes in my direction and attempt to position themselves as far away from me as possible.

I feel awful. Less because of how physically and psychically awkward it feels to foreshorten my rocking movements and more because I know I'm annoying the two people beside me with my pendulum-like swaying. To confirm my suspicions, I ask one if I'm bothering her. Her huff-and-puff response: "Well, you know…." I apologized and told her I'd move (the fact that I felt an apology was necessary speaks to my own thought processes and emotional reactivity and not to any objective need for an apology). She said something about there not being any other space for me in the section because I can't stand at the end of the row ("that's for the first sopranos"), and I can't stand in the front because that's also for the first sopranos. I told her I'd ask the choir director what I should do (note my assumption of responsibility to fix the "problem"). She responded: "No you can't do that. Just never mind. Forget about it." I couldn't "forget about it," so, when I saw a chance during a short break, I squeezed out of my row and approached the director. She was not interested in listening to me at that moment, so she shook her head at me and motioned me away. Discombobulated, I retreated to the side of the auditorium instead of returning to my place in the row (which is what I imagine the director wanted me to do).

I was in a hard place.

Seeing that I didn't return to my spot in the choir but was conflictedly "dancing" away from her, the director approached me and asked me what was wrong. I told her I was bothering the people beside me with my rocking and had to move. Her seeming impatience with me evaporated when she heard what the issue was (I told her during my choir audition that I am autistic), and she tried to find a suitable place for me to stand. I found myself becoming increasingly distressed and contemplated giving up and going home. Finally, the director said, "Well, you could stand at the end of the bass section. There's plenty of space there for you to rock without disturbing anyone." I clearly did not belong anywhere near this section (my voice sounds something like a mouse on helium), but at least I could participate in the performance, and the presenting issue would be remedied. I moved to my new location, had ample space on each side of me, and happily rocked my way through the concert (I did experience some upset, however, because I was situated directly behind my "old" spot and saw how the space where I had been standing was now occupied by the two women who found me unbearable).

Even if I technically could have stayed put in the soprano section and rocked within the confines of the space available to me,

see Rethinking Care on page 39

Finding Calm in Nature: Parent Perspectives on Outdoor Experiences

By Heidi Hillman PhD, BCBA-D, LMHC
Eastern Washington University

Engaging in nature activities like nature walks, park visits, and trail hiking has been linked to improved mental health outcomes across populations. Research indicates that nature exposure reduces stress, enhances mood, and supports emotional regulation in children and adolescents (Jimenez et al., 2021; Lomax et al., 2024; Moll et al., 2022). For autistic individuals, who experience higher rates of anxiety due to sensory sensitivities, nature environments are often more calm than urban settings (Fan et al., 2023; Li et al., 2019). Studies show that nature-based activities can improve sensory integration, reduce anxiety, and enhance social engagement by providing breaks from overstimulating environments (Bradley & Male, 2017; Fan et al., 2023; Kormanik, 2024). However, autistic individuals participate in fewer outdoor activities than neurotypical peers due to sensory, communication, safety and social barriers (Li et al., 2019; Salar et al., 2024). These challenges may intensify during adolescence, a developmental stage marked by increased independence and anxiety.

Although research supports the benefits of nature for autistic children, limited research has examined its effects on autistic teens' anxiety and emotional regulation (Daly et al., 2026; Fan et al., 2023). Furthermore, little research has explored parental perspectives on the effectiveness of nature-based activities for autistic teens. This article examined parents' perspectives on the effectiveness of nature-based activities for their autistic teens.

Methods

Participants included 11 parents (five fathers, six mothers) of autistic teens aged 12-16. The parents participated in a group interview answering five open-ended questions:

1. How does your child respond to outdoor sensory?

2. What challenges do you face accessing outdoor spaces?

3. What strategies have helped?

4. How does nature affect mood and regulation?

5. What would an ideal outdoor experience look like?

Results

Predictability and structure were reported by parents as important components for successful nature-based experiences. Parents reported that predictable sounds—such as the wind or flowing water—were calming, while sudden sounds like barking dogs or large crowds quickly led to meltdowns. As one parent explained, *"Nature can regulate him beautifully or dysregulate him—it depends on his level of control."* These observations support research suggesting that sensory unpredictability is a major contributor to emotional dysregulation in autistic individuals (Bradley & Male, 2017; Li et al., 2019).

Preparation and planning—according to the parents—were critical for minimizing their teens' sensory overload and anxiety. Many families used visual schedules, previewed locations in advance, and visited nature sites during off-peak hours. Parents highlighted the importance of bringing headphones, walking sticks, and a small backpack with snacks on every outing.

see Calm in Nature on page 40

Access to Public Recreation and Leisure Opportunities for Autistic People as a Measure of Societal Acceptance and Inclusion

By Daniel Crofts, MA
Direct Support Professional
Arc GLOW

Sometimes a break is more than just a break. The value of hobbies, special interests, and other recreational activities is often viewed through the lens of respite from more serious pursuits, and with good reason. Going to the bowling alley after work every Friday is a good way to relieve the tension of the work week. Going to the movies over the weekend gives many people a chance to leave their cars behind for a couple of hours. Attending sporting events, hiking the trails in a public park, taking part in Pokémon card tournaments, eating out at restaurants, and other such extra-domestic and extra-workday engagements give people a "space" that bridges the private and public worlds while offering some distance from the pressures that can come with both.

These aspects of recreation and leisure already go beyond "taking a break" and reach into the domain of mental health. And for people with autism spectrum disorders (ASDs), who often struggle with issues that threaten their emotional and psychological equilibrium, access to recreational opportunities takes on a special importance.

When it comes to autism advocacy, a great deal of focus tends to be placed on what everyone agrees in calling "the necessities." Education, employment, housing, and health care are cases in point. Vital as these are, we should not forget to leave room in our advocacy for the inclusion of autistic people in public recreation and leisure. In fact, one might argue that the degree to which a society integrates autistic people into these realms is a singularly important test of its acceptance of this population.

Beyond the mental health benefits of leisure/recreation opportunities — for both neurotypical people and people with ASDs and other disabilities — there is also a social component, which has two aspects:

1. Socialization, the benefits of which are obvious, and
2. A wider and more culture-oriented sense of acceptance.

Let us take each of these in turn.

Rogers (1961/1995) laid the foundation for much of contemporary psychology by his characterization of an effective therapist-client relationship, which he claimed could be applied to any other type of human interaction (p. 37). Like the contents of any other school of thought, Rogers' principles are subject to limitation. But they do offer guidelines that can be helpful in terms of the ASD population and society's relationship with them.

The first characteristic of a healthy relationship is this:

> I have found that the more genuine I am in the relationship, the more helpful it becomes. This means that I need to be aware of my own feelings, to the extent possible, rather than presenting an outward facade of one attitude while holding another at a deeper, unconscious level. Being genuine also involves the willingness to be and express, in my words and behavior, the various feelings and attitudes that exist within me. It is only in this way that the relationship can have *reality* [.] (Rogers, 1961/1995, p. 33 — italics included).

see Access on page 41

When Special Interests Look Typical: Understanding the Hidden Intensity in Autistic Girls

By Dr. Zain Haris
Autism Advocate & Parent Educator,
Independent Researcher

Most autistic individuals develop special interests (SIs)—deeply focused passions that go beyond typical hobbies. These interests are often characterized by intensity, prolonged engagement, and difficulty shifting attention away from the topic. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5-TR) describes them as "restricted" and "abnormal in intensity or focus" (American Psychiatric Association, 2022).

However, emerging research and autistic perspectives suggest that special interests are not merely repetitive behaviors. They can serve meaningful emotional, cognitive, and identity-related functions.

Importantly, the way special interests appear can differ between boys and girls. Research shows that the content of interests often follows traditional gender patterns. Autistic girls are more likely to report interests in dolls, animals, celebrities, arts and crafts, or fictional characters (Nowell et al., 2019), while autistic boys more frequently show object-centered interests such as trains or construction (Bourson & Prevost, 2022).

Because many of these interests appear socially typical, they are often viewed as less unusual. As a result, the intensity and depth of engagement may go unnoticed. Studies suggest that this difference contributes to underdiagnosis of autism in girls (Beggiato et al., 2017; Stephenson et al., 2023) and may also affect performance on diagnostic tools such as the Autism Diagnostic Interview–Revised (Rutter et al., 2003).

In addition, autistic girls are more likely to engage in masking or camouflaging behaviors—consciously or unconsciously adapting their behavior to fit social expectations (Allely, 2018; Libsack et al., 2021). When intense interests align with socially acceptable topics, their autistic characteristics may be even harder to recognize.

Understanding the hidden intensity behind seemingly typical interests is essential. When we focus only on *what* a girl is interested in, rather than *how deeply* she engages with it, we risk overlooking an important part of her neurodevelopmental profile.

Why Autistic Girls' Interests Are Often Overlooked

Autism has always been perceived as a disorder that primarily affects boys, with male-to-female sex ratios commonly reported as 4:1 (Lai et al., 2015). Later research, however, indicates that the sex ratio disparity might be less than initially believed (Barnard-Brak et al., 2019), and in certain groups, it might even be equal. Indeed, ratios as low as 3:1 have been shown in children (Loomes et al., 2017), and they might be much lower in adults (Posserud et al., 2021). These results have prompted requests to better characterize females on the autistic spectrum and to include more of them in studies (Barnard-Brak et al., 2019). Autism is not the only condition where girls are underrepresented in research.

Males are frequently disproportionately overrepresented in clinical trials as well as fundamental research projects.

When comparing epidemiological studies that use active ascertainment to those

see Hidden Intensity on page 42

Autistic Personal Philosophy: Why Breaking Up the Autism Spectrum Would Be a Bad Idea

By Sam Farmer
Neurodiversity Advocate, Writer, Author, and Public Speaker

Though the autism spectrum is as widely diversified as any group of people could possibly be, I view us as a single community. Any one segment of the population, however it may be defined, embodies both commonalities and differences, and ours is no exception.

Every way in which diversity exists within the human population is represented in our community: race, ethnicity, nationality, age, gender identity, occupation, socioeconomic class, the nature of our challenges and support needs, to name only a few. And yet, each one of us on the spectrum is autistic, no more and no less autistic than any other autistic individual. Rather, autism manifests *differently* across us.

Difference is often exploited as a justification for separation, and with separation comes a greater possibility of inequity, of injustice. The ravages of Jim Crow-era racial segregation come to mind as one case in point. Some want to break up the autism spectrum into subgroups which are aligned with the extent of one's support needs, arguing that a separate diagnosis for those requiring 24-hour supervision and assistance, that of "profound autism", could lead to more funding and improved services and research efforts for these individuals. If profound autism were to become its own diagnosis/identity, I would fear that the us vs. them dynamic I see within the autism community between those who are able to live independently and those who are unable to would only intensify.

Many of us mask our authentic autistic selves on an ongoing basis in an effort to fit in better with our non-autistic peers. We do so not by choice but out of necessity, often at great cost, and often in response to trauma. A consequence of chronic masking is that the true extent of our challenges remains hidden. When unmasked, the reality of the hardships we face is not as far removed from that of profound autism as many believe. Furthermore, one's ability to mask, support needs and levels of independence evolve over time. Segmenting the autism spectrum becomes problematic considering these realities. In my view, it makes more sense to keep it intact and allow autistic individuals to move along it as warranted rather than jump from one diagnosis/identity to another.

The question of separation is fraught with several unknowns which are unsettling to ponder:

- Would a shift to a separate profound autism identification lead to the kinds of support, services and research outcomes advocates for separation believe would come to pass? There is never any guarantee that newly written rules and laws which, in this case, would govern how supports and services are to be provided, would be properly enacted and subjected to proper oversight.

- What impact would breaking up the spectrum into profound and non-profound subgroups have on the service and support needs of those who are not identified as profoundly autistic? "Independent" is a relative term. Individuals across the spectrum depend on assistance to varying extents. There are plenty

see Personal Philosophy on page 44

Reboot Before Takeoff: Regulation Strategies for Traveling Neurodiverse Families

By Lauren Tucker, EdD
Associate Professor
Southern Connecticut State University

Family travel is stressful. Full stop. Especially when your family has distinct needs planning and preparation can be overwhelming…like trying to update your phone while your storage is full, the Wi-Fi is unstable, and three apps are frozen at once. Chunking the aspects of travel and identifying specific challenge areas can be a valuable first step in the preparation process; for example, travel to the airport, through the airport, on the plane, and through the destination airport. As a parent in a neurodiverse family, I've learned that breaking things into chunks helps me spot potential error codes before our family operating system goes full blue screen. Pop up before continuing nothing here is foolproof, and there's always a side quest, the device that won't connect to Wi-Fi, the charging cord that won't work, the missing headphones that "feel just right," something is going to happen. Regardless, having a strategy helps me enjoy travel more and maintain a positive mindset.

Video Self-Modeling

Video modeling is an evidence-based practice featuring a video of a targeted behavior or skill (Cox & AFIRM Team, 2025) watched in anticipation of the task or skill completion. Specifically, video self-modeling includes the individual themselves completing the task or skill successfully (Wert & Neisworth, 2003). Video self-modeling has been demonstrated as more effective than even peer video modeling (Marcus & Wilder, 2009). Think of it like future-you coaching current-you with video evidence supporting your own potential.

Viral Video Self-Modeling

In the viral shorts era, asking an individual to watch a bland self-video model is like trying to sell a 4-minute instructional video to a brain accustomed to 17-second fireworks. Enter: viral video self-modeling. A viral video self-modeling segment can be developed with epic transitions, engaging sound effects, and catchy images, maintaining that 15-30 second timeframe. For example, imagine an individual has a sensory challenge with a specific aspect of the travel journey… let's say, the seatbelt. This self-starring hype video can be filmed in an engaging way and watched leading up to the sensory challenge. This reinforcement can build confidence and reduce anxiety associated with the experience. Watching this video filmed in the somewhat chaotic, but familiar, backseat of the family minivan can be built into a travel routine and can help generalize the behavior across novel situations.

Close Distance Communication

New travel environments are very stimulating: lots of visuals, smells, and sounds. Leading with curiosity can sometimes create safety concerns in these settings. For young travelers without personal technology, providing simple two-way communication might be helpful. Our family found that using a Bluetooth-based item tracking tool was a first-class upgrade for stress reduction. One of the essential features for our success was a "locate my phone" feature

see Traveling on page 32

Safe and Inclusive Aquatics for Autistic Individuals: An Evidence-Based Approach to Water Safety and Skill Development

By Dr. Erin Brooker Lozott, BCBA-D,
CCC-SLP, Program Director
Els for Autism®

Individuals with autism often encounter barriers that limit participation in recreational activities, reducing opportunities for social connection, physical development, and overall well-being. Water based recreation, such as water safety instruction and swimming lessons, can offer meaningful engagement when delivered in environments tailored to the needs of autistic individuals. Research and practice show that structured aquatic instruction supports regulation, builds confidence, and promotes inclusion across the lifespan.

High-quality aquatic programming is especially important given the significantly elevated drowning risk among autistic children. Addressing safety and access requires programs grounded in evidence-based best practices that include professional training for adaptive swim instructors, individualized instruction, and the use of a structured scope-and-sequence curriculum. Implementing programs with these essential components ensures that participants progressively develop water safety skills, strengthen broader life skills, and cultivate lifelong participation in aquatics.

Swim instruction will be taught at the Els for Autism® Specialized Autism Friendly Recreation Complex starting in Spring 2027

The Urgent Need for Water Safety

The urgency of water safety cannot be overstated. Drowning is the leading cause of death for children with autism. Florida data since 2021 show persistent, preventable fatalities among autistic children, with Palm Beach County among the most affected regions (Children's Services Council of Palm Beach County, 2024). Therefore, water safety instruction must begin early, be explicit and repetitive, and be reinforced across people and environments.

The Benefits of Swimming and Autism

Aquatic environments offer unique sensory, physical, and emotional benefits. Water provides natural resistance, deep pressure, and buoyancy, elements that can support regulation, motor development, and confidence (van 't Hooft et al., 2024). The rhythmic qualities of movement in water can help some individuals with autism attend, sequence actions, and tolerate new sensations (Hynes & Block, 2023). Yet, access remains inequitable due to limited program availability, few trained instructors, and environments not suited to autistic individuals' sensory or communication needs. Inclusive programs, integrating evidence-based practices for autism are essential to remove these barriers, ensure access, and sustain meaningful engagement.

A Dual-Focused Program Model

A dual-focused instructional model underscores high-quality aquatic instruction for individuals with autism. Therefore, aquatic programming should include: (1) professional training for certified adaptive swim instructors through online learning modules, accessible materials, and opportunities for consultation; and (2) direct

see Inclusive Aquatics on page 43

Autistic Endurance: What Ultra Running Has Taught Me About Regulation and Belonging

By Danielle Aubin, LCSW/LICSW
AuDHD Psychotherapist
My Autistic Therapist

Getting up at 4:40 a.m. most mornings is hard. I want to stay in my warm bed. I can find no logical reason to get up that early to run in the cold, but I need the miles. I am training for a 100k race, and it's only a few short weeks away. My sleepy brain argues with me: can't I just take a day off today? I remind myself: consistency. Relentless forward motion.

It sounds harsh, but it isn't. My life has always felt like a tension between stagnation and forward motion. I choose forward motion. It is uncomfortable. It requires repetition. But the results are worth it.

When I arrive at an event I've trained for—when the timer starts and I test my body, when I run for hours in quiet woods wondering if I should quit or push a little further—and I push, and discover I can go farther than I believe I feel something shift. It isn't just physical strength. It is regulation. It is attunement with myself.

Endurance as Chosen Regulation

I never considered endurance racing until recently. As an autistic person, I associated races with crowds, unpredictability, and performance. Being perceived while exerting myself sounded overwhelming.

Danielle, during a group trail run in Auburn, California.

For most of my adult life, I ran privately to regulate—accessing dopamine, reducing stress, and finding relief in nature. But racing introduced a different dimension: structure.

Much of autistic life requires endurance already. Masking. Navigating sensory overload. Interpreting social nuance. Suppressing natural rhythms to meet external expectations. Research on autistic burnout describes the cumulative exhaustion that results from chronic masking and life stress (Dora M. Raymaker et al., 2020). That framework resonated deeply with my lived experience.

What struck me about endurance sport was this: it transformed unconscious survival endurance into chosen endurance. The stress was intentional. The discomfort had boundaries. There were clear rules, a start line, a finish line. Achieving something I wanted.

Also, collecting medals and organizing them is fun!

Nature and the Nervous System

Trail running introduced another element I hadn't anticipated—the profound regulation of being in natural environments.

There is growing evidence that interacting with nature improves cognitive functioning and reduces mental fatigue (Marc G. Berman et al., 2008). For someone whose nervous system often runs hot from sensory and social input, hours in the woods offer something rare: quiet predictability.

The rhythm of running—left, right, left, right—feels organizing. Forward motion without complex social demand. Just breath, ground, and distance.

It is low demand, but high return.

see Autistic Endurance on page 45

Rhythm Nation: How Music Helps Neurodivergent Children Communicate, Focus and Thrive

By Gina-Marie Moravcik MA, CCC-SLP
Owner and Speech Language Pathologist
Sunrise Speech and Language Services

I was introduced as "Ms. Gina" to two, cherub-faced little boys who attended kindergarten group speech sessions together at their school. Space was limited, so we were given a smaller "preschool" room to use for our meetings. My first memory of my "little drummer" was that in a room full of toys, that most kids that age would be distracted by, he gravitated towards items/toys that either played music or that he could use as a drumstick to tap against our tiny table, the floor or any other surface. Over time, I noticed that not only was he tapping his hands, but his feet and legs were tapping too. We incorporated beats and music in almost everything we did from articulation therapy to vocabulary development, sentence structure, responding to wh-questions, listening comprehension and turn taking. This little one's need for movement to process the world around him was not lost on me! With delight, I strongly urged his parents to seek out community based martial arts for full body movement, but more importantly music/drum lessons because it was clear that this was what made him tick. It was apparent that he was a natural musician at an early age and it would be wonderful to see him continue to grow in his abilities. However, he was quite shy and reserved in school, mainly keeping to himself. Perhaps community-based music activities could give him a satisfying social experience. Fast forward to 10 years later, when he is now a teen and drummer in a local musical school's house band that performs with other teens regularly. His family shares videos often and I fully expect to see him in another 10 years on a larger stage, living his dream.

When he is behind his drum kit, he exudes confidence and dedication and is the backbone of his band. Let's just hope that he remembers our time together when he's playing at the arena and his old speech teacher wants to come congratulate him!

Like the child described above, many people need movement of mind and body in order to fully participate in their environment, process and produce language and engage socially with others. For ADHDers like us, music lends itself not only to movement but creative thoughts and an invisible rhythm in which we thrive in. Unlike my student, whose need for movement was encouraged, my constant movement as an elementary student was consistently discouraged. The educators around me did not accept my thinking to my own soundtrack. My world outside of school was flooded with music, dancing and performing, often in my grandparent's driveway with my very large Italian family of musicians. It was not until I began playing violin in elementary school, which unlocked an ability to thrive, focus, self-regulate my emotions, accept new challenges by playing new pieces of music, develop dedication and a consistent practicing regimen, form life-lasting friendships and feel confident about my abilities. The benefits were endless. Exploring music was quite literally the start to all of life's journeys to date and has been transformative.

Scientifically the benefits of music to increase concentration, positively affect mood and self-regulation, enhance cognition and language abilities, improve social

see Rhythm Nation on page 46

Building an Autism-Supportive City: Training Municipal Staff and First Responders

By Heidi Harrison
Assistant Recreation Director
City of Beacon

Carter DeToro, Janitor for the City of Beacon Recreation Department

I have learned so much when working and interacting with people who have autism and neurodivergence. They offer such a unique perspective and taking the time to better understand the world through their lens, is an opportunity to better ourselves. A truly inclusive environment, in my opinion, is one where "norms" don't even exist. It is a world where everyone shows up as their genuine selves and feels confident, supported, equal, and accepted (Pellicano and den Houting, 2022).

In 2025, the City of Beacon made the decision to partner with Anderson School for Autism,[3] Anderson Center Consulting and Training, to bring their mission to life, by optimizing the quality of life for people with autism, through their successful training programs.

We initially trained our After School Program Employees, who work with children ages Kindergarten through 5th grade. This training was so well received by our office staff and our After School Program Employees that I wanted to expand this to all city employees. Following the initial training, one of our Site Supervisors approached the instructor with tears in her eyes, thanking her for helping her better understand some of the children that she observed to be struggling in one way or another during After School Program. She felt that she could better understand where their difficulties many be stemming from and felt a new confidence in strategies that she could employ, to greatly improve their inclusion and children's experiences in our program (Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2015).

I then moved forward with coordinating the full city employee training which took place in December 2025. This training was set up through the city as a mandatory training, because we felt that as a whole, we want everyone who works for us, to have a better understanding of how they can support autistic and neurodivergent individuals in the community while at work and on their own personal time (Kinnaird et al., 2019).

At the conclusion of our trainings, we received sensory kits to have on hand at our sites.[2] They include several different items that may help an individual living with autism, in situations where they need sensory input (Ashburner et al., 2008). It also included a communication card, with words and phrases to create a very clear way to facilitate communication to be possible in situations when one party or the other may have a difficult time either expressing themselves or understanding one another.

With a fully trained staff the City of Beacon can develop practical strategies on strong communication skills, become sensory sensitive, make informed decisions during interactions, and learn how to be an ally to a community that is often misunderstood.

My department, the Recreation Department, employs a young man with autism as the building janitor. It is so important that we, as his coworkers, learn how to meet him where he is by embracing his communication style, accommodating any sensory

see Autism City on page 46

Special Interests are the Key to Autistic Success, Employment, and Satisfaction

By Karl Wittig, PE
Advisory Board Chair
Aspies for Social Success (AFSS)

It is now widely accepted that special interests, for autistics, can serve as a powerful motivational tool, and in many cases present the only opportunity they have for future employment and independent living. This has been recognized by such prominent autistics as Temple Grandin and Stephen Shore, among others. It is also a welcome change from the traditional attitude that excessive interest of any kind is unhealthy and should be discouraged, and that the ideal of becoming "well-rounded" should be emphatically stressed. I doubt that this is beneficial for anybody, but for autistics it is nothing less than destructive and can result in tremendous frustration and anger, not to mention missed opportunities. Autistics are better served by learning about and participating in things that they have interest in and aptitude for, and which can provide satisfaction and perhaps a future occupation, than they are by the traditional practice of imposing things for which they have neither, and results in little or no benefit.

In my own case, I was always interested in anything mechanical, electrical, or electronic, and liked to take apart, tinker with, and repair such devices, going back to early infancy. This led to, and was very influential in, my becoming an electronics engineer, and having a career that lasted nearly 30 years. It also provided me with a hobby of restoring old, vintage, and antique electronic equipment, scientific and laboratory instruments, as well as mechanical and other devices. I have done this for most of my life and, being retired from my occupation, am doing so to this day – I use these to decorate my apartment.

A Very Early Obsession

I recall hearing stories from my family that, from a very early age, I had great interest in anything with moving parts, or which could be taken apart. I was fascinated by mechanical devices such as locks (which I would repeatedly open and close), and anything electrical (I would turn light switches on and off in a similar manner). This sometimes resulted in embarrassing incidents, such as setting off a store burglar alarm on at least one occasion. Not long after learning to talk, I would incessantly perseverate about my interest in anything mechanical or electrical. The latter was later recognized as the "little professor" trait of Asperger Syndrome, and the others are now regarded as classic autistic behaviors. At that time (late 1950's to early 1960's), however, nothing was known about this, and the word autism barely even existed. Consequently, these were not identified as the autistic manifestations they actually were. At least, though, they were seen as signs of aptitude and intelligence and hence something positive.

It is interesting that, even though my parents divorced early and I had no contact with his side of the family, my father came from a long line of engineers going back to ancestors in Germany and was himself an engineer, but my mother's side (by which I was raised) had no such leanings, and today would be considered technophobic. Unlike many who developed such interests because of a family member, teacher,

see Autistic Success on page 47

"It Really Is Disneyland": The Benefits of Sleepaway Camp for Autistic Children and Adults

By Emily Blumberg
Freelance Writer

After 32 years as the Director of Family Support Services at Citizen Options Unlimited, Savita Sharma still begins a countdown to the organization's Camp Loyaltown in Hunter, NY each January.

"Parents tell me: 'Bags are packed, it's only January. [Our child] knows camp is coming,'" she said.

Across the country, sleepaway camps dedicated to autistic campers of all ages provide personalized support to those whose needs cannot be met by a traditional camp setting. A study from the Children and Youth Services Review found that a majority of campers progressively improved their social skills each summer across ages and support needs.

Camp Loyaltown, which has served both youth and adults with high support needs for over 50 years, offers two-week sessions of recreational activities and skill-building with a staff ratio averaging one counselor for every one to three campers. Beyond your typical swimming pool and arts and crafts center, the camp also provides access to resources such as designated quiet spaces and iPads connected to the camp's wifi to cater to individual needs.

"There's no other place like it in the world," Sharma said. "It really is Disneyland. If someone's transitioning into camp, they come up and see Camp Loyaltown. And then they get this feeling, and then they say, yes, my child would want to come here."

Sharma, who started a program to sponsor cultural visas for staff from over 45 countries, said the benefits of camp are also worthwhile for their hundreds of counselors and administrators.

"[Camp is] the first time that a person, including myself when I did this, really learns to understand a person that you would do anything [for them]," she said. "I know it's successful because we had somebody who was a staff member when he was 18 years old and he started a company in his home country for people with developmental disabilities. He takes them abroad, he takes them to recreation, and he wants to bring them to America."

In the Green Mountains of Vermont is Camp Akeela, a three-week-long experience specifically tailored to autistic individuals who are able to attend a typical camp but struggle to foster deeper social connections with their peers.

Founded in 2008 amidst the emergence of Asperger's syndrome as a diagnosis in the U.S., Camp Director Debbie Sasson and her husband Eric sought to create a space like traditional camp with added "social scaffolding" and support.

Camp Akeela also offers what they call "social coaching" rather than utilizing a particular social skills curriculum. Sasson said their approach allows campers to learn organically in an environment that doesn't feel like a classroom.

"We're using the camp day," she said. "We are using the opportunities that come up when you have to live together in a community 24/7."

Sasson noted one family, who was initially anxious to send their daughter to the camp.

"[Their daughter] was anxious her first summer. She didn't really believe she would meet other kids who loved Dungeons and Dragons as much as her and

see Sleepaway Camp on page 46

The Performing Arts: More Than Access to Recreation for Autistic Children and Adults

By Annie Kent, MA Psychology
#ActuallyAutistic Mental Health/
Autism Advocate, Freelance Writer,
and Educator

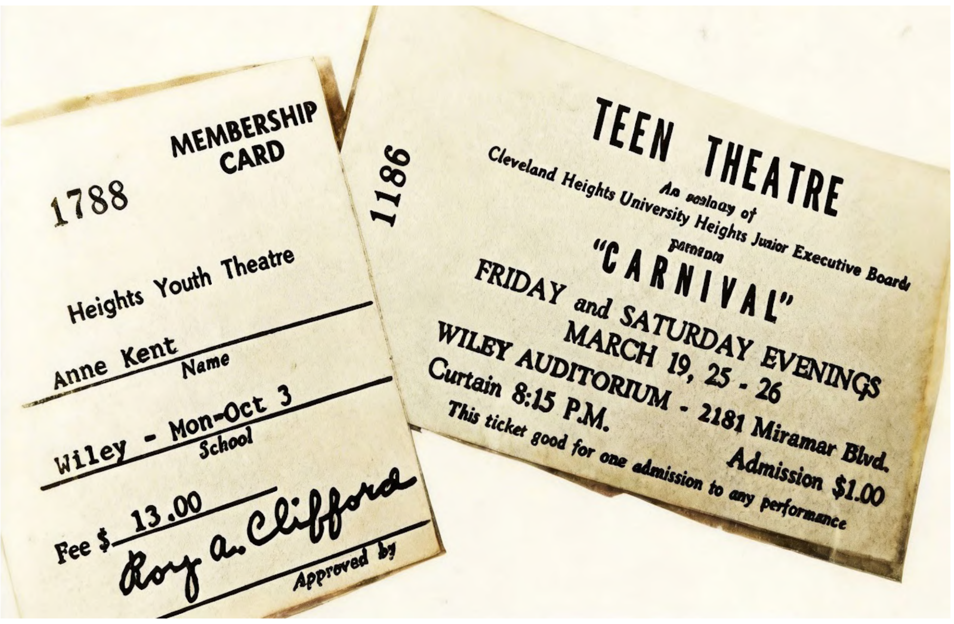
The school district I attended between 4th and 9th grades included a professionally managed theater arts program. In fifth grade, my class was treated to a live performance of *Pippi Longstocking*. The following year, I was cast in a small, non-speaking role in *Tom Sawyer*. My parents enrolled me in Heights Youth Theatre classes upon starting Junior High.

Classes were held after school and during the summer. Using the Stanislavski Method, we were tutored in how to step into a role, not just to play "make believe."

Unfortunately, I didn't understand many of the scenarios, and, worse, failed to understand why I didn't *get it*. One lesson challenged us to enact waiting for a bus in the freezing cold. How might we convey that to an audience?

At times I felt like an imposter. I learned through echoing and mimicking others. I despaired of ever having a lead role in a play but learned some social skills and, for the first time, felt like I belonged.

The program, Heights Youth Theatre, is among the oldest children's theaters in the US. Founded in 1945, it operated under the auspices of the Cleveland Heights--University Heights Board of Education. Jerry Leonard, the group's first director and guiding force, shaped it into a full-fledged professional children's theater company. Heights Youth Theatre was initially the only children's theater in the country that performed plays by and for young people that were not subsidiary to a regular theater.



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MEMBERSHIP CARD
Heights Youth Theatre
Anne Kent
Name
Wiley - Mon-Oct 3
School
Fee $ 13.00
Roy a. Clifford
Approved by

1186
TEEN THEATRE
Cleveland Heights University Heights Junior Executive Board
"CARNIVAL"
FRIDAY and SATURDAY EVENINGS
MARCH 19, 25 - 26
WILEY AUDITORIUM - 2181 Miramar Blvd.
Curtain 8:15 P.M.
Admission $1.00
This ticket good for one admission to any performance

Annie Kent's Childhood Theatre Souvenirs

In recent years, Heights Youth Theatre expanded its offerings to include programs that provide opportunities for young participants to engage in dialogue around timely social issues such as diversity, building relationships, and being equitable and inclusive (hytstagemanager, 2022).

Structured Environment and Purposeful Engagement

Long focused on Neurotypical performers, the "needs of autistic students… have not been investigated to the same level [as those with other disabilities] perhaps due to perceptions of autistic people as only engaging with theatre in educational or therapeutic contexts or as audience members, rather than as professionals" (Glen, 2025).

The dramatic arts (Drama) tend to be a highly structured environment, which certainly aligns with the preferences of many autistic individuals who thrive on routine and predictability. The process of rehearsing, learning lines, and following stage directions provides purposeful, meaningful experiences in a controlled setting, making it easier for autistic participants to engage and succeed.

Social Skills, Communication, |and Emotional Growth

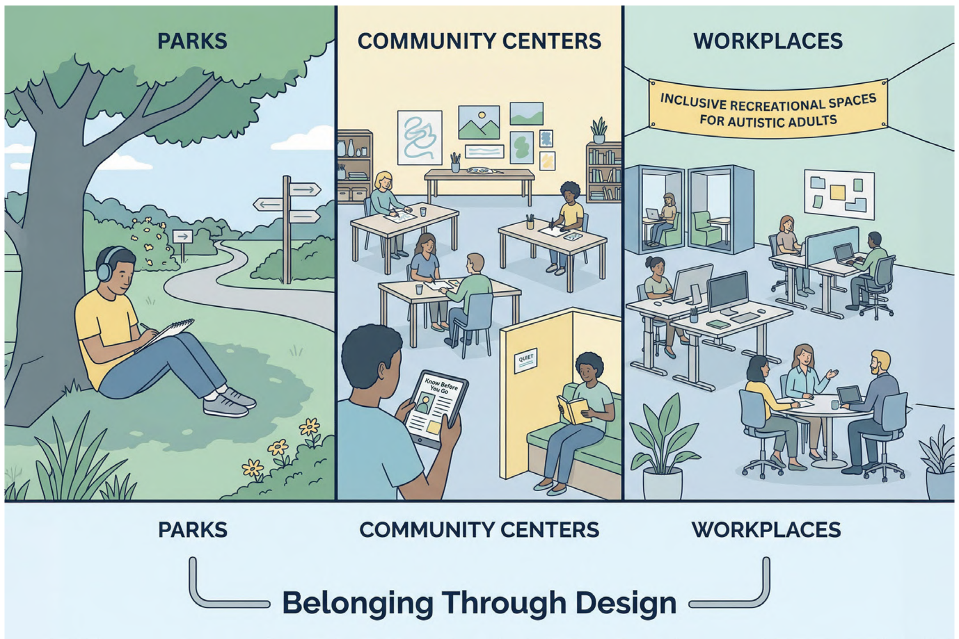
Participating in theater helps build social and communication skills. Through collaborative activities—such as acting, improvisation, and group rehearsals—autistic individuals can practice eye contact, dialogue, turn-taking, and non-verbal communication

see Performing Arts on page 45

Creating Inclusive Recreational Spaces for Autistic Adults: The Role of Parks, Community Centers, and Workplaces

By Candace Weaver-Dowds, LMSW
Sr. Manager of Strategic Initiatives
NEXT for Autism

In theory, the community center gym was accessible. The ramps were well maintained, automatic doors readily available, and the hours of operation were clearly posted. However, when Jessie arrived after work, the fluorescent lights were glaring, the music was blaring, and every machine was occupied. After a full workday navigating back-to-back meetings, inundation of sensory stimuli, and working through social nuance, the gym's environment felt overwhelming. They left without exercising, not due to lack of motivation, but because the space required more regulation than Jessie had left to give. Unfortunately, Jessie's experience mirrors that on many autistic adults.



Inclusive or equitable recreation is often focused on activities for children. Accessibility often focuses on adaptive playgrounds, sensory-friendly story times at libraries, and even youth sports leagues. While these are all needed, autistic adults experience some of the highest rates of social isolation, underemployment, and community exclusion. When recreation is not intentionally designed for adults, isolation deepens. Neuroinclusive recreational options are not a luxury; they are a pathway to belonging.

As autistic adults age, they frequently report a loss of structured social opportunism after school-based services end; environments can feel overstimulating or unpredictable, and there seems to be limited spaces designed with adult sensory needs in mind. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention identifies physical activity and social connection as critical determinants of long-term health. Having options for recreation is necessary for reducing feelings of isolation, supporting regulation, and strengthening community ties. But Access alone is insufficient. There are simple things municipalities can do to design and offer opportunities for connection and belonging.

City parks and community centers are often assumed to be naturally inclusive, yet without intentional design they can unintentionally exclude autistic adults. Open air and green space can be regulating, but equitable access depends on predictable navigation, sensory-aware environments, adult-focused programming, and fair scheduling. Parks become more usable when they incorporate clear and consistent trail markers, posted maps or easy-to-navigate apps, and clearly identified rest areas, because predictability reduces anxiety and increases independence. Sensory-regulating features such as quiet areas away from playgrounds and sports fields, shaded seating, and low-traffic walking routes help create environments that feel usable rather than overwhelming. Availability of these simple accommodations not only benefit autistic adults but also older adults, individuals with mental health disabilities, or even trauma survivors. Adult-focused programming, including guided nature walks, photography or birdwatching groups, structured outdoor yoga, conservation initiatives, and community gardening, all provide interest-based entry points that reduce reliance on unstructured social interaction.

Similarly, community centers offer valuable structure for connection and wellness

see Inclusive Spaces on page 44

How Animals and Pet Therapy Enhance Recreational Experiences for Autistic Individuals

By Mordy Rosenberg
Director of Operations
Blue Jay ABA

For individuals on the autism spectrum, recreational activities can sometimes feel overwhelming or stressful. Loud noises, crowded spaces, or unfamiliar social interactions can make participation challenging. This is where animals can make a big difference.

Animals provide a comforting, non-judgmental presence. Their predictable behavior, gentle companionship, and simple cues can make people feel safe and motivated to join in activities. Whether it's a therapy dog visiting a summer program or a horse in a riding lesson, animals help recreational experiences feel more welcoming, enjoyable, and accessible.

Even casual interactions with pets—like brushing a rabbit, playing fetch with a dog, or watching fish swim—can turn ordinary activities into meaningful moments that bring joy and engagement.

Emotional Benefits: Feeling Calm and Confident

One of the biggest benefits of animals in recreation is emotional support. Interacting with pets or therapy animals can reduce stress, anxiety, and feelings of frustration. Stroking a dog, holding a guinea pig, or being near a horse can trigger the release of endorphins and oxytocin—chemicals that help people feel calm and happy.

For children and teens on the autism spectrum, animals offer unconditional acceptance. This can help boost confidence, support emotional regulation, and provide comfort in situations that might otherwise be overwhelming.

Adults on the spectrum also benefit from animal interactions. A calm presence, like a therapy dog during a community program, can make group activities less stressful and help participants focus on the experience rather than anxiety.

Encouraging Movement and Participation

Animals don't just help emotionally—they motivate physical activity, too. Activities like walking a dog, grooming a horse, or playing interactive games with pets naturally encourage movement.

For children, these activities develop coordination, fine motor skills, and energy management. Teenagers and adults may also find that animals give them a reason to try new recreational activities or participate in group sessions they might usually avoid.

Even simple interactions, like feeding a fish or helping care for a small pet, can build routines, focus, and responsibility—skills that carry over into everyday life.

Building Social Connections

Animals act as natural bridges for social interaction. For individuals on the autism spectrum, starting conversations or joining group activities can sometimes be intimidating. Animals make it easier.

For example, a therapy dog at a recreational program can spark conversation and create shared experiences. Children might take turns helping the dog, share stories about pets at home, or work together during activities involving the animal.

see Pet Therapy on page 48

Do's and Don'ts of Connecting Through Classical Music: An Autistic Perspective

By Eric Schissel
Formatting Consultant
Mental Health News Education

Neurodivergent special interests can be more or less "obscure." The author used to be fascinated by mathematics and was a math student through graduate school. Even at that time, I began spending an unsustainable amount of time in music libraries and record stores. Decades later, after writing several articles on various pieces of little-known music, among other things, it's safe to say where my sympathies now lie. The two, math and music, are linked in some ways. After many years of making connections through mutual love of music, I draw some through-lines.

Back in my grad school years and for the decade after, I made several connections with people because of common interests in music, more than I did because of mathematics. Early in college I already had some trouble deciding whether I wanted to major in music, math or philosophy. I had entered college with a strong focus on mathematics. However, an excellent philosophy class during my first year reminded me of my early interest in that subject, and I was always interested in music, first as a would-be performer and as a listener, then as an intrigued theory student and, increasingly, amateur researcher, to the point where I began to be distracted from mathematics. This sequence of events and indecisions led to stretched attention, falling grades and, eventually, being asked to leave grad school after only three years, with a Master's, but not the PhD I had been aiming for. I was not yet properly diagnosed, and so was not able to take advantage of coping and organizational strategies that would have helped both generally and specifically with my responsibilities as a graduate assistant grader.

Positive examples of forming connections between and through music have been easy to find in my life history. One who has since died was a music appreciation teacher in London who emailed me when I got his friend's vita wrong in a webpage I had created. His friend had been an interesting English composer, born in 1901. The webpage was basically an incomplete musical worklist, but it went down when GeoCities did. We eventually corresponded at length, mostly about music, starting sometime in the early 1990s, and ending a little before his death in 2009. He and his wife joined me for dinner when I took my second trip to London in July 1999, after which he and I went to one of the Promenade Concerts at the Royal Albert Hall for a program of Debussy, Sibelius and, one at the beginning and one in between them, two terrific psalm settings by Lili Boulanger (1893-1918).

During the same week in London, I met up with someone I'd known online for at least two years, whom I ran into on a newsgroup while discussing the music of another 20th century British composer of interest to me [Benjamin Frankel, 1906-73]. I did not at first recognize the name of my new correspondent, only later realizing he was the author of the program notes on the CDs I had of that composer's music. We also kept up a good correspondence, and I had dinner and listened to broadcast tapes at his place.

One of my most substantial acquaintances I owe to music is with a composer, music professor, musicologist, researcher and

see Autistic Perspective on page 48

Traveling with Children with Autism or Sensory Needs: Tips for Families and Single Parents

By Mary Ann Hughes, MBA
Special Needs Certified Divorce Coach
Special Family Transitions LLC

Spring and Summer travel planning is in full swing, but for many parents, especially those with children with autism or sensory needs, the thought of planning and taking a vacation can be daunting. Fortunately, there are ways to make travel more manageable and enjoyable, even as a single parent of a child with unique challenges, creating family experiences and memories that will last a lifetime.

To navigate the challenges of traveling with kids on the spectrum, the secret to a successful vacation is following the “3 P’s: Plan, Prepare, and Provide.” As a mom of now young adult children on the autism spectrum, I’m sharing tips I’ve learned over the years, along with strategies I’ve added to my toolkit since becoming a single mom, to make travel smoother and more enjoyable.

Plan

Planning ahead is the first step to success when traveling with children, especially those with exceptional needs. Choose a destination that is manageable, offering a variety of activities but not so much that it becomes overwhelming. What feels manageable may change over time, depending on past travel experiences and a parent’s confidence and comfort level in traveling with their children.

If traveling by air, try not to schedule flights too early, when rushing to the airport may be stressful, or too late, when children may be tired or cranky. For long or international flights, keep in mind that your child may not sleep. One of my kids stayed awake for an entire overseas flight, so be prepared with activities to keep them occupied.

This is not the time to hide your child’s disability. Notify the airline of any special needs when making the reservation, in their online system, and again at airport check-in, security, and at the gate. Contacting TSA Cares ahead of time can make screening and security lines easier to navigate. Be sure to tell the gate agent you’d like pre-boarding for your family. Most agents are happy to accommodate, though some airlines may allow only one adult to pre-board with the individual with the disability.

My son is fine on the plane, if he has a window seat. He will literally look out the window the entire flight. (He even kept the window shade open during an overnight international flight, much to the chagrin of the flight attendant who kept asking us to lower it. But better an open window than an outburst on the plane!) So be sure to book early to reserve a window seat, especially when there are enough seats available for the entire party to sit together.

Here’s a pro tip: If you book a restrictive fare that doesn’t allow seat selection at the time of reservation, you can call the airline afterward to have seats assigned together, especially if you’re traveling with a child with a disability or a young child.

Some airport information desks offer the Hidden Disabilities Sunflower lanyard, which signals knowledgeable airport personnel to provide extra support to individuals with non-visible disabilities, such as autism and anxiety. More details on this global program are available at hdsunflower.com.

see Traveling Tips on page 49

How Enhancing Access to Art Activities Supports Well-Being and Social Inclusion of Children on the Autism Spectrum

By Laura Costello, BA
Elementary Educator
and Children’s Author

For many toddlers, some of the earliest joys are simple things: the playground, toy trains, building towers out of blocks. But one of the first things that truly captivated my son Matthew was something much quieter.

It was crayons.

When Matthew was very young — before he was speaking much — he could sit for long stretches of time with a piece of paper and a small handful of crayons. While the world around him felt loud or overwhelming, he would lie on his stomach on the floor and draw. Again and again, he made large spirals that curled inward, then smaller spirals inside them. Sometimes he paused to study the colors in front of him as if choosing the one that felt just right.

I remember noticing something remarkable about those moments. When the environment around him became noisy or stressful, Matthew did not melt down or withdraw. Instead, he quietly returned to his drawings. The crayons, the colors, and the rhythm of the spirals seemed to calm him. Even before he could explain his feelings with words, he had discovered a way to regulate his own nervous system.

At the time, I did not yet have the insight to describe what I was witnessing. I only knew that art seemed to give my son something important — a place where he could organize his thoughts, soothe himself, and communicate in a way that felt natural to him.

Years later, both research and experience would confirm what many parents and educators have come to understand. For many children on the autism spectrum, art is not simply a hobby — it serves as an important way to foster emotional expression and regulation, communication, and social connection.

Artistic expression is much more than a leisure activity for many children on the autism spectrum. It functions as a natural form of communication. Art can assist children on the autism spectrum in expressing themselves in ways that do not rely on words. Society is largely structured around neurotypical norms, where verbal communication is often seen as the primary form of expression. Children who communicate differently may therefore be misunderstood.

Engaging in artistic experiences gives these children the opportunity to express aspects of themselves and their life experience that they cannot fully convey through words. Many are innately wired to think and express themselves visually, and art provides a meaningful outlet for this form of expression.

Children frequently experience emotions they cannot yet articulate. This is true for all children, but it can be especially difficult for those who struggle with verbal communication or social cues. Art offers a way to express feelings without needing to find the “right” words.

A child who cannot explain frustration might draw bold, energetic strokes across a page. Another child might choose soft colors or repeated patterns that reflect calm or comfort. Over time, these visual expressions can help caregivers and educators better understand a child’s emotional world.

Art therapy research has similarly shown

see Art Activities on page 49

The Voice Inside - How the Arts Express the Unspoken and Unleash Pathways to Success

By Gena Sims
Founder and Executive Director
Autism Theater Project

There have been generations of people with a message God gave them that the world never heard. Children who seemed voiceless on the surface but had powerful voices inside. Caregivers, parents, and teachers who didn't yet have all the tools needed to help the voiceless find their voices. The Autism Theater Project is working to change that.

The arts are especially powerful for people on the spectrum, because they do what so many of them crave: express the unspoken. Music is universal, and movement tells a story everyone can understand. A painting speaks to you in your own language. Our loved ones can speak to us through art even when their mouth can't say the words. And sometimes, what they create helps their mouths say the words better. In the Autism Theater Project's early drama workshops, I'd come across kids who seemed nonverbal at first and then started to reveal more speech over the course of our 8-week sessions, as they became more comfortable with expressing themselves.

Singer, The Voice Inside actress, guitarist, and composer Kaylah Taylor performs her original song "Autism Speaks" at the South Beach Jazz Festival. Credit: Zachary Hoaglund

Believing in a person and creating a safe environment makes an incredible difference when it comes to unlocking their potential. I first discovered this helping raise my little sister. I believed in her, she believed in me, and in some ways, we helped raise each other.

For both of us, the arts were a bridge. When my sister was in elementary school, she had very few words, but through dancing, listening to music, and just her smile, she communicated so much. Music helped her connect with people when conversations were hard. Drawing helped her show me how she saw the world. And the more she felt connected, believed in, and understood, the more she found confidence in her own forms of communication.

In high school, my experience with my sister led me to the Friendship Circle, where I met another friend with autism who showed me the power of communicating through the arts. I'll call her Elizabeth for the sake of this article. On the first day we met, Elizabeth had us start creating stories. I got to know her through stories we made up on the spot about a princess. At sixteen, she said she feared other people would think her habit of making stories was childish. I told her it could be a career path.

Fast forward ten years later, a bunch of young adults who refused to grow out of making up stories were determined to turn that passion into a meaningful career. Determined to inspire the next generation, the Autism Theater Project filmed the first episode of our TV series, *The Voice Inside*. My co-writer, Matteo Esposito, worked with me religiously for years to tell his success story through *The Voice Inside* and provide a platform for others to tell their own. Everyone has a voice. Everyone has the power to be resilient. The key is just to

see The Voice Inside on page 48

How Special Interests Help My Mental Health as an Autistic Adult

By Cory Morrison
Freelance Writer

When people on the spectrum are vulnerable to society ostracizing them because of their autistic traits, unfortunately, in some cases, it means that their mental health can deteriorate, as well. Indeed, autistic people have two to 10 times higher rates of mental health conditions than neurotypicals, and that is incredibly concerning (Beck, 2024).

Where do I fall here? I've struggled a lot mentally in my life to the point where I've had days where I just lay down, do almost nothing and feel that everything is too hopeless no matter what I do and no matter how hard I try to improve. Workplace issues, friendship fallouts, social rejection, guilt over past mistakes and a general feeling of being behind others in life have greatly contributed to this kind of mental state that I've often had since my teens and still do sometimes experience. There's, thankfully, a bigger fish to distract and override these mental health issues once I've had enough time to make sense of it all, and that is special interest

It's important to be aware that special interests may not always work for every autistic person who struggles, as the spectrum is so broad to the point that you can't say that too many things about the condition are universal (Chiang et. al, 2021).

Are Special Interests Linked to Improved Mental Health?

A special interests study indicates that while some neurotypical people may not understand why special interests are beneficial to autistic people, many autistics who participated in the study say they bring so many benefits (Long, 2025). In fact, the study says special interests can help autistic people not only improve their mental health but help them communicate with others better, which challenges a common assumption that autistic people having special interests always means that they are completely isolated in society focusing on them. One participant said, "Special interests are something that I'm motivated to do, even when I'm not motivated to do things. Like when I'm depressed, they give me a reason to get out of bed. … They give me structure and often in times where I feel very hopeless or overwhelmed, or stressed or burnt out," while another said, "When you're able to grasp on to a special interest, I think it's a lot easier, mental-health wise, and ability-to-live wise."

Building Online Friendships Through a Shared Interest in Weather

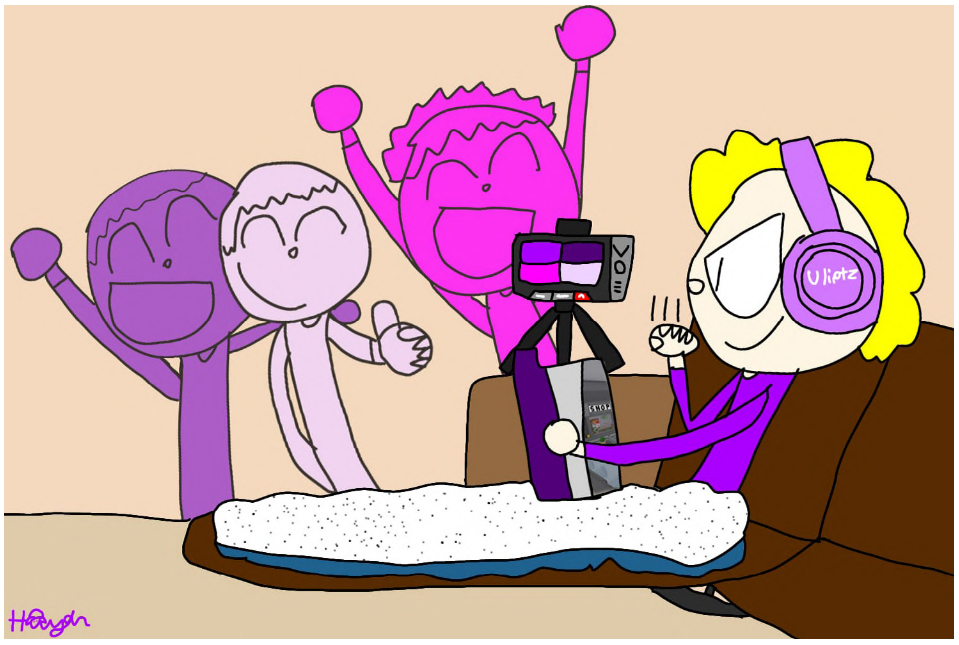
Going back to the early 2010s when I graduated from high school and started my first college program, although I did try to be more social after being nearly completely isolated in high school, I did have some rocky friendships. I had some academic difficulties in college plus friendship fallouts back in the 2011 to 2013 period, and by then, I didn't have much going for me other than my special interest in weather. It all truly shook me. However, that interest, which started in 2006, I started to explore further by early 2014. I would read social media comments on a weather site, read weather blogs, read weather forums and track weather through models, and through these comments, I found online friends (many who I still have today) who not only share my weather interest but have the same kind of weather preferences that I have (generally warm, dry weather).

During the mid-to-late 2010s, with these new online friendships combined with meeting people at a warehouse/office job,

see Special Interests on page 39

Online Recreation and Autistic Teens:
A Parent's and Carer's Guide to Safe Supported Gaming

By Emma Sharrocks, BA, MA, PGCE
Officially Diagnosed Autistic Woman, Parent to a 13-Year-Old Autistic Boy, Full Time Applied Psychology Degree Student, and Former Further Education Teacher.



It's a Thursday evening. I am just about to dish out dinner when my son Haydn runs into the kitchen with a massive grin on his teenage face whilst doing a happy autistic dance. He yells (I wince as my own autistic hearing struggles when he is so excited), "Oh my God, T, A, C and L (names changed to protect identity) are all on my Minecraft server at the same time!" Cut to him shoveling down his usual beige-food dinner whilst he watches the team chat, eager to engage. Sitting next to him, I hear him bark out orders to his "team-mates", patiently reprimand one friend who defaced another friend's base (with my regular request for him to reduce his voice volume as he is unaware of its increase when he talks online), and regularly he will ask them "are you ok, am I being ok, am I being a good friend?". This made me realize that he and his fellow male autistic (some AUHD) peers were learning life skills here that they fail to in mainstream classrooms due specifically to allistic students and a lack of trained classroom support. For me, this is the major positive of online recreation. My teenage autistic son has a social life that I as a female autistic child of the 80's failed to experience. He is safe in my home after a draining day socializing with both autistic and allistic people at school, and he can exit the interaction at any time when he crashes. But I know my opinions are not widely shared.

Online gaming is not a form of socialization many parents, and society, approve of. When parents were asked for their thoughts concerning gaming and their 13-15 year olds in 2024, 41% said they were worried about "(T)he content of the games they are playing, in terms of violence, bad language, disturbing content, etc.", 44% mentioned "(T)he pressure to make in-game purchases, for things like access to upgrades, skins, loot-boxes, in-game currency or other rewards." 48% were aware of "(T)he possibility of them being bullied by other players, and "(T)he possibility of them talking to strangers while gaming, whether within the game or via the chat function" was the worry of 62% of surveyed parents (*Statista.com*, 2024). The surveys do not specify if the 13–15-year-old child is autistic or not, but it is well known that autistic teenagers can be far more susceptible to scams, to trusting new online "friends" without meeting them IRL (in real life), and to misinterpret other player's responses.

Returning to my son and his friends, I can categorically say that there is a fair share of bad language and discussions centered around toilet jokes and meme references (stereotypical boys humor). My son attends school with four of the teammates, and the youngest one he met at a local LGBTQ club. They play on a private server that my son set up which can only be accessed by the players he invites (so no stranger danger here), and he talks to them all on Discord or WhatsApp video chat whilst playing. Rather than being a dictator, my son has given admin rights to everyone to promote equality. This can backfire when one player falls out with an

see Online Recreation on page 50

Beyond Barriers: Making Mathematics Accessible for Autistic Students

By Ailton Barcelos da Costa, PhD
Nassim Chamel Elias, PhD
Federal University of São Carlos
Brazil

Mathematics is often perceived as a discipline marked by abstraction and complexity, frequently associated with low academic performance among students in general. For students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), these challenges may be intensified by cognitive, linguistic, and executive-function barriers. However, difficulties in mathematics should not be interpreted as an inability to learn, but rather as an indication that instructional approaches may need to be reconsidered.

Research over the last decade has advanced our understanding of how students with ASD learn mathematics, yet important gaps remain. Fleury et al. (2014) emphasized that evidence-based mathematical interventions for students with ASD are still limited, particularly when compared to literacy-focused practices. Even so, there is strong consensus that access to meaningful mathematics instruction is essential for students with ASD, as mathematical competence is directly related to autonomy, problem-solving, and independent living skills (Bouck et al., 2021).

Executive Function and Mathematical Learning in ASD

One of the most frequently reported barriers to mathematical learning among students with ASD involves executive-function difficulties. Executive functions include working memory, inhibitory control, and cognitive flexibility, skills that are fundamental for planning, monitoring, and adapting strategies during problem-solving situations (Demetriou et al., 2018).

According to the Núcleo Ciência Pela Infância (NCPI, 2016), executive functions support conscious control over thoughts, actions, and emotions, allowing individuals to regulate behavior and make autonomous decisions. When these skills are compromised, students may struggle to retain numerical information, shift between strategies, or inhibit impulsive responses during mathematical tasks.

A recent integrative review conducted by Costa and Elias (2025), examining studies published between 2015 and 2024, identified six primary barriers to mathematical learning in children with ASD:

- Executive-function deficits, particularly in working memory;
- Intelligence quotient (IQ) as a predictor of mathematical performance;
- Language difficulties affecting comprehension of mathematical vocabulary and problem statements;
- Visuospatial processing limitations;
- Weak early number sense;
- Insufficient or poorly mediated use of concrete and virtual instructional materials.

These findings highlight the need for instructional strategies that reduce cognitive load and provide structured, meaningful support during mathematics instruction.

Making Math More Engaging: The Role of Concrete Materials

Does mathematics instruction for students with ASD need to be rigid and abstract? Evidence suggests otherwise. Concrete and hands-on materials can transform

see Beyond Barriers on page 51

Creating a Home Environment That Encourages Play and Leisure for Autistic Children

By Ari Ginzy
Founder and CEO
Wonder Star ABA

Play isn't just fun—it's a vital part of development for autistic children. It helps build social skills, creativity, problem-solving, and emotional regulation. Leisure time, whether it's reading, art, or sensory activities, provides opportunities for relaxation, exploration, and independence.

However, the home environment plays a big role in whether children feel motivated and supported to engage in play. A space that's cluttered, overstimulating, or lacks engaging materials can make play feel stressful or unappealing.

Creating a home that encourages play and leisure is about designing spaces that feel safe, engaging, and tailored to your child's interests and sensory needs.

Design Spaces with Sensory Needs in Mind

Autistic children often have unique sensory preferences. Some may seek stimulation, while others may feel easily overwhelmed. Designing spaces with these needs in mind can encourage participation in play and leisure:

- **Quiet Corners:** A small, cozy area with soft cushions, blankets, or a tent can provide a calming retreat.
- **Sensory-Friendly Materials:** Incorporate items like weighted blankets, fidget toys, or tactile materials such as sand, water, or clay.
- **Lighting Considerations:** Soft, natural lighting is often more comfortable than harsh fluorescent lights. Adjustable lamps or string lights can add warmth.
- **Noise Control:** Noise-canceling headphones, rugs, or soundproofing materials can reduce unwanted noise and help your child focus on play.

By tailoring spaces to sensory needs, children are more likely to engage in activities without feeling overwhelmed.

Organize Play Materials Thoughtfully

Accessible, well-organized materials encourage children to initiate play independently:

- **Open Storage:** Clear bins or labeled containers make it easy for children to find toys, art supplies, or games.
- **Rotate Toys:** Keep some items out of reach and rotate them periodically to maintain interest.
- **Create Activity Zones:** Designate areas for different types of play—art, building, sensory, or imaginative activities.
- **Use Visual Supports:** Pictures or charts showing where items belong can help children stay organized and reduce frustration.

A well-organized home makes play less stressful and more inviting, helping children explore freely and confidently.

see Play and Leisure on page 50

Autistic Well-Being from page 18

highlighted as having implicit traits that neurodivergent viewers identify as symptoms of autism and discuss on social media.

One final benefit to anime as a special interest is the welcoming communities that are formed. In an article by Rose, Galbraith, and Thomas-Parr (2025), autistic individuals who enjoy anime feel a strong sense of identity within the community. The anime community has been identified as a 'stim culture,' or a community in which stimming or sensory experiences are openly accepted. The art of cosplay, or dressing up in costumes, and participating in activities related to their favorite show reduces the need for masking. Additionally, participating in cosplay has been shown to create a sense of self-identity and belonging within a community where they feel safe to express themselves (Rose, Galbraith, & Thomas-Parr, 2025).

In my own personal experience, anime has been a special interest of mine since I was a child. The exaggerated expressions of characters made it easier for me to listen to conversations and understand what was going on. *Pokémon* was a big series that started when I was in school, and it allowed me to talk to many classmates who I may have never spoken to before. As an adult, going to conventions has also been a great way to meet others who share similar interests to my own. The worries of being judged for liking anime or dressing up in costumes go out the door when I get to talk to fellow excited fans. Many characters I enjoy watching the most also have traits I find myself relating to in my own social life. Specific routines, special interests, and social awkwardness are reflected in characters in ways I see myself. In therapy, I incorporate anime into sessions by discussing different anime protagonists and how the client may relate to them. Seeing their own journeys or struggles through the eyes of a drawn character can make a big difference.

Jenna Winkelman, MA

Although anime provides positive experiences, as well as opportunities for social learning and community development, it is important to highlight some potential downsides. For individuals who may also experience symptoms of anxiety or depression, consumption of anime can become a coping mechanism that provides an escape from the real world (Tzila et al., 2025). For parents and caregivers, reducing the amount of screen time for children and adolescents is recommended. In doing so, young individuals with ASD can continue practicing social interactions with peers and developing a sense of community.

More popular anime series also create a network of individuals on different social media websites or chatting services. Many users may post misinformation and theories that can be stressful to individuals with ASD (Georgiou et al., 2024). Parents should remain cautious of the digital environments their children or teens interact with and provide time to discuss their worries. It is also important to monitor the anime they are watching to ensure it is age appropriate. Many websites and journals from families provide insight into anime that would be suitable for different age groups. Parents and caregivers should also continue to monitor any social media content their child may experience surrounding their anime of interest.

In conclusion, anime has become a growing special interest for individuals with autism. The exaggerated art style, straightforward plots, and subtle traits of neurodivergence provide both immersion and opportunities to practice and study socializing. Autistic fans have also found communities to be welcoming and a safe space to unmask and express themselves through cosplay and discussions. It would be of great benefit to further research into ways autistic anime fans relate to characters and what anime means to them personally. Parents and caregivers should also remain involved in their child's exposure to anime, ensuring they are age-appropriate and easy to follow. School anime clubs and family-friendly conventions can also provide other opportunities for children and teenagers to practice socializing and become accustomed to a welcoming community.

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***Inclusive Recreation** from page 1*

ability are present. Over time, these patterns limit access and make it harder for people to feel that they belong.

For this vision to become everyday practice, training matters. Staff and program leaders need opportunities to learn how to recognize participation barriers, identify ways to work around and how to adapt activities in meaningful ways, and how to support a wide range of communication and movement styles with confidence. When training is grounded in clinical knowledge, lived experience, and real-world application, it gives teams practical tools they can use immediately. It helps move inclusion from intention to action, and from isolated efforts to consistent practice across classrooms, gyms, playgrounds, and community programs. With shared understanding and skilled guidance, inclusive recreation becomes something people know how to do, not something they hope will happen.

Effective training in inclusive recreation needs to be guided by professionals who understand disability and neurodivergence and who work directly in group-based programs. This includes experiences with communication differences, movement needs, and the decisions staff make during activities. Training led by specialists in inclusive recreation and clinical practice helps staff recognize participation barriers early and make appropriate adjustments while keeping programs safe and meaningful for all involved.

Inclusive recreation requires intentional design and skilled facilitation. When staff are trained to notice how each person communicates and how each person moves, they can adjust activities, so participation becomes possible rather than optional. When peers are guided to adapt to their own expectations, group activities become shared rather than remaining separated. For children, this supports social problem-solving and emotional regulation within play. For adults, this supports connection and confidence through meaningful group participation. Over time, these experiences strengthen functional skills and mental well-being, and they build a lasting sense of belonging within community life.

Practical changes in recreation programs often start small. Posting a simple visual and/or written schedule can help students know what is coming next. Keeping routines consistent can make transitions easier and reduce stress. Slightly adjusting a rule, the pace of a game, or how equipment is used can make it possible for more students to remain in the activity with their peers. When activities are broken into clear steps and students are given more than one way to join, participation becomes more natural without changing the true nature and intention of the program. Over time, listening to students and families' helps staff see what is working and what could be made more available, accessible, and welcoming.

Adrienne Robertiello, BS, ACDS

In schools, recreation also aligns closely with educational goals and the intent of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Participation in physical education, recess, clubs, and extracurricular activities supports skills that are central to many IEPs, including social communication, self-regulation, peer interaction, motor planning, and participation in group routines. When recreation is viewed as an IDEA Related Service, it becomes part of how students practice functional skills in natural settings rather than only in isolated instructional time. These experiences allow goals to be addressed through individual and/or group play, movement and shared activity, which often increases motivation and generalization. In this way, recreation supports access to the curriculum, participation in school life, and progress toward meaningful educational outcomes.

Strong connections between schools and community recreation programs further extend these benefits. For afterschool programs and camps, these partnerships help staff understand which supports already help a child take part and how to carry those supports into group activities without changing how the program runs. This creates smoother transitions between school and out-of-school programs and helps children remain with their peers during activities. When districts, municipalities, and local organizations communicate and collaborate, students are more likely to experience continuity between school-based activities and community participation. This supports the spirit of the ADA by promoting access to typical programs rather than relying on separate options. These partnerships can look different depending on setting and resources. Urban communities may draw on large park systems or adaptive sports programs. Suburban areas may partner with local recreation departments or YMCAs. Rural and tribal communities may rely on schools, cultural centers, or shared regional programs. No single organization is expected to meet every need. When each setting contributes within its capacity, and when inclusion is approached as a shared responsibility, participation becomes more consistent, more sustainable, and more reflective of the communities people live in.

Caitlyn Foelsch, CTRS, MHA, CHM

This way of building inclusive recreation also strengthens programs over time. When staff learn how to adapt to activities within existing settings, fewer people are pushed into separate programs and more can remain with their peers. Schools and community programs spend less energy creating parallel options and more energy supporting participation in what options already exist. Over time, this leads to more consistent programming, stronger staff skills, and greater trust from families.

Recreation supports connection and contribution. When schools and community organizations recognize it as central to development, they create pathways to belonging that extend across the lifespan. Investment in professional training, clinical guidance, and inclusive program design strengthens participation, deepens relationships, and supports full engagement in community life.

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***Wellbeing** from page 6*

are encouraged to pursue activities that spark curiosity or joy, new forms of learning and connection often follow.

The question facing clinicians and educators may therefore be less about whether hobbies or leisure activities belong within intervention, and more about how intentionally they are incorporated.

If wellbeing is a central outcome of autism support - as many families and self-advocates increasingly argue - then the conditions that nurture wellbeing deserve careful attention. Experiences of shared interest, exploration, and enjoyment may be among the most powerful of those conditions.

Dylan's story ultimately offers a reminder that the trajectory of development is not determined solely by the intensity of instruction. Sometimes it begins with a much simpler question: what does this person love to do?

When that question is taken seriously, new possibilities often emerge.

Katie Curran, MAPP, is the Chief Wellbeing Officer of Proof Positive, a nonprofit dedicated to spreading the science and skills of happiness for individuals with autism and their communities. With over two decades of experience, Katie has developed pioneering programs that integrate Positive Psychology with Applied Behavior Analysis to support strength-based growth and human flourishing. She also serves as a primary instructor with the University of Pennsylvania's Master Resilience Training team. Katie holds a Master's of Applied Positive Psychology (MAPP) from the University of Pennsylvania and earned her bachelor's degree in psychology with honors from Towson University in 2004. With her love for lifelong learning, Katie is pursuing a Master of Science in Nonprofit Leadership at the University of Pennsylvania.

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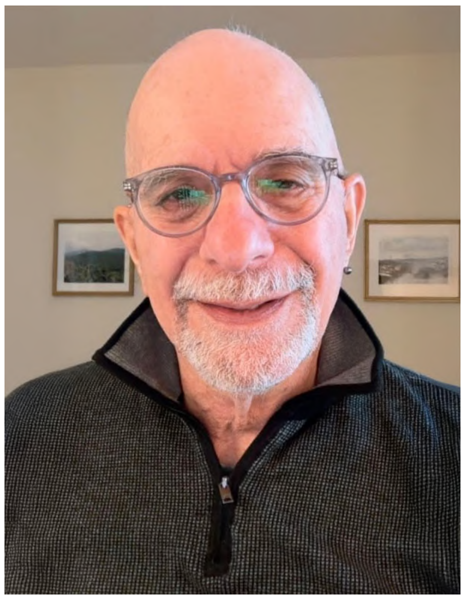
Autistic Joy from page 13

people with disabilities and their families who wanted to receive an education that was equitable to that provided for people without disabilities. Parents, led by the Arc of the United States, had advocated for this law since 1950. This law established the right of every child to a free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment, with an Individualized Educational Program (I.E.P.) based upon specific goals and methods to achieve those goals. This law became the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1990.

Also, in 1990, when the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was stalled in Congress, dozens of activists abandoned their wheelchairs and other mobility aids and began crawling up the 83 steps of the U.S. Capitol. This direct action, known as the "Capitol Crawl,"; physically demonstrated the architectural and societal barriers they faced daily. Protester Jennifer Keelan, age 8 at that time, declared, "I'll take all night if I have to." The powerful images of this action, documented in the 2020 movie "Crip Camp," helped pressure Congress to finally pass the landmark ADA legislation. Those rights to diversity, equity, and inclusion are now being gutted by the current Washington administration. People in wheelchairs, who were pushing back protesting cuts to Medicaid in the "Big Beautiful Bill," were greeted by getting zip-tied and arrested on June 26, 2025, in the U. S. Capitol.

Having grown up in the 1960s, I was deeply impacted by the human rights and anticolonial movements led by Mahatma Ghandi, Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, etc. As I have deepened my knowledge of that history, it has humbled me to understand that we stand on the shoulders of those who have come before us, and we have a responsibility to those who come after us. Ghandi would advise us something to the effect of "Be the change you wish to see in the world." So, it is up to us in the autism community of advocates, parents, families, and helping professionals to pay it forward to those who come after us to win back, protect, and advance our cause in civil and disability rights. As the Jewish poet, Emma Lazarus is quoted, "Until we are all free, none of us are free."



Robert Naseef, PhD

In the recent past, our community has continued our proud history through the pandemic. We have proven ourselves to be resilient as families and service providers who care for children or adults with disabilities. It has never been easy, but resilience has been baked into our very beings by the challenges we have faced repeatedly. It's been a process in which we've learned lots of coping skills that help us to face adversity, keep struggling, and bounce back.

The moral imperative for this struggle has connected us to each other. Facing setbacks in our own lived experience, we have practice persisting and moving forward despite our disappointments with some experiencing more adversity due to race and social class. We know how to face loneliness and alienation while finding hope and comfort in community. We must be vigilant about safety when our children, students, or clients don't understand danger. We have learned to adjust expectations. We have learned to face our fears and regulate our emotions. We have learned to accept that which we cannot control.

In our current sociopolitical environment, staying overwhelmed and immobilized is not a good option. Parents of autistic people are telling me how deeply troubled they are by their own feelings and how powerless they are to explain to their children what they may be seeing or hearing in the news. It reminds me of a quote from Mr. Rogers: "When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, "Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping."

In this existential and moral crisis, it takes courage to stand up to the moment speaking truth to power. We can become paralyzed, or we can take small steps on behalf of our children and their shared future. There are many things we can do to keep momentum and hope alive. For example, in Minnesota and other communities across the country, many thousands of volunteers have been delivering food to families who feel unsafe leaving their homes. This is a time to use all that we've learned about resilience and fortitude to persist in our values and beliefs. If you have the means, you can contribute money to food pantries. You can connect with mutual aid groups. You can exercise your free speech in protests and community meetings. You can educate yourself and others and take care of yourselves for the long haul. Our community and our families need us.

Personally, I find hope in the actions that people are taking to help. Recent examples include teams of carpenters who are actively replacing doors kicked in or broken down by federal agents. These efforts are often organized through local mutual aid networks like Stand with Minnesota, which organizes community actions and provides resources. Sometimes, it's just everyday people doing what they believe is the right thing to do. In Philadelphia, where the history of George Washington's slave quarters was removed from Independence National Historical Park in January by President Trump's order, people protested repeatedly, until a court order resulted in restoring the exhibit on February 19.

Advocacy organizations such as the Autism Self Advocacy Network, the Autism Society of America, and the Arc of the United States, regularly give us alerts about important advocacy issues with detailed explanations for elected representatives. Get on their mailing lists. Take small steps regularly.

Something vital that we can all do is to celebrate and protect our autistic or disabled family members and clients in a society that regards them as different and even less than. We protect the broader community by protecting them. In this respect, celebrating and protecting autistic joy is an act of resistance. This joy can be expressed through spinning, singing, vocalizing, pacing, and authentic interaction in various forms.

When we meet autistic individuals right where they are, we can celebrate their joy. One father told me recently that when he connects with his 14-year-old daughter, "it feels like a bolt of electricity." A mother told me that her 35-year-old son enjoys marking the calendar on the dates they will go to some of his favorite places. When a teenager holds a parent's hand like a preschooler in the supermarket while stimming with the other hand and vocalizing, a parent can protect them and their joy by not shushing them. When a college student still sleeps with their favorite stuffed animal, a parent can support them instead of telling them they should outgrow it. When my adult son puts his head on my shoulder like a little boy, I feel his uniquely human spirit that needs protection.

Connecting in community as we advocate for disability rights, there are countless examples that show acceptance and appreciation for the autistic experience of joy and well-being. In his "Letter from Birmingham Jail," Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote: "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny." How true today, as we strive to be a force for good while maintaining hope and faith for a better world.

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Traveling from page 21

from the device. We used this button to "Call mom" throughout our travels. I was also able to tap "find device" on the app and the device would ring. We reinforced, "Find your family" when it rings. Playing this game in everyday settings provided a motivating back-up plan in case of separation. This solution is not all encompassing; the tracking can be unreliable and is limited by range. Still that additional interactive reassurance acted like a software update for our collective nervous system.

Game-Based Grounding Strategies

We've made it through the airport; we have our seat belt on and now the take-off anxiety is in full gear. Rather than listing grounding strategies that are dismissed as quickly as an ad is skilled, try a different presentation. Swipe from the viral video self-model to the wheel spinner. This classic tool is available through a variety of apps or websites, providing options for grounding strategies within the wheel picker. This format can reduce caregiver prompting pressure. I like that the wheel can be easily accessed, pre-programmed, and modeled by a caregiver exactly when it's needed most.

Lauren Tucker, EdD

Final Destination Approaching

Just like having options within your travel itinerary, having quick access to technology resources to support the travel process is like packing snacks, you may not need them every minute, but when you do, you really do. Exploring these supports in everyday environments allows for adjustments and early introduction, so when the environment shifts, the support already feels safe and predictable. Curiosity and anxiety regarding travel is expected, but normalizing planning for supports as intentionally as we plan for logistics can create space for smoother transitions and softer landings.

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Community Events from page 14

typically absent in mainstream performances, where sensory conditions, seating expectations, and audience rules remain fixed. While environmental accommodations can support participation, another important step is identifying meaningful goals and the skills needed to help individuals engage successfully in these settings.

A practical starting point involves identifying and teaching the specific skills required to attend and stay engaged in these settings. Prior to teaching specific skills, it is important to first develop meaningful goals. Practitioners may also use structured assessment tools to identify goals that are meaningful, appropriate for the individual, aligned with family values, and achievable. For example, Gerhardt and Bahry's (2023) *Meaningful Goal Guide: An Open-Ended Interview Tool for Practitioners (MGG)* can be used to guide goal development. The following questions have been adapted from Gerhardt & Bahry (2023) to help identify skills that support participation in community spectator events:

- How does my child communicate their wants and needs while out in the community?
- How well is my child understood by others outside the immediate family?
- How does my child communicate socially, or for any reasons beyond wants/needs?
- What are some things that my child might find difficult to tolerate or accept?
- Are there behaviors my child engages in that may be inappropriate in certain settings, potentially dangerous to themselves or others, or that make it difficult for our family to participate in community events?
- Does my child demonstrate the safety skills needed to participate safely in community events (e.g., staying with caregivers, responding to safety instructions, and communicating if separated)?
- Does my child respond to basic instructions that may keep them safe? (e.g., "stop," "stay with me," "come here", "no")?
- How does my child communicate when they want to refuse something, leave an activity, or take a break?
- What activities does my child enjoy watching or participating in?

Madhura Deshpande

- What types of community events would I like my child to be able to attend with our family?
- How well does my child tolerate others being physically close to them or sharing space with them?
- Does my child show interest in shared activities with family members or peers?
- What types of social experiences seem to make my child happiest?

Once meaningful goals are established, participation in spectator events can be supported by systematically teaching the component skills that help individuals tolerate and engage in these environments. Isenhower et al. (2025) developed an assessment that considers an individual's preferences and activity engagement when identifying appropriate leisure activities. The authors evaluated an individual's leisure preference profile across several phases by examining key components of leisure activities, including social interaction versus no interaction, stationary versus movement, and electronic versus non-electronic activities. Activities that aligned with the individual's preference profile resulted in higher engagement and fewer problem behaviors.

Parents and practitioners can begin by targeting waiting and endurance skills, such as remaining seated or standing in a designated area while the event is underway. These behaviors can be shaped gradually by starting with short durations (e.g., watching brief sports clips at home) and systematically increasing the length of time the child remains engaged. Strategies such as providing praise or small preferred items when the child remains seated or waits for longer periods, the use of visual or auditory timers, and scheduled brief breaks can help build tolerance for longer events.

Tamara A. Bannon

A second set of skills involves proximity and safety, including staying within a predetermined distance of a caregiver, responding reliably to name calls, and walking safely through busy environments. These behaviors can be practiced during everyday outings (e.g., parks, shopping centers) using clear rules, prompting, and reinforcement for staying within the defined boundary.

Spectator events also involve social participation cues, such as clapping, cheering, or using quieter voices at appropriate moments. These responses can be taught through modeling, rehearsal, and prompting while watching games or performances at home, with reinforcement provided for joining in during appropriate moments. Finally, children may benefit from learning coping and self-management strategies for handling noise, crowds, and other environmental demands.

Practitioners can teach functional responses such as requesting a break, moving to a quieter area, or independently using ear protection, often through functional communication training and rehearsal prior to the event. Preparing for events by identifying quieter spaces, bringing sensory supports, and practicing these responses in advance can help children to participate in the events for longer periods.

Preparation can increase the likelihood of successful participation in community events. Strategies include selecting shorter events, choosing to sit near exits to allow easy access to breaks, and previewing the environment or event schedule so the child knows what to expect. Bringing preferred items may help maintain engagement during waiting periods. Scheduling planned breaks and gradually increasing the duration and complexity of outings can help build tolerance for the demands of larger community events.

In conclusion, developing goals that are meaningful and aligned with the values of the individual and the family, identifying the skills needed, and teaching those skills step by step can increase opportunities for family outings, community involvement, and spectator participation. When the prerequisite skills required for community events are taught and practiced, individuals may be better able to access and sustain participation in these settings. Importantly, spectator activities should not be viewed as passive experiences. Attending sporting events, concerts, school performances, or community celebrations allows individuals to participate alongside family members and peers in shared cultural and social experiences. Teaching the skills that supports this reframes spectator participation as active, meaningful engagement in community life and can expand opportunities for families to participate in these events together.

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Empowering Adults from page 16

outdoor experiences, the people supporting them must be prepared with the right tools and mindset. Training both family caregivers and DSPs ensures consistency, safety, and an emphasis on empowerment.

Supporting Families and Friends

Family members and close friends are often a constant presence in the lives of individuals with IDD. Their role in outdoor engagement is critical — not just for safety, but also for creating experiences that feel natural and enjoyable.

Effective training should cover communication techniques, sensory considerations, and ways to support autonomy. Loved ones should learn how to identify environments that are welcoming and accessible, and how to introduce new outdoor activities in a way that feels manageable.

It's also important to reinforce inclusive practices - allowing individuals to make choices, express preferences, and participate in meaningful ways. With the right guidance, families can create outdoor routines that are empowering, not overwhelming.

Preparing DSPs for Outdoor Engagement

Direct support professionals are key partners in helping individuals with IDD explore the outdoors confidently. Their training should center on person-centered approaches that consider mobility, behavior support, communication preferences, and individual goals.

DSPs benefit from scenario-based learning that prepares them to handle common challenges — like navigating public spaces, supporting individuals during transitions, and adapting plans due to weather or health concerns.

In addition to safety and planning, training should emphasize how to promote independence and inclusion during outdoor time. That might mean helping someone join a group activity, encouraging them to try something new, or simply creating space for choice and exploration.

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Puberty* from *page 15

2011). Delayed or missed diagnosis can have long-term consequences, limiting access to appropriate educational, emotional, and social supports and negatively affecting developmental outcomes and quality of life (Taylor & DaWalt, 2020).

Hormonal Changes and Emotional Regulation

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) affects brain development in ways that influence communication, emotional regulation, flexibility, and sensory processing. Autistic individuals often experience heightened difficulty adapting to change and managing transitions, alongside patterns of rigid or repetitive thinking and behavior. Differences in sensory processing may include hypersensitivity or hyposensitivity to internal and external stimuli, which can significantly affect daily functioning. In addition, many autistic individuals experience co-occurring mental health conditions, including anxiety and depression (Lai et al., 2019).

Because predictability and routine are often central to emotional regulation in ASD, periods of rapid developmental change can be particularly challenging. Puberty introduces sudden biological and hormonal shifts that disrupt established routines and bodily expectations. Research suggests that autistic individuals may respond more intensely to these changes, sometimes in ways that appear maladaptive, as they attempt to regain a sense of control and stability (Chandler et al., 2022).

Despite the significance of these changes, relatively little is known about how autistic females experience reproductive transitions, including menstruation. This lack of understanding reflects several interconnected gaps in research. Historically, autism research has focused primarily on children, based on the assumption that ASD is a childhood condition, leaving adolescent and adult experiences underexplored (Kiehl et al., 2024). Additionally, research involving individuals with neurodevelopmental and communication differences often relies on caregiver reports rather than first-person perspectives, increasing the risk of recall bias and limiting insight into lived experience.

Gender inequities in medical and psychological research further contribute to this knowledge gap. Women and girls have long been underrepresented in clinical research, including autism studies, resulting in limited data on how biological processes such as hormonal fluctuations affect mental health across the lifespan (Merone et al., 2022; Liu & DiPietro Mager, 2016). As a result, the mental health effects of hormonal changes—whether naturally occurring during puberty or influenced by hormonal contraceptives—remain poorly understood. Notably, despite the widespread use of hormonal contraception globally, large-scale investigations into its mental health effects did not emerge until relatively recently (Skovlund et al., 2016).

Autistic females have been particularly excluded from autism research, reflecting a long-standing perception of autism as a predominantly male condition (D'Mello et al., 2022; Grove et al., 2024). This exclusion has reinforced clinical and societal biases and limited understanding of how autism manifests in females across developmental stages. Surveys conducted by autistic-led organizations further highlight this gap, with many autistic respondents identifying research focused on women and girls as a critical unmet need (Australian Autism Research Council, 2019).

Dr. Zain Haris

Sensory Challenges during Puberty & Menstruation

Puberty involves significant hormonal and physiological changes, including the development of secondary sexual characteristics such as breast growth, body hair, and the onset of menstruation (Sawyer et al., 2018). For autistic girls, these changes may occur earlier than expected and can be seen as particularly distressing. Research indicates that approximately 58% of autistic females begin puberty before the age of 11, which may intensify anxiety and reduce their capacity to cope with rapid developmental transitions (Corbett et al., 2020; Stenson et al., 2021).

Menstrual-related challenges are consistently reported at higher rates among autistic individuals. These include dysmenorrhea, menorrhagia, amenorrhea, and irregular menstrual cycles (Ames et al., 2024; Hamilton et al., 2011; Ingudomnukul et al., 2007; Pohl et al., 2014; Skinner et al., 2005; Simantov et al., 2022). Sensory sensitivities, combined with differences in interoception—the ability to recognize and interpret internal bodily signals—may heighten awareness of menstrual discomfort while simultaneously limiting the ability to clearly communicate pain or distress (Cummins et al., 2020; Gray & Durand, 2023).

Communication differences can further complicate these experiences. Autistic individuals may struggle to label physical sensations, describe pain intensity, or recognize when discomfort warrants support. As a result, menstrual pain may go unrecognized or untreated, particularly when distress is expressed through behavioral changes rather than verbal complaints. Delays in seeking or receiving support may be compounded by social and cultural discomfort surrounding menstruation, increasing the risk of prolonged distress (Kapos et al., 2024).

Together, sensory sensitivities, communication challenges, and limited access to appropriate support create a complex landscape in which puberty and menstruation can significantly disrupt emotional regulation and daily functioning for autistic girls.

Mental Health Problems during Puberty

Puberty is initiated through activation of the hypothalamic–pituitary–gonadal (HPG) axis, which triggers a series of interconnected neuroendocrine processes, including gonadarche, adrenarche, and rapid physical growth (Buck Louis et al., 2008; Dahl, 2004). These hormonal changes play a central role in physical development and also influence emotional regulation, social motivation, and vulnerability to mental health difficulties (Forbes & Dahl, 2010; Sisk & Foster, 2004).

Atypical pubertal timing has been associated with increased psychological risk, particularly when puberty begins earlier than expected. Early pubertal onset has been linked to higher rates of depression and anxiety in females, as well as greater sensitivity to social stressors and body image concerns (Kaltiala-Heino et al., 2003; Waylen & Wolke, 2004; Llewellyn et al., 2012). These risks may be amplified for autistic girls, who already experience heightened vulnerability to internalizing mental health conditions.

Research suggests that puberty may coincide with a temporary or prolonged decline in functioning for some autistic individuals. Studies have documented increases in aggression, obsessive behaviors, emotional dysregulation, and repetitive behaviors during adolescence, along with declines in adaptive, linguistic, and cognitive functioning (Gillberg & Steffenburg, 1987). Girls appear particularly susceptible to extended periods of deterioration during pubertal transition, underscoring the need for early monitoring and targeted mental health support.

Despite these risks, the adolescent period remains underrepresented in autism research, and the role of pubertal development in shaping mental health trajectories is not yet fully understood (Picci & Scherf, 2015). This gap limits the ability of clinicians, educators, and families to anticipate challenges and provide timely; preventative supports during a critical developmental window.

School and Social Challenges

Adolescence is marked by significant environmental and social changes, including the transition to secondary school, which often coincides with pubertal development (Dane et al., 2025). During this period, relationships with peers increasingly take precedence over relationships with parents and teachers. This social reorientation is accompanied by a heightened desire for acceptance and increased sensitivity to peer evaluation and rejection (Brown, 2004).

For autistic adolescents, the growing complexity of social expectations can intensify existing challenges. Peer interactions become more nuanced and less structured, requiring greater flexibility, perspective-taking, and social inference—skills that may be particularly demanding for autistic youth (Tantam, 2003). As a result, social difficulties may become more visible during adolescence, contributing to increased feelings of loneliness, anxiety, and depression (Bellini, 2006).

Peer groups during adolescence also tend to become more self-selecting, often forming around shared interests, social norms, and communication styles. While puberty may increase opportunities for peer interaction, these dynamics can inadvertently heighten social exclusion for autistic students (Ryan, 2000). Research consistently shows that autistic adolescents are at greater risk of victimization and bullying compared to their non-autistic peers (Humphrey & Symes, 2011; Kloosterman et al., 2013; Rowley et al., 2012). Although the emotional and developmental consequences of bullying in autistic youth remain underexplored, existing evidence suggests a strong association with worsening mental health and social withdrawal.

Role of Parents and Caregivers

Adolescence represents a critical developmental period characterized by profound physical, cognitive, emotional, and social changes. When these developmental demands intersect with the core characteristics of autism, autistic girls may experience unique or intensified challenges during puberty (Corona et al., 2016; Visser et al., 2017). While family members, peers, and schools typically serve as primary sources of guidance during adolescence, autistic girls may have limited access to peer-based learning due to social communication difficulties, leaving families with an increased support burden (Erbaş & Kurt, 2022).

The physiological and emotional changes associated with puberty can generate significant anxiety for both autistic girls and their families. Many parents report feeling underprepared to support their children through menstruation, body changes, and emerging emotional needs (Cummins et al., 2020; Mademtzi et al., 2018; Güven, 2021). The onset of menstruation represents a major transition that requires new self-care skills, body awareness, and emotional adjustment (Bitsika & Sharpley, 2018; Gönenç et al., 2020).

Without clear guidance and appropriate supports, families may struggle to address sensory discomfort, hygiene routines, and emotional regulation during this stage. This highlights the importance of proactive education and collaborative support between caregivers, healthcare providers, and educators to reduce stress and promote adaptive coping during puberty.

How Professionals Can Better Support Autistic Girls

Because adolescents spend a significant portion of their time in school, educational settings play a central role in supporting developmental transitions such as puberty. School-based interventions commonly fall into peer-focused or student-focused approaches. Peer-focused interventions may include peer education and structured interaction opportunities, while student-focused interventions emphasize skill development and self-regulation strategies. Despite their differences, effective peer-focused programs share several core elements, including participant identification, training, opportunities for interaction, adult facilitation, and ongoing evaluation (Carter et al., 2014).

Educators also play a critical role in partnering with families to support autistic girls through pubertal transitions. Strong family–school collaboration promotes consistency, shared understanding, and early identification of emerging challenges (Garbacz et al., 2017). These partnerships enable targeted interventions that address social, emotional, and sensory needs during puberty (Barnett, 2025).

Evidence-based strategies such as visual supports, task analysis, self-management routines, and self-monitoring checklists

see Puberty* on *page 35

Puberty* from *page 34

can be particularly effective in reducing anxiety and improving comprehension for autistic students (Hart Barnett et al., 2018; Wong et al., 2015). By breaking complex or abstract tasks into predictable steps, these structured approaches support independence and emotional regulation. Practical tools—including step-by-step hygiene guides, clothing preference charts, emotion-regulation menus, and daily routines—can be integrated into both school and home environments to foster autonomy and well-being during this critical developmental stage.

Conclusion: Moving from Misunderstanding to Support Autistic Girls During Puberty

Autism spectrum disorder is a complex neurodevelopmental condition that has historically been understood through a predominantly male-centered lens. As a result, the unique experiences of autistic girls, particularly during puberty—have often been overlooked. Evidence indicates that many autistic girls experience pubertal onset earlier than expected, which may intensify anxiety and complicate emotional and behavioral regulation during adolescence.

Although boys continue to be diagnosed with autism more frequently than girls, this disparity reflects differences in identification rather than prevalence. Autistic girls may present with less overt or "classical" traits, contributing to delayed diagnosis and limited access to support. When puberty-related changes intersect with sensory sensitivities, communication differences, and social challenges, the risk for mental health difficulties increases.

Research highlights elevated rates of menstrual difficulties, emotional distress, social exclusion, and bullying among autistic adolescents, yet significant gaps remain in understanding their lived experiences. Families and educators often report feeling underprepared to support autistic girls through these transitions, underscoring the need for early, coordinated, and evidence-based approaches.

By increasing awareness, addressing gender bias in autism research and diagnosis, and strengthening collaboration among families, schools, and healthcare providers, it is possible to better support autistic girls during puberty. With timely preparation and appropriate supports, this critical developmental stage can become an opportunity to promote resilience, autonomy, and long-term well-being.

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Integrating Exercise from page 15

are provided. This fitness and exercise program is open to all clients at the clinic. This brings together a group of people who would not have had access to each other otherwise and maximizes the potential value of these relationships. For the autistic adults that we work with, there is the opportunity to work in tandem with neurotypical peers. In these interactions, there is the potential power of modeling and increased social interaction for individuals who often report a high level of isolation (Verkooijen et al., 2026). There have also been opportunities for mutual understanding and camaraderie between individuals who would not have engaged with each other outside of this forum. It is interesting to consider that the individual in recovery from substance abuse or mental health concerns can feel as misunderstood as an adult with autism, and in that commonality, find mutual understanding that supports them both.

To facilitate this program, WJCS has partnered with Breakthrough Fit Co which is a gym located in Hartsdale, New York. The program's facilitators are certified personal trainers with additional certification in adaptive fitness training. Research indicates that professionals with this level of credentialing are a better match for clients with disabilities (Mehringer et al., 2025). There are two facilitators at each fitness class, coupled with a therapist, and the group does not exceed 10 participants. The facilitators provide general wellness, behavioral health, and fitness programming in a large conference room at one of the WJCS clinics. All participants engage in a general health and wellness curriculum that focuses on the benefits of physical movement, nutrition, and sleep hygiene in our lives and in behavioral health recovery.

Kenn Mann, PsyD

In addition, each participant has a realistic and personally meaningful objective of their choice to work on that is reviewed weekly. These objectives have included increasing hydration, increasing movement throughout the week, decreasing the use of electronic resources, and improving mood and coping skills. One participant, an adult woman with ASD, excitedly reported recently that she incorporated movement in her life such that she was going on daily walks and having positive experiences because of this. The facilitators observe that the group itself has created a sense of community for the participants and very diverse individuals, who would not have met otherwise, are able to participate side by side, sharing the experience topped by a fist bump of encouragement and mutual support.

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Recreation Access from page 17

may have limited exposure to autism-informed approaches, and small environmental factors such as noise, unpredictability, or unclear expectations can make participation difficult to sustain. Outside New York City, transportation adds another barrier, often leaving families to coordinate social and recreational opportunities long after adulthood begins.

Mental Health Consequences of Limited Leisure Access

Limited access to recreation is not a neutral issue. Loneliness and social disconnection are associated with poorer mental health outcomes among autistic adults (Hedley et al., 2018). Clinically, it is common to see reduced participation lead to a gradual cycle of withdrawal and growing anxiety around reentry.

Conversations about recreational access often occur only after mental health concerns emerge, rather than being recognized early as a preventative support. Many adults rely heavily on solitary activities, not because they prefer isolation, but because those activities offer predictability and control that community settings often lack. Without accessible alternatives, participation tends to narrow rather than expand.

It is also important not to frame recreation solely as therapy. Leisure should not exist only to produce clinical gains. Like anyone else, autistic adults need spaces where they can pursue interests, develop relationships, and experience belonging for its own sake.

Richard Anemone, MPS, LMHC

Moving From Access to Inclusion

Addressing this gap does not require creating an entirely new system. In many cases, small adjustments within existing programs can make participation far more accessible. Activities that grow out of shared interests, such as gaming, art, photography, technology, or outdoor groups, tend to reduce social pressure and give adults a clearer way to enter a community. Predictable schedules and clear expectations also help reduce anxiety, while still allowing people to choose how much they want to interact. Attention to sensory needs, including quieter spaces and consistent routines, can make it easier for adults to stay engaged. Recreation staff who receive even basic training in autism-informed approaches are often better able to support communication differences and offer flexible guidance. Clinicians can also play a role by discussing hobbies during treatment planning and helping adults work through the logistical or emotional barriers that make participation difficult. Together, these kinds of adjustments create more reliable pathways into community life without requiring programs to reinvent themselves.

Broadening Definitions of Participation

Traditional ideas of successful social participation often assume frequent verbal interaction or full group integration. For many autistic adults, meaningful engagement may look different. Parallel participation, quieter involvement, or shared presence without continuous conversation can all represent genuine connection. These forms of participation should be recognized as valid and valuable.

Expanding recreation access requires communities to move away from measuring conformity and toward supporting diverse ways of engaging.

Conclusion

Autistic adults without intellectual disability represent a growing group whose needs often fall between existing systems. As school-based supports end, opportunities for recreation and community participation frequently diminish at the exact point when adult identity and belonging become most important. Strengthening access requires collaboration among clinicians, community programs, and service systems to create accessible, interest-driven pathways into recreation. If New York hopes to improve long-term outcomes for autistic adults, recreation must be treated as an essential part of adult life, one that supports mental health, independence, and genuine community inclusion.

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ADA Compliance from page 17

- Participation in valuable recreation is a strong predictor of quality of life for autistic adults across the lifespan (Préfontaine et al., 2026, pp. 123-133).

Autistic adults participate in recreation less than non-autistic peers due to program barriers, not lack of interest (Préfontaine et al., 2026, pp. 123-133).

Barriers Beyond the Physical

To improve recreational access to autistic adults, it is important to understand not only well-known physical barriers but also the less recognized challenges they face. Here are five of the most common barriers to recreation participation faced by autistic adults:

1. Sensory Barriers**:** The sensory demands of many recreation programs and facilities, such as bright lights, loud noises, strong smells, and crowds, can be overwhelming for autistic adults.

2. Unstructured programs, unclear rules, and last-minute changes create stress and anxiety for autistic adults.

3. Social Barriers: Many recreation programs, such as team sports and group fitness classes, require a level of social interaction and communication that can be uncomfortable or stressful for autistic adults.

4. Attitudinal Barriers: Negative attitudes and biases among recreation staff, such as a lack of knowledge about autism and a failure to accept and accommodate autistic adults, can be a major barrier to participation.

5. Economic and System-wide Barriers: Institutional obstacles, such as cost, transportation, and lack of programs specifically designed for autistic adults, can make it difficult or impossible for autistic adults to participate in recreation programs.

Advancing Recreation Accessibility

To advance access, recreation providers must go beyond ADA requirements and focus on the needs of autistic adults. Here are five core principles that provide clear recommendations for advancing recreation access to autistic adults. Each one delivers practical actions for designing and delivering accessible programs and facilities: Formed Design. Recreation facilities and programs should be designed with the sensory needs of autistic adults in mind, including the provision of quiet spaces, ear protection, sunglasses, and other sensory accommodations.

Isaac Mawuko Adusu, DHA, MSNPM

- Ensure predictable structure using visual schedules and clear, advanced communication of changes.

- Offer multiple options and respect individual preferences to foster choice and autonomy.

- Staff Training and Cultural Competency. Recreation staff should be trained in autism-related issues, including strategies for communication, inclusion, and support, to ensure programs and facilities are welcoming to autistic adults.

- Adapt recreation programs to include autistic adults, using peer support and involving them in planning and evaluation.

- Co-Design with Autistic Adults. Autistic adults should be involved as equal partners in the design and delivery of recreation programs and facilities to ensure that programs meet their specific needs and priorities.

From Compliance up to Innovation

Improving recreation access for autistic adults requires coordinated innovation and action at the program, policy, organizational, and community levels.

Policy-Level Strategies:
- Expand minimum accessibility standards to specifically include the sensory and neurocognitive needs of autistic adults, requiring these as part of policy and practice. Identify and share resources for inclusive recreation programs and facilities for autistic adults.

- Make recreation access part of standard healthcare and disability service plans.

Organizational-Level Strategies:
- Focus on including autistic adults as a core value in organizational mission statements, formal policies, and standard operating procedures. Training and development for recreation staff on autism-related issues.

- Use outcome-based evaluation to measure real access and inclusion, not just attendance numbers.

Community-Level Strategies:
- Build partnerships to increase local recreation opportunities and ensure autistic adults are included.

- Develop inclusive recreation ecosystems that address the specific needs and priorities of autistic adults.

The Future of Inclusive Recreation

The future of recreation for autistic adults is exciting and filled with rich possibilities. Here are some of the key trends and breakthroughs that will determine the future of recreation for autistic adults:

- Leveraging new technologies, such as virtual and augmented reality, to improve recreation access and inclusion for autistic adults.

- Expanding nature-based and community-integrated recreation programs, which have been shown to have numerous physical and mental health benefits for autistic adults (Picton et al., 2020).

- Prioritize meaningful interaction and inclusion in recreation over mere attendance.

Conclusion

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 was a landmark piece of legislation that fundamentally changed the field of physical accessibility in the US. While the ADA has been incredibly effective at ensuring physical accessibility, it falls short in meeting the different and complex needs of autistic adults. To improve recreation accessibility, providers must go beyond ADA standards and focus on the specific needs of autistic adults. By improving recreational accessibility, we ensure that everyone can participate in meaningful activities. Recreation is essential for connection, identity, health, and belonging for autistic adults.

Our challenge: Make recreation spaces usable, welcoming, and empowering for autistic adults.

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Theatre Programs from page 8

people live fuller, more connected lives. That's where passions outside of traditional caregiving can become powerful tools. Having a background in healthcare, education, or even the arts and music can add something unique to the lives of the people DSPs support.

That spirit of creativity and connection is at the heart of #MoreThanWork, a campaign highlighting the meaningful and often unexpected ways direct support professionals make a difference every day.

That passion is what makes others shine.

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Gardens to Galleries from page 9

for uncertainty, develop problem-solving skills, and strengthen confidence through real experience.

When someone moves from hesitation to participation, the shift isn't theatrical. It's practical. "I'm not sure" becomes "I did that."

Expanding access to recreation and leisure is not a luxury. It's an equity issue. Individuals with IDD deserve the same access to cultural institutions, public spaces, art, agriculture, and shared civic life as any other New Yorker. Inclusion means being present in the places where community happens — not on the sidelines.

These experiences are not about filling a calendar. They're about expanding opportunity — and allowing individuals to see themselves as participants in the broader community.

As DJ reminded us, something that begins with hesitation can lead to unexpected connection and motivation.

Through intentional programming, strong community partnerships, and a commitment to inclusive exploration, AABR's Program Without Walls and Day Programs continue to demonstrate a simple truth: when access increases, so do expectations — and outcomes.

Libby Traynor, LSCW, is Chief Executive Officer of AABR, Inc.

Creating Space from page 11

peers of upcoming events. Others assist with reading, games, or helping friends board transportation safely. Each role communicates competence and reinforces mutual respect.

Growth as Evidence of Impact

The growth we have seen over the last few years reflects that families are searching for safe spaces where their adult child can feel included and develop authentic friendships. It reflects a broader recognition that recreation and leisure are not luxuries, but necessities.

Many of the families I speak with informed me that there are limited or no real opportunities for community and recreational activities in their area. WJCS Shelanu/Supper Club began with six or seven regular attendees. Today, weekly averages have doubled, and milestone celebrations approach triple digits. Growth does not dilute intimacy. Instead, it expands the circle of belonging. It is fair to say that when you prioritize belonging, it fills a critical gap.

Nicholas R. Primavera, MS, MBA

As numbers increase, so does visibility. Community members witness what inclusion looks like in practice. They see individuals cheering, volunteering, leading games, and supporting one another. The more the community is exposed to these practices, the more it helps to shift their perceptions of viewing themselves as limited to viewing themselves as contributory and meaningful.

Creating Stronger Communities for Everyone

When communities make room for neurodivergent adults to gather, contribute, and lead, the social identity strengthens. Inclusive recreation challenges stereotypes and fosters empathy. It demonstrates that diversity enhances, rather than detracts from, communal life.

Members carry newfound confidence into other environments. Families experience relief and hope. Volunteers grow up with understanding and compassion; what begins as a place to gather becomes a place to thrive. Each new member that walks through that door strengthens the mission, belonging comes into play and we can see how the transformation follows.

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Leisure Activities from page 14

Elsewhere, in research conducted amongst the elderly, regular participation in recreational activities was reported as a crucial factor for improving various aspects of well-being for older adults (Obi, 2024). Obi found that participation in physical activities improved physical health and mobility, while participation in social activities reduced feelings of loneliness and isolation. Amongst the elderly, Obi found that participation in cognitive and creative activities not only stimulated the brain but also enhanced psychological well-being.

Childhood is a unique life stage that affords many opportunities to explore interests and find out what he or she may enjoy doing in their free time. These interests may change at various developmental stages or ages, and things previously shied away from may become appealing later. But many parents wonder "*How can my child participate in leisure activities in our community when there are social delays, cognitive delays or motor-coordination delays that are a core feature of autism?*

Children (or adults) with autism can participate in leisure activities within their community with planning and supports. Prepare for a successful experience by focusing on an individual's strengths and providing accommodations as necessary. Seek out an environment that facilitates comfort, not overwhelm. Be patient and know that this may take trial, error and multiple small steps to arrive at the correct environment.

Begin with an activity that your child is interested in. This may look different for any given child. Some children may enjoy art, while others may find this overwhelming and prefer something completely different such as swimming. The specific activity is less important but seek out an activity that may be interesting to your child to build their motivation, develop their success, and build their confidence. Depending on where you live, a suitable environment may be a community center, library, a program offered through a local recreation department, or a fully private provider. Ask about individual lessons or small class sizes, or the potential for a class that may accommodate others with diverse needs. Draw from the tools your child may be using in the classroom that are promoting success there, such as visual schedules, sensory-friendly times or locations, or trained staff who have some experience in working with children with autism.

Dr. Monica E. Carr, PhD

Prepare at home before you embark on a new leisure activity. This may include a visit to the location, looking at pictures, or using a simple social story to explain what will happen. Practice relevant social skills such as taking turns, following basic instructions, or using simple scripts for greetings can improve confidence and lower anxiety. If your child has motor delays, enquire about using adaptive equipment, occupational therapy input, or modified rules (for example all abilities non-competitive sports) can help your child participate successfully.

Peer support may also help your child prepare to participate in a new leisure activity. A sibling or close cousin may be a supportive partner for practice at home, or while attending the leisure activity. If this is not a possibility, enquire about a buddy system, or supportive peer mentors who may be able to model appropriate social interactions, provide timely corrective feedback, and offer appropriate verbal praise or motivating rewards. Depending upon your child, structured activities such as martial arts, swimming lessons, Lego clubs, or art classes, may be preferrable to free play as they can offer clear expectations and structure.

Clear and timely communication with leisure activity instructors is essential. Before the activity begins, make an appointment so that you can share your child's strengths, triggers, and helpful strategies. This can promote successful participation even in situations where an activity leader is working with a child with autism for the first time.

Be patient. Start small. Aim for short sessions and gradual exposure to the activity to avoid overwhelm, create enjoyment, build endurance and develop confidence. Celebrate progress rather than perfection. Remind your child that participating is not about performing like their peers. It is their personal journey of self-discovery, enjoyment, belonging, and growth. With careful preparation, home practice, community collaboration, and by adopting a strengths-based approach, it is possible to support children (or adults) with autism to meaningfully participate in leisure activities and build social skills, independence, self-confidence and resilience.

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Rethinking Care from page 19

psychologically I couldn't remain there. I felt like I was causing a problem and had to take care of things. I felt like I had to make things okay. However, the work I did to fix the problem put stress on me, stress on the director, possibly took practice time away from everyone, and just felt yucky. Whether or not I needed to move, and whether or not I invented a problem that required a resolution, this "other kind" of care work I performed, care work where the person with a disability attends to the comfort of the able-bodied, is a legitimate issue and speaks to the need for a reappraisal of the directionality of care, and perhaps also a redefinition of what care work is.

The concept of "care work" assumes a lack of reciprocity—the giver of care (the care worker) is the "able-bodied," the recipient of care is the "disabled-bodied." The burden of care is unidirectional, and the meaning of "care" is perhaps implicitly understood. The Government of Canada (2023) defines unpaid care work as "informal caregiving undertaken without monetary compensation, including direct care of… children, older persons, and persons with disabilities" (n.p.). The directionality and substance of care assumed by this definition is unambiguous. Care moves from those with physical and mental capacity to those often without. Simply, those needing care are characterized by their dependence and perhaps even "incompetence" (Stubblefield, 2014, p. 219).

In her creative essay "Care Time," Stevens (2018) describes care time as "a liminal place that shifts location between crip time and abled time in a complex, unpredictable dance" (n.p.). Where the carer is not fully part of either the disabled community or the abled community, but "straddle(s) both worlds" (n.p.). While some carers might claim partial membership in the two communities because of the intimate entanglements they experience with each, there is no question, even in Stevens' essay, about who the carer is, about their physiology: they are non-disabled. They are caring from a standpoint of someone who does not personally live in a disabled body. Thus, even they are toeing the line of order: care flows from the abled to the disabled.

Rhonda Cheryl Solomon, MSc, PhD (cand.)

I would argue that the boundaries of care work are more flexible than the "giver/receiver" framing of caring indicates. The directionality of care is not so absolute, and the work done in care time is more porous and has a wider and more inclusive spectrum than implied by the "abled = carer/disabled = cared for" binary. Specifically, this binary doesn't hold space for the ways people with disabilities care for the non-disabled, even if primarily through ensuring they don't feel bad or bothered—emotional care work.

Another story.

"Please, can I hold your hand?"

My building was undergoing renovations. The balconies were being replaced. Three months of jackhammering, circular sawing, generators, and other tools of the concrete trade. Also, people directly outside my window, in my space. I couldn't move to a different building, so I had to live through the noise (with my three terrified cats). I am highly sensitive to noise (not all types, but most, and especially loud noise), so it was a nightmarish experience.

One day, I met up with a few neighbors outside. It was a random meeting, they just happened to be there when I was coming home, and I decided to be social. They were chatting about the construction, so, during the conversation, I explained how difficult it was for me to cope with the noise. Everyone in the group who worked from home was saying that they also found the noise challenging, but they just wore ear plugs or left home for a few hours if they needed a break. I've known these people for a few years, so I decided to be open with them: I told them that it was a bit different for me because I'm autistic and loud noises and easily leaving home are very difficult for me to deal with. There's no simple, even if imperfect, solution for me.

One of the women in the group seemed overwrought by my "big reveal." She said to me, "Oh my G-d, please can I hold your hand?", looking at me pitifully. What would I have liked to have said is, "Uh, no, thanks, I'm good." What I did instead: I gave her my hand to hold, fighting back extreme discomfort and a desire to flee because she was in an (inexplicably) emotionally fragile state, and I felt I had to take care of her. I had to make her feel better, possibly because I had caused this problem.

So, I ask you: What should I have done in these situations? Should I have kept rocking, doing what my body needed to do, and let the people on either side of me deal with it (however they chose to deal with it)? Should I have said, "I'm fine?" and quite literally kept my hands to myself? To what degree is it my responsibility as someone with "nonconforming traits" (Serlin, 2020, p. 173) to take others' needs into account and to make them feel better?

Perhaps I assume the burden of care because I'm female, and hence somehow osmotically trained to be responsible for others' comfort, even at the expense of my own comfort. Or perhaps, in typical Rhonda fashion, I'm just trying to be normal and do what I imagine is expected in the situation, even if it means not acknowledging, accepting, or honoring my preferences, boundaries, and needs. The most likely reason is that I felt I had caused these situations, so I was responsible for fixing them.

Honestly, I think if I were braver, bolder, I'd go with "I'm fine." I'm fine to rock in this tight space and I'm fine not to give you my hand.

I'm fine not to take care of you, even if it inconveniences you. Even if you don't like me because of it.

"I'm fine."

I just need to figure out how to say it.

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Special Interests from page 28

a supermarket service clerk job and a college journalism program, my mental health took a dramatic rise from the complete isolation I once badly experienced just several years prior. Meeting those online friends through commenting on social media weather posts by chance was, admittedly, not the only contributor, but it played a big part. I wasn't only finding great joy in my special interest, but I was able to find people who shared it with me.

Rediscovering My Love for Piano During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Despite a generally strong period in my life from 2014 to 2019, like with many people, the spring of 2020 was not fun for me, to say the least. It wasn't even just the whole everything is closed down, and you can't meet up with people thing, my mind took a spiral from spending so many days at home. I wasn't only focused on the presence of the COVID-19 lockdown situation, but I kept cringing at old memories from my younger years (specifically high school) to the point I kept going on about them with my parents. It badly affected my mental health to the extent that I was fighting my thoughts and resting pretty much constantly.

Finally, on a hot summery day in late May 2020, my father came down to my room (my room was in the basement in the house I lived in from 2002 to 2025) to talk to me about everything I was feeling. He looked at my keyboard piano, noting that I've barely touched it in years (I was an avid piano player during my pre-teen and teen years but lost interest in it for reasons I won't go on about here). Then, he looked at me and said, "You really need to start getting into piano again. You're so good at it." I took his advice to heart, and I started my own series on my Facebook and Instagram accounts where I post shortened piano covers of popular mainstream songs roughly twice a week. I haven't given up on this series either, as I now have hundreds of covers from the past six years. All this new joy because the pandemic brought me to an exceptionally low point in my life. I acknowledge how common it was for people to reunite with long-lost hobbies or discover new passions during the pandemic, though, and I was fortunate to be a part of that crowd.

How Special Interests Impacted My Childhood

I had many conflicts with peers and adults that affected my mental health in some adverse ways during my childhood, but I can't say these kinds of thoughts were as persistent as they were in my teen and adult years. Still, do special interests help temper any negative feelings? They almost always did because as an autistic child, special interests especially felt strong and rewarding (like a kid getting excited for Christmas). Even when adults in my life reminded me not to do the same things repeatedly, I didn't want to move away from these interests. This is partially because I didn't have the social wherewithal to understand why having extremely narrow interests can be socially difficult in the long run, especially if they weren't things well-liked by children around my age.

On the other hand, during my preteen years, I was at a stage where I knew some of my interests in certain computer or video games deviated from what many of my peers liked. I still thoroughly enjoyed these interests, but whenever someone criticized me for liking them or being "stuck" on them, I would get extra sensitive (sometimes to the point of crying or distancing myself from them for days). At 10 and 11, there was one online game, in particular, that I was so into that I unintentionally annoyed almost everyone around me about it (despite some of my peers also playing it), and that combined with dealing with some rude people in that online community drove me to slowly stop playing the game.

From a distracting me from schoolwork struggles or social isolation struggles standpoint, these interests distracted me immensely during my childhood. However, it came with the cost of being bullied or shut down by people, and how I responded greatly depended on how socially aware I was at the time.

Understanding the Power of Special Interests on the Autistic Mind

The way my brain has processed special interests has been an eye-opener in a way that has helped me get through the worst storms of my life. If it weren't for them and the support from some incredible people in my life, I probably would not have much motivation to do the kind of things I have been doing in the past and present. It's evident that this is true for many other autistic people, too, and I fully accept that. Although I had some extremely difficult times, things sometimes must get worse before they get better, and that was evident with the online friends I made who have my shared weather interest, as well as my motivation to start my piano series.

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Calm in Nature from page 19

In addition, parents highlighted the importance of having clear exit plans when their teens became too overwhelmed. Four parents devised communication solutions, such as walkie-talkies to compensate for limited cell phone coverage or cue words signaling it was time to leave. Parents recommended short hikes spread out across days rather than one long nature outing. One parent plans several short outings in new areas—so their teens could become accustomed to the trails—before progressing to longer outings in the same area. *"Seeing my daughter hiking, feeling calm, and exploring is worth all the planning,"* a mother reflected.

Safety concerns. Parents reported constant vigilance when trails included water, cliffs, or steep drop-offs, noting that the lack of enclosed areas or protective barriers limited how much they could relax during outings. One dad mentioned that many trails are technically "accessible" but not realistic for autistic teens who tire easily or need constant supervision. The parents provided a good reminder that even though their autistic kids were now teens, it did not mean they didn't still run off. One dad said, *"My teen still runs off when dealing with sensory overload, the only difference now between when they were little, I cannot easily stop them."* Services that many people do not realize can hinder accessibility for autistic families are lack of close parking or parking that provides ample space to exit or enter the car, lack of bathrooms at the beginning of trails, and steep or uneven trails. Additionally, parents reported being anxious because of others—disapproving looks or comments from others when teens were experiencing meltdowns. One mom said, *"While on a trail, my son started having a meltdown and this stranger walked by and just stared at my son, which caused my son to yell at the stranger to stop staring which then led to a scene. We have not gone back to that trail, and it was so beautiful."* Another mom agreed and said they stopped visiting popular nature areas for similar reasons.

Benefits. Despite the challenges, parents reported benefits after nature outings. Many describe outdoor environments, especially areas near water, as calming for their teens, often leading to improved sensory regulation, reduced agitation, and better sleep at night. One parent noted that their daughter *"is happy outdoors and socializes more,"* highlighting how nature spaces may provide a context where autistics feel less overwhelmed and as a parent said, *"A sense of just ahhh…where your whole body relaxes."* Parents also observed that when in nature there aren't the same social norms surrounding communication. One mom said their teens have fun making loud sounds in the dense forests to hear the echo and he loves it when others walking the trail make similar noises in return. Overall, parents reinforced the importance of nature's low-stimulus environment, allowing their autistic teens to be themselves, quirky behavior and all.

Heidi Hillman PhD, BCBA-D, LMHC

Ideal outdoor experiences. Parents envisioned a balance between structure and flexibility, emphasizing visits during times when fewer people were present. Two dads mentioned the need for more park rangers who understand autism, sensory regulation and communication differences. Parents mentioned design features, such as wide trails, shaded paths, and quiet sitting spots distributed along hiking routes. These features allow teens to regulate their sensory input while reducing the constant supervision burden on parents. A father shared, *"If the trail is fairly smooth and there are benches along the trails, we collect little wins — he stays engaged, and we can stay longer."* Parents particularly valued environments where safety concerns were minimized, such as enclosed areas or trails without steep drop-offs. One parent described a trail with exercise stations—push-up bars, monkey bars—along the route, suggesting that integrated activity stations may increase engagement of autistics while supporting physical development.

Autonomy. During outings, parents reported that allowing teens to explore at their own pace—choosing when to pause, sit, or continue—helped regulate sensory input and reduced the likelihood of meltdowns. Over time, families developed a process of reflecting on which aspects of outings promoted calm or triggered anxiety, enabling them to refine strategies for future trips. One dad said, *"We learned from a previous camping trip—it failed—that camping in our backyard before going on our next weekend camping trip was all it took to make it more successful."* These findings support research (e.g., Kormanik, 2024) emphasizing the importance of autonomy for autistic individuals.

Developmental. The benefits parents described extended beyond sensory regulation to physical, emotional, and social domains. Outdoor activities supported gross motor development through walking, climbing, and exploring varied terrain. Nature environments were also perceived as low-pressure settings where teens could interact with family or peers without the intense social demands often present in structured environments. Several parents suggested that nature-based experiences countered sedentary habits typical of teens—summarized by one mom as the tendency to *"sit on the couch and play video games."* Nature outings also strengthened family bonds by creating shared experiences that emphasized enjoyment rather than therapy.

Recreation professionals, including therapists, park rangers and park staff—can use these findings to design more inclusive nature experiences. Creating quiet, sensory-friendly zones away from high-stimulus areas such as roads or crowds can improve accessibility. Visual trail signs indicating shade, water features, open spaces, and level of difficulty can increase predictability and help autistic individuals navigate trails more independently. Small modifications such as recommending less crowded trails or designing maps highlighting rest points, bathrooms, and easy exit routes may further increase participation by balancing autonomy with safety. During interactions with autistic families, park staff and rangers should communicate calmly using simple, direct language, allow extra time for responses, and avoid sudden physical contact. If a teen becomes overwhelmed, staff can assist families in moving to a quieter area to reduce sensory stimulation. In cases where a teen wanders, rangers can initiate search procedures and approach calmly when locating them.

In conclusion, these interviews highlight that nature-based experiences can offer meaningful benefits for autistic teens when the outings are designed with predictability, safety, and flexibility in mind. While families often face barriers, intentional preparation and support can transform outdoor spaces into places of regulation and connection. Ultimately, when barriers are reduced and a teen's autonomy is supported, nature becomes a powerful setting where autistic teens and their families experience relaxation, growth, and a sense of belonging.

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Mindfulness from page 18

External Source as the Focus

This practice is adapted from Sonny Jane Wise's work in their text "The Neurodivergent Friendly Workbook of DBT Skills" (2022). For this practice, one uses an external source as the focus (i.e. anchor) of their awareness during the mindfulness meditation. This practice can be done in any comfortable position and with eyes open in a soft gaze towards the anchor or closed. The practice begins by exploring the anchor. This can be done through as many or as few senses as the individual can tolerate. The goal is not sensory overwhelm, but to explore the anchor through as many senses as possible, such as sight, sound, touch, temperature, texture, etc. If particular senses cause overstimulation, then that sense can be skipped to start. It can also be important to select an anchor that causes as little sensory overwhelm as possible (e.g. fidget toy, a painting, a weighted blanket, music, etc.). Through exploration, the individual will begin incorporating the naming of emotions, thoughts, sensations, and imagery that become present. There is no right or wrong answer; the goal is to name anything that is present while anchoring on the external source. The experience of exploration and noticing present moment sensations will begin to be separated by focusing on one or the other. For example, the individual will spend a moment focused on the anchor, then focus their awareness on their emotions, sensations, thoughts, and/or images that come to mind. This is an example of titration (further defined below). This practice can be as short as a few minutes up to as long as the individual wants and needs. This practice allows autistic folks to begin to build their interoception and present-moment awareness by naming emotions, sensations, and thoughts as they happen in real time.

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Titration

Titration is defined as, "a method or process of determining the concentration…in terms of the smallest amount of…known concentration required to bring about a given effect in reaction…" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Titration is useful in mindfulness-based practices because, as shown in the previous example, it allows autistic people the time and space to slowly increase their tolerance for interoception and present-moment awareness, ideally without overwhelm leading to overstimulation, shutdown, and/or meltdown.

Everyday Mindfulness

There are many ways to incorporate mindfulness into our everyday lives. This can be through chores, walking, cooking, and any other everyday activity that feels accessible. Every day mindfulness focuses on the same principles, noticing and accepting. This can involve verbal narration of tasks through first-person language. For example, if someone is cleaning their dishes, they may narrate as they clean (e.g., "I am scrubbing this pan with soap"). This allows more awareness of the present moment through explicitly naming what is occurring. Again, this is the practice of noticing and accepting. As one becomes more comfortable with noticing the present moment, they can begin to add in the interoceptive qualities. For example, if someone is feeling fatigued as they clean their dishes, they may add, "I am scrubbing this pan with soap, and my body feels heavy and tired." This example adds in acceptance as well, though not attempting to change the sensation they are noticing. The need for rest may be met naturally once the dishes are complete, or they may have a separate need to meet, and they will be able to utilize mindfulness to explore that more deeply.

These are a couple of examples of how autistic individuals and providers working with autistic folks can begin to make mindfulness-based practices more accessible. Again, accessibility is not one size fits all, and it is imperative to adjust practices to meet the needs of an individual. Through the focus of increasing interoception and present-moment awareness to build capacity for emotion regulation, autistic folks can potentially improve their well-being and lead more fulfilling lives (Simione et al., 2024).

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Access from page 20

This principle seems especially relevant for the ASD population. People on the spectrum tend to benefit from straightforwardness in relationships and from minimizing the need to discern social subtleties.

Outside of the home and family life, recreation and leisure are the areas in which authentic relationships of the kind that Rogers extols are most likely to occur. Certain layers of public propriety and professionalism are required in other areas of life. But in leisure activities, people feel freer to be themselves.

Now, let us look at the cultural aspect, which pertains to the second characteristic of a healthy therapeutic relationship:

> I find that the more acceptance and liking I feel toward this individual, the more I will be creating a relationship (...) of warmth and safety. (Rogers, 1961/1995, p. 34).

Speaking as though addressing a client directly, he continues:

> It is only as I *understand* the feelings and thoughts which seem so horrible to you, or so weak, or so sentimental, or so bizarre (. . .) that you feel free to explore all the hidden nooks and frightening crannies of your inner and often buried experience. (Rogers, 1961/1995, p. 34 — italics included).

Those of us who are in the workforce are often reminded that we do not need to like our co-workers. We need to respect them and to collaborate with them, but outside of work, we don't have to have anything to do with them. Often enough, we hear people speak of their co-workers along the following lines: "He's a fine asset to the company, but I'm glad I don't have to see him when I'm off duty."

Daniel Crofts

But we don't "hang out with" people unless we truly want to. Whereas willingness to be associated with someone professionally signifies mere tolerance, joining someone in activities chosen rather than necessary is a sure sign that the person is valued and embraced.

Let us now take this from the individual to the societal level.

The realms of recreation and leisure, apart from the economic benefits they certainly possess, enjoy a privilege all their own. Other areas of public life are utilitarian in nature — that is, they involve tasks done for the sake of something else. Work is for the sake of a paycheck. Financial stability is for the sake of meeting one's needs. Having a home is for shelter against the elements. Nutrition and exercise are for bodily wellness. Leisure activities, on the other hand, are those in which we engage for their own sake, without any further end in view. We watch baseball games because we enjoy baseball. We make use of nature trails because we love the beauty of nature. Similar statements may be made about all recreational activities.

Let us imagine a group of outsiders looking at our society from a bird's-eye point of view, from which they can see its various elements at a glance. If they see autistic people integrated into the workplace and other necessary spaces, they can rest assured that these individuals are being given the minimum in terms of what they need. They can rest assured that the usefulness of the ASD population is recognized and valued. Beyond these, nothing can be inferred with certainty.

But what if the same bird's-eye view reveals autistic people in public recreation spaces? What if our visitors see that people with ASDs (and other disabilities) are given an active part in those areas of life that are freely chosen rather than imposed by necessity? Then they can have greater assurance that this is a society that truly embraces such individuals as its own.

If one is looking for support from more controlled studies, research indicates that such inclusion benefits people with disabilities and the general population. A relatively recent study published in the *Journal of Outdoor Recreation and Tourism* explores this issue in relation to physical disabilities and broader disabilities. An abstract and other details of the study can be accessed here.

But if this topic resonates with readers who are not inclined to go to such depths in their exploration thereof, perhaps these readers would accept a simpler challenge.

Do you have co-workers on the autism spectrum? Invite them to a social outing sometime. You might be pleasantly surprised at how much this will add to the experience.

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Hidden Instensity from page 20

that rely on clinical or educational records, the lower male preponderance indicates that we may be underdiagnosing autism among females. Several explanations have been proposed. Among these is the fact that certain studies on autism have only used male subjects, which has probably resulted in a skewed perception of the entire range of autism and its symptoms.

Additionally, it has been proposed that autistic girls are more inclined to form friendships and are better able to exhibit reciprocal discourse than autistic males (Lai et al., 2015). Although the "special interests" that autistic girls pursue might seem less unique, centered on subjects like those of their neuro typical peers, like a fascination with celebrities or horses, the depth and intensity of these interests are nevertheless unusual (Gould and Ashton-Smith, 2011). Furthermore, autistic women and girls may frequently intentionally mimic neurotypical females and use "camouflaging," which could lead to underdiagnosis (Gould and Ashton-Smith, 2011). According to Pellicano et al. (2014), all these factors may contribute to the exaggeration of the male preponderance in autism. As a result, autistic females may not receive the necessary diagnosis and support, which could have detrimental repercussions on their mental health and general well-being.

The disparities in the appearance and experiences of autistic girls have garnered more attention in recent publications (Leow et al., 2024; Mandy & Lai, 2017). Research has shown that autistic girls exhibit different traits from boys, even though many traits, including cognitive function and sensory demands, are the same for both sexes (Duvekot et al., 2017). Teachers and parents may overlook autistic girls' special interests that fit more traditional gender stereotypes, like animals or celebrities (Sutherland et al., 2017), and their decreased repetitive behaviors, like flapping their hands (Gould & Ashton-Smith, 2011).

Since research shows that autistic girls participate in similar social activities and have comparable levels of close friendships to non-autistic girls, less obvious social differences may also have an impact on timely identification (Dean et al., 2017). It has been proposed that autistic females internalize their challenges, which may manifest as mental health issues (Bargiela et al., 2016), rather than externalizing their behavior (Hiller et al., 2014).

Emotional and Self-Regulatory Role of Interests

Special interests are not simply hobbies or preferences. For many autistic girls, they function as emotional anchors, helping them manage stress, anxiety, and sensory overload. Engaging deeply in an interest can provide predictability, comfort, and a sense of control in environments that often feel overwhelming.

Autistic self-advocacy perspectives consistently highlight the calming and restorative role of focused interests. Spending time with a preferred topic can reduce emotional fatigue and support recovery from social or sensory exhaustion. Rather than being a distraction from development, these interests often help autistic girls maintain emotional balance and resilience.

Research has also shown that special interests carry emotional significance beyond a purely functional or academic value. They are embedded in meaning-making processes and autistic identity formation. When these interests are dismissed as "obsessions," an important coping strategy may be unintentionally removed.

Identity Formation and Sense of Self

Special interests can play a central role in identity development for autistic girls. Through their interests, many discover areas of competence, confidence, and self-expression. Qualitative research shows that autistic individuals frequently describe feeling valued and recognized for their expertise in their areas of interest (Goldfarb et al., 2021; Winter-Messiers, 2007).

For some, early interests later shape academic or professional pathways and influence long-term career development. Research further indicates that special interests help autistic individuals make sense of life events and social contexts, providing direction and meaning (Goldfarb et al., 2021; Winter-Messiers, 2007).

Person-centered interests—such as fascination with fictional characters, psychology, or celebrities—may also serve as tools for understanding relationships and social dynamics (McFayden et al., 2020). These interests are not superficial; they often reflect deep cognitive and emotional engagement.

Because many autistic girls develop interests that appear socially typical, the depth and intensity of these interests may be overlooked. Research suggests that autistic girls are more likely to have age- and gender-normative interests compared to autistic boys, contributing to under recognition (Nowell et al., 2019; Grove et al., 2018). When adults focus only on whether an interest looks "normal," they may miss its emotional importance and developmental value.

Social Camouflaging Through "Acceptable" Interests

In addition, girls with autism are more likely to engage in camouflaging strategies—consciously or unconsciously masking autistic traits in social contexts (Hull, Petrides, & Mandy, 2020; Cook et al., 2021). Having interests that align with socially accepted gender norms may further obscure recognition of intensity. As a result, clinicians and educators may underestimate the presence of restricted or fixated interests if they focus solely on the topic rather than depth (Nowell et al., 2019).

Risks When These Interests Are Misunderstood

When special interests are dismissed as phases or excessive behaviors, autistic girls may lose a key source of emotional regulation and identity support. Misinterpretation of autistic behaviors in girls is well documented and contributes to underdiagnosis and unmet needs (Hiller et al., 2014; Mandy et al., 2012).

Because camouflaging is more common among autistic females (Hull et al., 2020; Cook et al., 2021), discouraging visible expressions of interest may intensify masking behaviors. Over time, this can contribute to emotional exhaustion and internalized distress (Bargiela et al., 2016).

Supporting, rather than suppressing, special interests may reduce anxiety and promote well-being.

What Parents and Educators Should Notice

If you are a parent of an autistic girl — or suspect your daughter may be autistic — her interests deserve careful attention. Interests that appear typical on the surface may still carry unusual intensity and emotional importance.

Look Beyond the Topic

An interest in animals, fictional characters, celebrities, crafts, or books may seem age appropriate. Consider the depth of engagement:

- How much time does she spend thinking or talking about it?
- Does she struggle to disengage?
- Does the interest help her feel calm, safe, or confident?

Intensity and emotional reliance often matter more than the subject itself.

Notice the Emotional Role

Many autistic girls turn to their interests for comfort after school, during stress, or when overwhelmed. These interests may function as important tools for emotional regulation. Removing or restricting them without understanding their purpose can increase anxiety.

Avoid Shaming Language

Describing an interest as an "obsession" or "too much" may create shame around something that provides stability and confidence. Respectful curiosity is more helpful than correction.

Use Interests as Bridges

Special interests can support:

- learning and academic engagement
- communication and conversation
- social connection with peers who share similar passions

When incorporated thoughtfully, they can become pathways for growth rather than barriers.

Support Balance Without Suppression

Healthy routines and flexibility are important, but they can be developed collaboratively. The goal is not to eliminate intense interests but to help autistic girls build balance while preserving what brings them meaning and joy.

Most importantly, a special interest is rarely just a pastime. It may be a source of identity, comfort, and strength.

Conclusion

When autistic girls' interests appear socially typical, their depth and significance can be easily overlooked. An interest in animals, books, celebrities, psychology, or art may not immediately signal autism. Yet what distinguishes autistic special interests is not the topic itself, but the intensity, emotional reliance, and cognitive immersion involved.

Focusing only on whether an interest looks "normal" risks missing its regulatory, developmental, and identity-shaping functions. For many autistic girls, special interests provide stability in overwhelming environments, structure in social uncertainty, and confidence in areas of strength.

Misunderstanding these interests can contribute to delayed identification, increased masking, and emotional distress. In contrast, recognizing and respecting them can support wellbeing, self-esteem, and authentic development.

When parents, educators, and clinicians shift from asking *"Is this interest typical?"* to asking *"What role does this interest play in her life?"* they move closer to understanding autistic girls more accurately and supporting them more effectively.

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View the full reference list here.

Inclusive Aquatics from page 22

instruction for autistic individuals using a curriculum grounded in evidence-based practices identified by the National Clearinghouse on Autism Evidence and Practice (Steinbrenner et al., 2020). Instructor training emphasizes effective environmental arrangement, clear prompting hierarchies, visual supports, reinforcement systems, behavior supports, and family collaboration, ensuring that instructors are prepared to individualize water safety and swimming instruction while maintaining fidelity to research-informed teaching strategies.

Scope-and-Sequence Curriculum in Practice

A structured scope-and-sequence curriculum is a central component of evidence-based aquatic instruction for individuals with autism. Instruction typically begins with safety routines, water acclimation, and tolerance, then progresses to breath control, floating and rolling, propulsion, and safe exits. Progressive curricula that include leveled lessons, each broken into teachable steps with clear mastery criteria, help ensure systematic skill development. Instructor-to-participant ratios are recommended to shift across levels, often beginning with 1:1 or 1:2 instruction for early learning and gradually moving toward 1:3 or 1:4 formats as participants demonstrate water safety and swim skill competencies. A layered learning approach helps participants build foundational comfort before introducing more complex skills, promoting confidence, safety, and early success.

An evidence-based program also incorporates systematic assessment to guide individualized, data-driven instruction. A comprehensive process should include a pre-lesson questionnaire, an in-water skills evaluation, a progression checklist with ongoing tracking, and mastery-based advancement criteria. These measures assist instructors in identifying strengths, tailoring supports, and monitoring acquisition, maintenance, and generalization of skills.

Session lengths typically average 40 minutes and follow a predictable structure to support regulation and learning, including a warm-up, core instruction, play based reinforcement, and a structured exit routine. To ensure individualization, lessons should be adapted through flexible pacing, skill-based grouping, and adjustments for sensory, behavioral, and communication needs. Safety protocols, such as deck checks, consistent safety cues, arm's reach supervision, and visual pool rules, are critical to integrate in each lesson. Visual supports, including schedules, cue cards, first/then boards, communication boards, and social narratives, enhance comprehension, reduce anxiety, and promote independence across aquatic activities.

Communication Supports

Autism-informed swim instruction in progress: Instructor uses visual supports and graduated prompting in 1:1 lesson

Communication supports are central to safe, accessible water safety and swimming instruction. Participants benefit from concise language paired with visuals (e.g., symbol icons, photos, gestures), consistent routines, and embedded choices. Instructors use scripts and rehearse key phrases (e.g., "wait for whistle," "roll to back," "hold wall"), pairing language with demonstrations and tactile cues as appropriate. For those who need additional support, waterproof devices, picture-based boards, or gesture-based systems are integrated directly into lessons to ensure ongoing access and active participation. Integrating communication supports increases regulation and engagement while reducing the likelihood of challenging behavior.

Family Involvement and Layered Protection

Family involvement is an evidence-based practice for autism and plays a critical role in safety, well-being, and skill generalization. Active engagement strengthens outcomes. Caregivers are encouraged to observe sessions, practice key safety routines (e.g., using door alarms, preparing swim-ready clothing, locating safe exits), and follow brief home-practice plans. Families should also share their child's sensory preferences, motivators, and calming strategies to support a positive start and effective regulation. Family involvement creates layered protection through safe environments, skilled instruction, vigilant supervision, and informed communities.

Beyond Safety: Building Life Skills

Beyond immediate safety outcomes, aquatic instruction can accelerate growth in self-regulation, following directions, social engagement, motor planning, and physical fitness, core life skills that promote independence and participation across environments. Aquatics instruction also offers opportunities to practice joint attention, turn-taking, and peer interaction, while building endurance and strength that support participation in other sports and recreational activities. Motivational elements such as behavior-specific praise, peer encouragement, and certificates of completion help build confidence, reinforce effort, and celebrate progress in meaningful and developmentally supportive ways. Finally, an evidence-based aquatics program facilitates continuous improvement and research, generating insights that support ongoing quality and inclusion in aquatic experiences.

Getting Started: Practical Guidance for Families and Providers

- **Start early:** Prioritize water-safety instruction even before a child shows interest in water or swimming.

- **Vet programs:** Ask about autism-specific staff training, pre-assessment, individualized goals, and how progress is tracked.

- **Use visual supports:** Request visual schedules and communication aids, review teaching plans and procedures, and ask about the best practice proactive behavior supports in place.

- **Plan generalization:** Practice safe entries/exits at different pools, rehearse "stop and look" routines near all bodies of water, and coordinate with schools and community programs to ensure generalization and consistency of supports surrounding water safety and swim instruction.

Conclusion

Expanding access to well-designed aquatic programming is both a safety imperative and an inclusion opportunity for individuals on the autism spectrum. When water safety instruction and swim lessons follow a structured, evidence-based scope and sequence, participants gain essential competencies, such as breath control, floating and rolling, propulsion, and safe exits, while also benefiting in areas of regulation, social interaction, communication, and confidence. A dual-focus instructional model that pairs professional training with individualized instruction equips instructors to implement visual supports, prompting and fading strategies, reinforcement systems, and behavior supports with fidelity. Family engagement further strengthens outcomes by promoting consistent routines, layered protection, and generalization across settings.

Programs such as the Ernie Els #GameOn Autism® Aquatics Program demonstrate how inclusive, research aligned approaches can reduce drowning risk while expanding pathways to meaningful recreation and community participation. Continued investment in professional development, sensory friendly environments, and rigorous progress monitoring will support communities in building sustainable, high quality aquatic experiences that safeguard lives and foster lifelong engagement, in the pool and beyond.

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For more information about evidence-based water safety and aquatics programming email sports@elsforautism.org

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Personal Philosophy from page 21

of accommodations on which I depend to be at my best and without which I would be in deep trouble.

- How might those with unjust motives in positions of power and influence exploit the new autism paradigm to our detriment? Profound/non-profound separation could render one or both subgroups even more vulnerable to nefarious agendas than we already are.

- What if breaking up the autism spectrum were to result in "autism" pertaining only to those identified as profoundly autistic? Where would that leave me and all who view their autism as being core to self-identity? Upon finding out at age 40 that I am autistic, I worked particularly hard at accepting and eventually embracing my newfound identity, understanding that if I didn't, I would never be able to attain true happiness in life. Years of effort in this regard would likely end up being for naught.

I have no idea how I would end up self-identifying, how I would present myself to others and what the resultant impact on my self-esteem would look like. "I used to be autistic but not anymore"? "I am non-profoundly autistic"? "I'm not sure who I am"? I reject all these descriptors because I am proudly and openly autistic. Autism is at the heart of who I am, and there are many who share this sentiment.

Sam Farmer

The desire for more research, supports and services for those autistic individuals who face hardships daunting enough to warrant around-the-clock supervision and assistance is abundantly understandable to me. I simply do not feel as though breaking up the spectrum is the answer. In my view, an unwavering commitment on the part of society to sufficiently invest in the care economy is the key. Regrettably, a monumental challenge, simply because we have chosen not to prioritize taking care of each other.

What will it take to change course? The cost in human terms has been immeasurable in that the care needs of so many have gone unmet for so long. Not merely with respect to autistic persons but to all disabled individuals and to everybody. All of us require care in one form or another. It's a matter of societal priorities.

I believe that the conflict within the autism community with respect to services and support would be resolved if sufficient resources for all autistics were to be made available and if care needs assessments were individualized. Our community is too diversified when it comes to the nature of the help that is warranted for a "one size fits all" approach to work out. Utopian wishful thinking, no doubt, and that's the problem. Throughout history, resource constraints and resource allocation malpractice have had a way of pitting humans against each other.

With regard to keeping the autism spectrum unified, doing so would be easier if we were to not allow the differences that exist among us to divide us and to acknowledge that which all autistics share: the reality that how we function with respect to behavior, communication, socialization, thinking and learning is inconsistent with normative societal expectations, none of which were established with us in mind. We contend with many of the same struggles, yes, to varying extents, but they're still very real to all of us: pronounced sensory sensitivity, challenges around processing non-verbal cues, social anxiety, mental health vulnerabilities and ableism, to name a few. We all bring value to the table in our own unique ways. We are all human beings, deserving of dignity and respect.

Sam Farmer is a neurodiversity advocate, writer, author, and public speaker. Identified later in life as autistic, he shares stories of lived experiences as well as ideas and insights as to how one can achieve greater happiness and success in the face of challenge and adversity. A Long Walk Down a Winding Road – Small Steps, Challenges, & Triumphs Through an Autistic Lens is his first book. Visit samfarmerauthor.com to learn more.

Stress-Free Vacations from page 16

Consider Sensory Needs - Loud, crowded, or brightly lit environments may be overwhelming. Bring noise-canceling headphones, sunglasses, or hats if needed. Seek attractions with quiet areas or sensory-friendly accommodations.

Include Your Child in Decisions - When possible, let your child choose activities or meals. Even small choices can give a sense of control and make the vacation more enjoyable.

Create Excitement and Reduce Anxiety - If visiting a new attraction, show pictures or videos in advance. Use social stories to help your child know what to anticipate with the activities your family has chosen to do.

Tips for Mealtime Success

Meals can be stressful for many families. Maintaining familiar foods or predictable routines can make dining smoother.

- **Pack Snacks:** Carry familiar snacks for in-between meals or delays.
- **Research Restaurants:** Look for places with calm atmospheres, simple menus, or options your child likes.
- **Consider Meal Prep:** Vacation rentals or hotel rooms with kitchenettes allow you to prepare meals your child is comfortable with.

Managing Unexpected Challenges

Even with preparation, surprises happen. Having strategies for coping helps everyone stay calm:

- **Create a Comfort Kit:** Include headphones, sensory toys, fidget tools, or a favorite blanket.
- **Have Quiet Spaces:** Identify nearby parks, quiet lounges, or hotel rooms for breaks.
- **Use Visual or Verbal Cues:** Gentle reminders, visual schedules, or timers can help your child adjust to changes in routine.
- **Stay Flexible:** Some days may not go as planned, and that's okay. Shifting the schedule or adjusting expectations can prevent stress from escalating.

Travel Benefits for Children with Autism

While travel can present challenges, it also offers unique growth opportunities:

- **Building Confidence:** New experiences help children develop independence and problem-solving skills.
- **Social Interaction:** Exposure to different people and situations can support social development in manageable ways.
- **Family Bonding:** Shared experiences strengthen family connections and create lasting memories.
- **Learning Through Exploration:** Visiting museums, parks, or cultural sites can support curiosity and learning in fun, interactive ways.

Making It a Positive Experience

Ultimately, the goal of a vacation is to enjoy time together as a family. Small adjustments and thoughtful planning can make travel smoother and more enjoyable:

- Start early with preparation and discussions.
- Keep routines flexible but consistent where possible.
- Prioritize your child's comfort and needs.
- Celebrate small successes and fun moments.

With patience, preparation, and understanding, families who have children with Autism can have vacations that are both memorable and stress-free. Travel doesn't have to be a source of anxiety—it can be a rewarding adventure that brings the whole family closer together.

Kimberly N. Smith, BCBA, LBA, is Clinical Director/BCBA at Milestone Achievements.

Inclusive Spaces from page 25

but can quickly become overstimulating due to bright lighting, loud music, or crowded fitness areas. Organized, interest-driven programming such as art studios, technology labs, fitness classes, book or gaming clubs, and skill-building workshops lowers social ambiguity. Providing a "Know Before You Go" guide, offering pre-event walkthroughs, clearly identified noise levels, and defined start and end times increase comfort and willingness to participate. While many facilities offer sensory-friendly hours, timing is the key. If low-stimulation access is only available during off-peak or mid-day periods, working adults or those reliant on others for transportation can be excluded. Equitable practice requires evening and weekend options, rotating inclusive time blocks, reducing baseline overstimulation where possible, and providing quiet spaces for regulation. Inclusion cannot require choosing between employment and access.

Community centers and park systems can also intentionally recruit and compensate autistic adults to design, teach, and lead interest-based programming, ensuring that activities are grounded in lived experience and reflect authentic community interests rather than assumptions. Respecting adult autonomy is equally essential. Staff should speak directly to adults, avoid infantilizing language, assume competence, and offer choices.

The true measure of an inclusive community is not whether autistic adults can use its spaces, but whether those spaces were designed with them in mind from the beginning. Recreation is not optional in adulthood. It is where health, employment, and belonging intersect.

NEXT for AUTISM transforms the national landscape of services for people with autism by strategically designing, launching, and supporting innovative programs. We believe that individuals with autism deserve to live fulfilling, productive lives, supported by excellent services and connected to their communities. We continually ask, what's next for people on the autism spectrum? For more information, visit nextforautism.org or email SI@NEXTforAUTISM.org.

Candace Weaver-Dowds, LMSW

***Performing Arts** from page 25*

in a supportive, low-pressure environment. Theater also evokes a wide range of emotions, fostering empathy, compassion, and emotional expression.

Community, Belonging, and Friendship

Theater can be a powerful basis for community. Specialized theater groups for autistic people offer a sense of belonging and mutual support. The shared experience of creating and performing builds trust, teamwork, and lasting friendships, helping to reduce isolation and increase social cohesion.

Freedom from Identity Constraints

Theater allows players to explore a wide range of social behaviors and identities beyond their everyday selves. This is often especially valuable for autistic people, who—like me—may feel limited by social expectations or their own self-concept. By taking on different roles, we can experiment with different ways of interacting and expressing ourselves, ideally leading to increased confidence and personal growth.

Reduction of Social Anxiety and Increased Confidence

Many Aspies experience social anxiety, which may make group activities daunting. Theater arts provide an incremental pathway to participation, starting with observation and moving toward more active involvement. The confidence learned from performing in front of an audience and the opportunity to "try on" less anxious personas can help reduce overall anxiety.

Personally, adopting less anxious personas was important to my social development. Among my earliest memories is self-identifying as favorite TV and movie characters. I had no sense of "Me" but had to engage socially and academically with others. Through internally "becoming" the character, I could respond as I believed that character would. How that affected my personality or outward demeanor, I don't know, but what mattered was how I felt inside.

Activities That Simulate Real-life Interactions

Group role-playing that mimics realistic social activities encourage players to collaborate, share, and communicate. For example, participating in games of 'store' or 'restaurant,' allow children to take turns playing different roles. Such exercises promote cooperation, patience, and an understanding of group social dynamics.

Such activities are also designed to help players recognize and interpret non-verbal cues, including facial expressions, gestures, and body language. For example, children may practice noticing when a peer looks upset or when someone signals a desire to pause a game. These role-playing exercises may also incorporate resolving interpersonal conflicts, sharing, and taking turns, all of which support the development of emotional regulation and social awareness.

Annie Kent, MA

Improvisational theater activities encourage cognitive flexibility— "thinking on your feet"— a skill that challenges many autistic people. Regular practice in safe settings, like drama class, may help to improve the ability to respond more confidently to social situations.

Empowerment and Self-Discovery

Theater empowers autistic individuals by providing opportunities for self-expression, creativity, and independent achievement. Applause and positive feedback reinforce self-worth, while the process of preparing and performing fosters a sense of ownership and pride in one's abilities.

Quality of Life and Well-Being

Engagement in theater arts may improve overall quality of life by offering a safe space for self-discovery, social interaction, and creative fulfillment. The transformative "magic" of theater lies in helping individuals of any age become comfortable with themselves and share their unique perspectives with others.

Important Considerations and Challenges

- **Sensory Sensitivities:** Traditional theater environments can be overwhelming due to loud sounds, bright lights, and crowds. Sensory-friendly performances and accommodations are crucial for accessibility.

- **Individual Differences:** Not all autistic people will enjoy or benefit from theater. The suitability of any given program depends on the individual person's interests and the culture of the group.

Autistic individuals often have heightened sensory awareness, insight into autistic social challenges and differences, a strong understanding of our thought processes and problem-solving approaches, and clear insight into our emotional states, despite the challenge of expressing these emotions to others. and differences. These challenges may discourage some neurodivergent people from trying theater.

My memories of Youth Theater are emotionally mixed. I met my best friend there, and she's still my best friend many years later. We dreamed of leading roles, or at least important parts in plays. But auditions terrified me. I could sing well enough to be in the school chorus and choir for three years. But when I tried to sing in front of the Director, Mr. Leonard, my vocal cords froze. I was so afraid of being judged by my peers, and especially by him.

He was, after all, a *Professional*. During rehearsals, he could be overheard yelling, "*You are replaceable.*" He was a strict, no-nonsense teacher and mentor who pointed out our mistakes, determined that we would learn from them. On the other hand, to be praised for a job well-done filled us with joy and boosted our confidence.

Mr. Leonard tried to find some way for every child in the program to involve themselves in productions. If you didn't get a part in the play, he would offer behind the scenes roles. I was too young for the Teen Theatre summer musicals but was always offered a job as an usher at Cleveland's historic Cain Park amphitheater. Even that provided a sense of inclusion and belonging.

Recently, I found some Heights Theatre memories and comments on social media. 'Tom' wrote:

> *My few years at Heights Youth Theatre taught me about people in the theatre. From my high school, I learned fear, scorn, and a deeply mined ambivalence to learning or growing.*
>
> *[Heights Youth Theatre] might as well have been an alien world. Here were people that actually loved. And shamelessly embraced me, my lowly, undeveloped talent, and welcomed me into their little artistic home. I was caught in a wave of serendipity and flabbergasted by love. For all of you with your welcome arms, I thank you... (HEIGHTS YOUTH THEATRE ALUM - the JERRY LEONARD DAYS | Facebook, 2026)*

I only engaged in drama through my university years and auditioned for the occasional production thereafter. But I feel fortunate to have had the opportunity to access theater classes. While I can't identify all the ways it benefitted me, in retrospect, I know it did.

Conclusion

Theater can be profoundly beneficial for people with autism, offering structured opportunities for social learning, self-expression, empowerment, and community. With savvy accommodations and inclusion practices, the performing arts become a welcoming space where autistic individuals thrive and enrich the creative world with their unique talents and perspectives. With more neurodivergent leadership and advocacy today, theater could rival psychosocial therapies in improving the lives of autistic people.

Annie Kent, MA, spent two decades working in public sector disability, mental health, and infectious diseases advocacy and education. Diagnosed with three closely related types of neurodiversity, a lack of awareness and understanding led to burnout and retirement from the field. She remains an active advocate, learning and engaging personally and remotely with several Autism and ADHD organizations and Forums. Contact Annie at anjolie1031@gmail.com.

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***Autistic Endurance** from page 22*

Parallel Play in Adulthood

From the outside, ultra running appears solitary. In reality, it is communal—but in a way that feels surprisingly accessible.

Autistic adults are often described as socially impaired, yet emerging scholarship challenges that deficit framing. The "double empathy problem," introduced by Damian Milton (2012), suggests that social breakdowns between autistic and non-autistic individuals arise from mutual misunderstanding rather than inherent autistic deficiency.

In endurance spaces, I have often felt less of that mismatch. Conversations are structured and topic-centered: pacing strategies, fueling methods, elevation gain. Info dumping is welcomed. Silence is acceptable. You can run beside someone for miles without pressure to maintain eye contact or fill conversational gaps. The social expectations are low.

It feels like parallel play for adults—together, but not too intensely other focused.

For someone who has spent much of her life calculating social rules, navigating the social rules of the running world has been a welcome relief.

***see Autistic Endurance** on page 47*

Rhythm Nation from page 23

skills and inclusion, and provide overall satisfaction and happiness have been well documented. Scientifically the benefits of music to increase concentration, positively affect mood and self-regulation, enhance cognition and language abilities, improve social skills and inclusion, and provide overall satisfaction and happiness have been well documented. Research indicates that engagement with music activates widespread neural networks involved in attention, executive functioning, and emotional regulation, which can support sustained concentration and cognitive performance (Hallam, 2010; Thaut, 2005). Studies have also demonstrated that listening to or actively participating in music can positively influence mood and reduce stress by modulating neurochemical responses associated with reward and emotional processing (Chanda & Levitin, 2013). In educational and therapeutic contexts, music-based activities have been shown to support language development and memory through rhythmic and melodic patterning that facilitates auditory processing and verbal recall (Patel, 2011; Tierney & Kraus, 2013). Additionally, collaborative musical experiences—such as group singing, ensemble participation, or rhythmic synchronization—can strengthen social bonding, increase prosocial behavior, and foster a greater sense of inclusion and well-being among participants (Kirschner & Tomasello, 2010; Hallam, 2010). Collectively, these findings suggest that music serves not only as a form of artistic expression but also as a powerful cognitive, emotional, and social support that contributes to overall life satisfaction and happiness.

Gina-Marie Moravcik, MA, CCC-SLP

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Autism City from page 23

needs he may have, adapting the manner in which we offer directions and assignments to suit his preferences, and honor the requests that he makes, as an advocate for his own success. These practices are all simple and positive ways we can actively increase his personal gains and chances of longevity in his position, as opposed to attempting to force him into neurotypical norms, which do not serve anyone's best interest. (Austin and Pisano, 2017).

I coordinated for a coach to work alongside him to provide even greater success in his workplace. He will receive on-site job coaching through OPWDD[1] for six months starting in the very near future (Wehman et al., 2016). Once this coaching is completed, he will be taking a permanent union position as a city employee, and he is very excited about his career path.

Support from agencies such as OPWDD is so critically necessary in reducing job insecurity for individuals with autism in the workplace (Wehman et al., 2016). I truly believe that with enough outreach and education to organizations, municipalities, and businesses, we can embrace a new standard by giving the employers the tools and skills to feel confident to support an employee with autism. And in turn, this will allow the employees to achieve a higher level of success and accomplishment in their roles at work. People who live with autism make accommodations every single day, in so many situations that they encounter, to adapt to what many people in the public consider to be "normal" everyday living (Milton, 2012). I would love to see a shift in thinking, where our communities are shaped in a way that does not consider one group "the norm," but allows more fluid, flexible settings, so that every member of society feels seen and heard.

Heidi Harrison

Anderson Center Consulting and Training offer several different courses, specializing to the type of business or organization being trained. Police and Fire Departments are separate from general city employees. Our Police Chief Thomas Figlia told me that our Police Department does yearly internal training, with specific blocks on Responding to People with Disabilities, which includes people with autism, (Gardner et al., 2019) but they will be receiving a specialized training from Anderson in 2026. I also spoke with our Fire Chief Thomas Lucchesi, who let me know that a specific program is being developed by Anderson Center, that will be geared towards First Responders, and they will also be implementing this in the year 2026. I am thrilled with the enthusiasm that I have received from my coworkers, and I look forward to all of us sharing the information that we learn with others, in the hope that more cities, towns, organizations and businesses decide to do the same.

I am grateful for the support of the city administration in this endeavor. If not for their openness in adding this to our current employee training courses, it would not have been possible. In addition to adding the Police and Fire Departments First Responder Training in 2026, it is my hope to add an additional course, Autism Supportive Community, where our Recreation Department would host a community session with Anderson School, to train individuals in the community, expanding the mission to an even larger population. Inviting neighbors, business owners, and local organizations is my goal.

I am so excited to continue to build upon this foundation, be a part of changing standards, and bring awareness to others in positions like my own. I hope that if they have not had the amazing opportunity yet, that someday, they too have a coworker with autism.

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Footnotes

1.OPWDD refers to the New York State Office for People With Developmental Disabilities, which provides employment and support services for individuals with developmental disabilities.

2. Sensory supports are tools designed to assist with sensory regulation and may include tactile, visual, or auditory accommodations.

3. Anderson Center Consulting and Training provides professional education programs focused on autism support and inclusion practices.

Sleepaway Camp from page 24

was hesitant to expose herself socially. Her mom now tells me her daughter can't wait to go back and describes camp to other people as the place where she feels really seen."

For Sasson's campers, Camp Akeela is an opportunity to safely and comfortably break out of their comfort zones, even in seemingly small ways.

"I have talked to so many parents who start off by telling me that they're really unsure that their child will be able to eat chicken nuggets that aren't in a particular shape," she said. "Camp can be an amazing tool to help push them to do things that they may be uncomfortable with."

Though these camps cater to vastly different individuals across the autism spectrum, they both share the same goal: to foster community, connection, and joy for campers in a space that families can trust.

"I think the best gift a parent can give their child is an opportunity to grow independently," Sasson said. "That's hard for parents to recognize, but I think kids are really capable of more than we give them credit for."

In the welcoming spirit of camp, Sharma enthusiastically added:

"Come visit whenever you want."

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Autistic Success* from *page 24

relative, or neighbor who influenced them, I had no such person in my life. Clearly, my strong inclination towards this was purely genetic, and probably connected to my then-undiagnosed autism. Nevertheless, my obsession with anything mechanical, electrical, and above all electronic (television and radio were the dominant technologies of the time) did not abate. Unfortunately, there was not much that I could do about it because, as a child, I had little access to such things or to anyone who could teach me about them.

One Man's Trash is Another Man's Treasure

This famous proverb applies to autistics even more than it does in general, because we are often drawn towards unusual things that most people would hardly care about. For me, however, it was true in the most literal sense. Growing up in the urban environment of New York City, where garbage is put out on sidewalk curbs for collection by the sanitation department, I would often see discarded appliances and other mechanical and electrical devices. Since they were free for the taking, I picked up any such items that I found and brought them home to take apart and examine.

At first, there was little that I could do besides look at their insides but, as I got older, I was able to figure out how they were put together, and even how they worked. Eventually, I was able to repair them and get them to work. One unfortunate result of this is that I was labelled "garbage picker." I had been doing this since age six (if not earlier), and it became more of a peculiarity as I got older. Still, for an autistic person, the stigma of a social taboo that I could not understand (and still don't) was not nearly as strong as my obsessive special interest. As such, I continued doing this and do so to this day (along with finds at flea markets, apartment and yard sales, thrift shops, vintage stores, as well as online).

This became especially significant when people discarded old radios, televisions, record players, and other electronic equipment, which immediately came home with me. Unlike the other devices (mainly mechanical and simple electrical), whose operation can be directly observed, one cannot figure out how electronic equipment works without specialized technical knowledge, which I did not yet have. Over the following years, a few basic books about radio and TV repair remedied that situation. I found my first TV set at age 10; I had already fixed a few radios by then but had no idea what to do with a TV. A few years later, when I was in high school, I got my first TV to work. It became a daily ritual for me to walk around my neighborhood after school in search of electronic items. Also, I can honestly say that I spent as much time looking at television from the inside as I had watching it from the front. Before long, every room of my apartment (I lived in a large extended family) had its own TV, not to mention numerous radios. My own room was filled with those precious finds.

Karl Wittig, PE

Because I attended a science high school, the physics lab had a huge amount of laboratory equipment and instruments, many of which were not in working condition. I was able to figure out how many of these worked and often repaired them to full working order.

Things Have Changed a Lot Since Then

To this day, I consider those early experiences as important to becoming an engineer as was my formal education. Although everything that I had tinkered with (old TVs and radios with tubes) had long been obsolete by the time I began my professional career, this early activity gave me a strong practical feel for working with practical electronic devices and equipment; all of this served me very well in my later professional life. I can honestly say that those early autistic obsessions and special interests led directly to my career and may even have made it possible to begin with.

Unfortunately, nowadays, electronic devices are so compact that they can barely even be opened or taken apart, let alone repaired. As such, there are fewer opportunities for a young person who, like me, is interested in such things. After my ASD diagnosis in 2000, I often encountered parents of a kid on the spectrum who had been fixated on vacuum cleaners and loved taking them apart (these are among the few common devices that can still be disassembled and whose operation is somewhat interesting). I always told them, quite emphatically, that they should encourage this as much as possible. Even if it doesn't lead directly to a career or occupation, it stimulates interest in how things work and provides an activity that is both enjoyable and educational. This *can* put them on the road to a viable educational or career path and, eventually, gainful employment.

Educational Considerations

I was also fortunate in that, not only was I capable of doing well in school (at least, according to their criteria) but also had a strong aptitude for science and math (in contrast with such subjects as English and social studies, which made little sense to me). I always liked, and did well in, what are now called STEM subjects. In addition to electricity and electronics, I became very interested in astronomy (the planetarium was my favorite school trip), the Apollo space program, atomic and particle physics, and other similar areas. Alas, the only pre-college subject in which any of these were taught was physics, which I didn't get to take until high school.

I was especially fortunate to be good at math, which many autistics who (like me) were strongly inclined towards mechanical and electrical things did not have aptitude for. Temple Grandin has addressed this issue and points out that many otherwise technically gifted autistics were never able to do algebra. Although math was not my primary interest, I was always strongly drawn towards numbers, looked for numerical patterns wherever I could find them, and was fascinated by different number systems (e.g., Roman numerals). Thankfully, I was able to learn algebra, enjoyed geometry (particularly as it related to mechanical drawing), and especially loved trigonometry after I discovered its connection to electronics and physics.

All of this meant that I would go to an engineering school, as opposed to a four-year liberal arts college. I had the opportunity to do so, majoring in applied physics, followed by a master's degree in electrical engineering. Had I not been able to do this, I would most likely have been a repairperson, laboratory technician, or other similar occupation. Surely many autistics have followed this path. I have always believed that unemployment rates for autistics (among the highest for any demographic, including disabilities) are greatly overestimated because many have been able to find employment related to their specialized abilities and interests and were never diagnosed.

My Autistic Career

My career as an electronics engineer was spent in research and development laboratory organizations. I worked in such areas as electronic imaging and display devices, scientific and laboratory instrumentation and, most notably, was a member of various teams that developed technologies for the digital high-definition television broadcasting standard that is in use today. The R&D environment, at least at that time, was very favorable for autistics (then undiagnosed) because it employed substantial numbers of eccentric individuals (to the point of creating stereotypes). As such, my autistic differences would have been seen as merely another form of such and were tolerated to a much greater extent than they would have been in other work environments.

Although the electronic devices that I spent so much time tinkering with in my youth, and which had largely come from discarded trash, used early technologies that were very different from the ones with which I worked during my employment, I cannot help but make a direct connection between those early experiences, which were the direct result of an obsessive autistic special interest, and the career I was later able to have. I am convinced that there is a direct line going from those old televisions that I liked to repair as a kid to my later occupation working on advanced video technologies.

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Autistic Endurance* from *page 45

Dopamine, Novelty, and the AuDHD Brain

As someone who also has ADHD, I quickly noticed another layer: endurance training satisfies both my need for routine and my need for novelty.

Training plans provide structure and repetition. Races offer new terrain, new distances, new goals. The dopamine system plays a central role in ADHD, particularly in reward processing and motivation (Nora D. Volkow et al., 2009). Endurance sport, paradoxically, stabilizes my attention through disciplined repetition while also delivering intermittent novelty spikes through events and challenges.

It is the rare activity that satisfies both sides of my AuDHD brain.

What Endurance Taught Me About Belonging

Endurance running is not for everyone. It is physically demanding and time-consuming. But what it taught me extends beyond sport.

It taught me that there are communities structured in ways that reduce ambiguity. That shared activity/interests can replace forced small talk. That belonging does not have to require constant performance or a social intensity that is too hard to maintain.

For much of my life, connection felt like something I had to earn through denying my own autistic needs. Through masking. Through becoming more palatable. Research on autistic burnout reminds us of what that chronic adaptation costs (Raymaker et al., 2020).

Running showed me another way.

I can show up as I am—focused, intense, analytical—and it works. I can move beside others without overextending. I can push my body to its limits while letting my nervous system settle.

Endurance, I've learned, is not just about how far you can go physically. It is about discovering environments where your system can sustain itself, where you can learn new things about what you can do.

Relentless forward motion, yes.

But chosen. Structured. Shared.

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Autistic Perspective from page 26

professor emeritus, whose articles and music reviews I enjoyed reading in a monthly magazine I subscribed to. Through his reviews and other writings, I came across a lot of music I might not have otherwise and was glad he encouraged me to give it a listen. A friend of mine at the time encouraged me to express my gratitude via e-mail, which, hesitantly, I did. This was around 30 years ago.

I started corresponding with this musician sometime in the early 1990s, exchanged emails for years, met him for a whole very pleasant weekend at his place in 1999 (always remember your passport when traveling to another country. I didn't), and we are still in touch. During that one weekend we had much to talk about and listen to regarding music, and the spectrum, too.

I have often been reluctant to impose myself on a stranger's time, even though, in my experience, professors have uniformly responded very well to a reasonable correspondent who sends a letter expressing interest in their work. I did this a few times back in my “math days,” too, in one case to correct a to-me-obvious error in a book on Differential Geometry, receiving a very positive response from the - now late - author. This was, in retrospect, maybe also at the thought that a high school student was trying to read a book of theirs very much directed at graduate students and even partially succeeding, but this didn't occur to me at the time. I digress.

Eric Schissel, MS

Looking over some of my early conversations over archaic newsgroups (UseNet) like “rec.music.classical” can't fail to remind me that my writing style, my way of interacting with people, has changed in the 15-year period in which I was using them. Incidentally, I notice that one of my earliest posts that can still be found online was a tentative-looking request for information, from August 1989, on Bach's lovely “Prelude, Fugue, and Allegro,” and I seem to have used even just that one newsgroup thousands of times, meeting some people there - a few of whom I later met in person - between there and 2005. Unsurprisingly, 30 years ago, my enthusiasm was more open, but my willingness to get into an argument, online anyway, over many things, was greater.

To the extent I have negative social media stories, many of them also originate with UseNet, as when I arrived back at my parents' from a visit to New York Public Library Lincoln Center, to find a “saw you there” email from someone with whom I'd been having some sort of argument on the newsgroup; he recognized me because in those days merely three-odd decades ago we thought nothing of putting photos of ourselves on our personal websites.

Now there were others who, unlike that character, I'd gotten off on the right foot with, but where my acquaintance is best remembered only sketchily as a cautionary tale, and a big reason why I am glad I have waited a few years from meeting someone online to doing anything with them in person. There are skills I have begun to learn since then, like active listening, understanding my goals in communication, and how I sound (do I sound like I'm only trying to teach where I could be learning, using a conversation as a one-sided opportunity to promote, and if so why...) that I don't doubt can help with my relationships going forward.

I have now lived in the same city for over 30 years, and continue to make and develop acquaintances, relationships and friendships. My skills, like most people's, improve, backtrack, but generally improve, with time, understanding, and work. The reward has been deeper and more meaningful connections.

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Pet Therapy from page 26

Adults may find common ground in caring for an animal, building friendships, or simply enjoying shared moments of calm.

Animals can also support cooperative skills and empathy. Learning to care for a pet or participate in a group activity involving animals teaches patience, understanding, and teamwork in a low-pressure, enjoyable way.

Structured Therapy vs. Casual Pet Interaction

Not all animal interactions are the same, and both structured and casual approaches have value:

Structured Pet Therapy: Trained therapy animals and certified handlers guide sessions with specific goals, such as improving social skills, reducing anxiety, or encouraging participation in group activities. These programs are designed to provide measurable benefits while keeping participants safe and comfortable.

Casual Animal Interaction: Even informal encounters—like playing with a classroom rabbit or meeting a community dog—offer meaningful benefits. They can make activities more enjoyable, reduce stress, and spark interest in other recreational experiences.

Both types of interaction can enhance recreational activities for individuals on the autism spectrum, making participation more engaging, rewarding, and fun.

Real-Life Examples

Children in Summer Camps: Therapy dogs visiting camp sessions often help children feel more relaxed and confident. A shy child may be encouraged to participate in group games if a friendly dog is nearby, creating opportunities for social engagement and skill-building.

Equine Therapy Programs: Horseback riding programs can help children and teens improve balance, focus, and emotional regulation. The bond with the horse provides motivation and a sense of achievement, making recreational sessions more meaningful.

After-School Programs: Small classroom pets like rabbits, guinea pigs, or fish can help children learn responsibility, patience, and empathy. They also offer calming moments during busy schedules, helping participants reset and engage more fully in other activities.

Community Events: Adults on the spectrum may attend workshops or group programs featuring therapy animals. These animals offer a supportive presence, helping participants relax, enjoy the activity, and connect with peers in ways that feel natural and pressure-free.

Tips for Including Animals in Recreational Programs

If you're organizing recreational activities for individuals on the autism spectrum, here are some tips for including animals safely and effectively:

Prioritize Safety: Ensure all animals are well-trained, healthy, and comfortable in group settings. Consider allergies or fears among participants.

Work with Certified Handlers: For therapy animals, use trained professionals to guide interactions and ensure clear goals for the session.

Offer Optional Participation: Not everyone may feel comfortable around animals. Participation should always be voluntary.

Try Different Animals: While dogs and cats are common, smaller animals like rabbits, guinea pigs, or even birds can provide calm and engaging experiences.

Teach Respect and Care: Include education about how to handle and care for animals. This builds empathy and makes interactions more meaningful.

The Joy Animals Bring to Life

Animals have a special way of making recreational activities more enjoyable, engaging, and supportive for individuals on the autism spectrum. They provide comfort when activities feel overwhelming, motivate participation, and make social interactions easier.

Children, teens, and adults alike can benefit from the presence of animals. A therapy dog might help a child feel confident in a group game. A horse may inspire a teen to try a new skill. Even casual interactions with pets offer moments of calm, joy, and connection.

In the end, animals turn ordinary recreational activities into memorable experiences. They create moments of happiness, learning, and growth—making recreation not just fun, but meaningful and empowering for everyone involved.

Mordy Rosenberg is Director of Operations at Blue Jay ABA.

The Voice Inside from page 28

know that you have it.

The courage of my collaborators inspired me to become more courageous myself. I found myself part of a group of artists who were determined to show the world how “our limits make us limitless,” onscreen and off. And I knew I had to live that out.

That's the impact our South Florida PBS series has had, and will continue to have, as we take our artists from childhood dreamers and accomplished apprentices to professionals with careers that can change the world.

While doing research to develop *The Voice Inside*, I have met so many people who found ways to unleash their “voice inside” no matter their circumstances. I met the mother of a boy with no speech and epilepsy who overcame his fine motor limitations to type and uncovered his incredible gift as a writer. I met the mother of a young adult who struggled with speech but had a unique artistic eye thanks to his ability to see emotions and feelings as colors.

I met an actor who defied doctors' predictions and became an exceptionally eloquent speaker. I met someone who overcame a guardianship battle to become the first Florida State Representative candidate with autism. I got to know an actor whose ability to memorize camera angles helped me become a better director.

The world needs the absolute best of every individual born into it to become a better one. Everyone has their own unique form of genius. The Autism Theater Project is so excited to continue to inspire people to unleash theirs.

We would love for you to join us on this journey! Check out our website www.autismtheaterproject.org to learn more about our work. We'd love to see you at our next event on Tuesday May 12th, 2026, at Actor's Playhouse in Coral Gables, FL, where you can watch *The Voice Inside*, watch a musical performance, and hear from the inspiring people who created the series.

Gena Sims is the Founder and Executive Director of the Autism Theater Project. For more information, visit www.autismtheaterproject.org.

Traveling Tips from page 27

Booking a hotel with helpful amenities and a convenient location is also important - being close to attractions and easily accessible if a child needs a break during the day. Hotels that offer a buffet breakfast can be especially helpful, as finding restaurants that accommodate picky eaters or children with food allergies can be challenging.

Prepare

Preparing your child for what to expect is incredibly important when planning a vacation, especially if this is a new experience for the family. One effective strategy for autistic children is to create and share a **social story**, outlining what they can expect during travel and clarifying expectations for their behavior. Incorporating the itinerary along with pictures of the airport, destination, hotel, and attractions can make the experience more concrete and less intimidating.

Some airlines now provide social stories on their websites. For example, United Airlines offers a guide to help families prepare: www.united.com/en/us/fly/travel/trip-planning/social-story.html. Even reading books or watching videos about different aspects of travel can help children feel more comfortable, reduce anxiety about unfamiliar places or routines, and build excitement for the trip.

As you plan your vacation, include activities that both you and your children will enjoy. Be flexible - it's okay if you don't get to everything on your itinerary. Make sure to schedule downtime, especially opportunities to cool off and rest during hot weather.

Mary Ann Hughes, MBA

Provide

Providing items to make travel easier for children with special or sensory needs is highly recommended. Bring activities to keep them occupied on planes and during downtime, such as iPads, activity books, fidget toys, and snacks. Many airlines also provide screens on the back of seats, offering distractions like movies or tracking the plane's progress on the journey.

We never travel without headphones for my son, to help with his auditory and sensory sensitivities and block out the sometimes-overwhelming sounds of airports, airplanes, and busy destinations. When the demands of travel become too much for children not used to a constant inflow of new sights, sounds, and experiences, offering comforting reassurance or a quiet moment can be very helpful.

Traveling as a Single Parent

With the high incidence of divorce in families with children with disabilities, single parents are often the ones responsible for coordinating travel logistics and caregiving during family trips.

Previously, parents may have shared duties during travel, so newly divorced parents may struggle with whether and how to handle everything on their own. Bringing a helper, such as a relative or caregiver, can be very helpful for an extra pair of hands. If that isn't feasible, there are still ways to simplify travel logistics and make them more manageable:

Book direct flights whenever possible to avoid the stress of connections.

- Arrange for someone, or a service, to drop you off and pick you up at the airport, rather than worrying about parking and navigating the airport with children and luggage.
- Check in luggage to keep your hands free for your child, but bring a backpack with snacks, activities, and sensory or comfort items.
- Consider traveling to a destination where you can stay with, or visit, familiar family or friends.
- Some companies offer trained staff to assist families traveling with children on the spectrum on cruises and at resorts.
- Don't hesitate to ask for help.
- Start with shorter trips and gradually build up to longer ones.
- Be confident: you can do this!

The more you travel with your child on the spectrum, the easier it becomes. With proper planning, preparation, and sensory-friendly supports, you can create fun and enjoyable travel experiences for your family.

Mary Ann Hughes, MBA, is a Certified Special Needs Divorce Coach and Coparenting Specialist, and Founder of Special Family Transitions LLC. She spoke at TEDx Third Ward in January 2026 about her journey in divorce as the mother of autistic children, sharing how advocating for loved ones helps caregivers find their strength and purpose. For more information and resources on special needs divorce or transitions, please visit SpecialFamilyTransitions.com and follow on Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and LinkedIn.You can also reach Mary Ann at maryann@specialfamilytransitions.com.

Art Activities from page 27

that creative expression can support emotional regulation and communication for children on the autism spectrum (Malchiodi, 2015).

Emotional Regulation and Expression

Art can play a powerful role in supporting both emotional regulation and emotional expression for children on the autism spectrum. Many children experience the world in ways that can feel overwhelming, whether due to sensory input, social expectations, or difficulty communicating their needs. The artistic process offers a natural outlet.

Through engagement in the artistic process, children are able not only to regulate their emotions, but also to express them. Colors, shapes, movement, and imagery can become a language of their own — one that allows children to communicate feelings that may be difficult to put into words.

Providing children with a safe, non-judgmental way to express emotions can reduce frustration and support emotional clarity. Over time, this can contribute to improved emotional well-being and a greater sense of internal balance.

Self-Confidence and Sense of Self

Participation in artistic experiences can also play a meaningful role in developing a child's sense of self-confidence. For many children on the autism spectrum, traditional environments may not always highlight their strengths, which can lead to frustration or a sense of being misunderstood.

Art offers a different experience.

Through the artistic process, children are able to engage in something that feels natural to them. There is no single "right" way to create, and this allows children to explore their abilities without the pressure of comparison or judgment.

Laura Costello, BA

Over time, these experiences can help children begin to feel more secure in themselves. When a child sees that what they create is valued — whether by a parent, teacher, or peer — it reinforces a sense of capability and pride.

As self-confidence grows, children may become more willing to engage with others, try new activities, and express themselves in different ways.

Social Connection and Inclusion

Beyond emotional expression, art can also open doors to social inclusion. Many social interactions rely heavily on conversation. For children who find verbal communication challenging, this can make group activities intimidating.

Art changes that dynamic by allowing children to participate together without requiring constant verbal interaction.

One powerful example is collaborative art projects. In inclusive programs, children might work together on a group mural or shared artwork where each child contributes shapes, colors, or patterns. Some children may talk while painting; others may work quietly side by side.

Other simple activities can support this kind of connection:

- Emotion color mapping
- Story through drawing
- Shared visual journals

These activities reinforce an important idea: communication does not always have to be verbal.

Conclusion

Expanding access to artistic activities can have a crucial impact on the development of children with autism. When children grow up in environments that recognize and nurture their strengths, they develop confidence in their abilities. Artistic expression can play an important role in this process.

If children are given opportunities to communicate visually, explore their interests, and express themselves through art, they gain tools that can support them throughout their lives.

Art should not be seen as an optional extra. For many children on the autism spectrum, it is a meaningful form of communication and connection.

When we validate the importance of visual expression, we send a powerful message: every child has something valuable to share.

Laura Costello is an elementary educator with a Bachelor of Arts in Elementary Education and certification in both elementary education and English as a Second Language. She has spent decades working with children and families in public schools, supporting students from preschool through high school, particularly those with diverse learning needs.

As a mother of a son with autism, her work is deeply shaped by both lived experience and professional insight. She is the author of Tom's True Colors, a children's book that explores empathy, inclusion, and the social experiences of neurodivergent children.

Her work also reflects a growing focus on the role of art and creative expression in supporting emotional development, self-confidence, and social inclusion. She is currently pursuing certification in art therapy as part of her continued commitment to supporting children and individuals on the autism spectrum.

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Online Recreation from page 29

other, and naturally the bad language can escalate. This is when I must step in and advise my son to shut the game down for an hour to allow all members to cool down. Most times I have witnessed the group working out their differences verbally and calling out any bullying quickly, but I have also seen members rage-quit and go AFK (away from keyboard) all evening. This again requires me to step in, supporting Haydn as he works through the paranoia, anger and tears that come with any teenage fallout. 1 hour later and they were all singing a bad version of Baby Shark!

This article is not a sales pitch for Minecraft. They also play various games on Roblox where the temptation to make impulse purchases is ever-present, and my son is subjected to global strangers in the chat part of every game. My son can only spend his pocket money on his debit card; all other payment methods have been blocked or have password alerts linked to my account. When he is alone in a game, only members of Haydn's age group can talk to him due to Roblox's new age verification system (photo verification required otherwise the chat option is disabled): "(S)tarting in January 2026, Roblox requires age checks for users to access Communication features. To use Communication features like Experience chat, Voice chat, and Party chat, all users must successfully complete an age check. Once users complete an age check, they will be able to chat with global users in similar age groups" (*How to Chat on Roblox*, 2026). When inevitably a player speaks inappropriately, one quick click can have the player reported and swiftly banned for 3 days by the AI admin built into every Roblox server. But the main solution my son uses is to set up a private server in his chosen Roblox game for he and his friends to access and play privately; something he learnt how to do via YouTube.

Emma Sharrocks, BA, MA, PGCE

The main tips I would give to all parents/carers of autistic gamers are:

- You need to be present and paying attention when they are gaming online. Sit within earshot / sightline of your child when they are gaming some of the time. This can help you understand the games they play, meet their friends, hear the language they use, and observe the social and cognitive skills they are developing in this virtual environment.

- Be ready to step in when talk becomes too adult or argumentative and take time to sit with your child whilst they process their emotions following a falling out.

- Agree ground rules BEFORE gaming starts, such as language expectations and time limits (and warn your child before their time limit is up).

- Take a real interest in your child's online gaming. Ask questions and follow up ones if they do open up in any form of communication.

- Take time to learn technical speak. I have included a few well-used gaming terms in this article but do take some time to update your vocabulary so you can understand what you hear / read when your child is gaming.

- Set up password protections on payment methods to prevent unauthorized in-game payments.

- Read up on the security settings the online gaming platforms offer to protect your child from strangers.

- Ensure your child knows how to report someone to admin for inappropriate behavior (first explaining what such behavior can look like).

- Explore how to set up private servers for your child to play safely on their own, with permitted friends, or even with you!

Online gaming is no longer something parents should fear. When set up correctly, it can give your autistic teens a safe space to socialize with their peers in the safety of their own home. It is an ever-changing form of recreation that requires the parent/carer to do their own research, that they develop and maintain an open dialogue with their child, and ensure they are ever-present to support and guide their autistic gamer. Who knows, your child might make a gamer out of you!

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Play and Leisure from page 30

Balance Structured and Unstructured Play

Both structured and unstructured play are important:

- **Structured Play:** Activities with clear rules or goals, like board games, puzzles, or guided art projects, help build focus, problem-solving, and cooperation.

- **Unstructured Play:** Free play, imaginative play, or sensory activities allow children to explore creativity, independence, and personal interests.

Having a mix of both ensures that playtime is both educational and enjoyable. It also gives children opportunities to practice skills in predictable ways while also exploring their own interests.

Encourage Leisure and Relaxation

Leisure activities support mental and emotional well-being, providing time to recharge and reduce stress. Examples include:

- **Quiet Activities:** Reading, coloring, drawing, or building with blocks can be calming and engaging.

- **Music or Movement:** Dancing, playing instruments, or listening to favorite songs can provide sensory input and joy.

- **Technology and Apps:** Interactive apps, educational games, or video creation can support creativity and skill development in a controlled way.

Ari Ginzy

- **Nature Access:** Spending time outside in a backyard, garden, or balcony encourages exploration, movement, and sensory engagement.

By integrating leisure into daily routines, children can enjoy downtime that is both relaxing and developmentally beneficial.

Foster Independence Through Play

Creating a home environment that encourages play isn't just about physical space, it's also about supporting independence:

- **Offer Choices:** Let children choose activities or materials. This builds autonomy and decision-making skills.

- **Set Clear Expectations:** Use simple visual schedules or timers to indicate playtime or transitions.

- **Celebrate Small Wins:** Praise efforts and achievements during play, even if the activity is short or simple.

When children feel empowered to make choices and explore independently, play and leisure become more meaningful and enjoyable.

Make Play Socially Rewarding

While independent play is important, social interaction during play can help develop communication and relationship skills:

- **Playdates or Family Play:** Structured games, collaborative art, or interactive storytelling can encourage turn-taking, cooperation, and social bonding.

- **Include Siblings:** Pairing activities with siblings or peers provide natural opportunities for interaction while supporting family connections.

- **Use Animals:** If you have pets or access to therapy animals, incorporating them into play can foster empathy, joy, and social engagement.

Socially rewarding play doesn't have to be complicated, it's about creating opportunities for connection in ways that feel safe and enjoyable for your child.

Practical Tips for Parents

Here are some actionable ways to create a play-friendly home:

1. **Start Small:** Focus on one room or area and gradually expand to other spaces.

2. **Observe Your Child:** Notice what they enjoy and what sensory inputs help or hinder engagement.

3. **Create Routine:** Predictable play routines can reduce anxiety and increase participation.

4. **Involve Your Child in Setup:** Letting them help organize toys or design spaces gives ownership and investment.

5. **Stay Flexible:** Some days may be more challenging. Adjust expectations and allow for downtime when needed.

Making Home a Place for Fun and Growth

A home that encourages play and leisure supports both joy and development for autistic children. By considering sensory needs, organizing materials thoughtfully, balancing structured and unstructured play, and fostering independence and social connection, families can create environments where children feel confident, engaged, and happy.

When play is easy to access, comfortable, and meaningful, it becomes a natural part of daily life. Leisure time transforms into an opportunity for growth, creativity, and connection—not just a break from routine.

With small, intentional adjustments, your home can become a space where autistic children look forward to play, exploration, and relaxation every day.

Ari Ginzy is the Founder and CEO of Wonder Star ABA.

Beyond Barriers from page 29

mathematical learning into a more engaging and accessible experience.

Concrete manipulatives, such as physical objects that represent numerical or geometric concepts, support conceptual understanding by making abstract ideas visible and tangible. Bouck and Long (2021) argued that these tools are especially beneficial for students with ASD, as they promote active engagement and support multiple learning modalities. Virtual manipulatives, delivered through digital platforms and applications, further expand instructional possibilities.

However, manipulatives alone are not sufficient. Hord et al. (2020) emphasized that the effectiveness of visual and concrete resources depends on intentional teacher mediation. Guided questioning, explicit instruction, and verbal scaffolding are essential to help students connect manipulatives to symbolic mathematical representations.

Evidence from Practice:
The PRAHM Experience

In Brazil, a successful example of structured mathematical assessment using concrete materials is the *Protocolo de Registro e Avaliação das Habilidades Matemáticas* (PRAHM). Originally developed by Costa et al. (2017) for children with Down syndrome, the protocol has since been applied to 51 children and adolescents with ASD.

Across all applications, the use of concrete materials facilitated task comprehension and reduced assessment-related anxiety. Materials included cardboard tokens, two-dimensional geometric shapes, and the Monta Fácil® construction toy. These resources allowed students to demonstrate mathematical understanding in ways that were not solely dependent on verbal or symbolic processing.

Figure 1: “Easy Assemble®” Toy

Figure 2: Base Ten Blocks

Additional materials, such as adapted fraction circles, Cuisenaire rods, base-ten blocks, geoboards, and the Multiplan, have also been used successfully in teacher training programs and undergraduate coursework in Special Education at the Federal University of São Carlos. These tools illustrate how playful, hands-on approaches can coexist with rigorous mathematical instruction.

Above are two images of two concrete materials used.

Final Considerations

Teaching mathematics to students with ASD presents complex challenges, particularly when executive-function, language, and visuospatial barriers are not adequately addressed. Nevertheless, research and practice indicate that thoughtfully selected concrete materials, combined with intentional instructional mediation, can significantly enhance engagement and learning outcomes.

Rather than simplifying mathematics, these approaches reframe it—honoring students’ cognitive profiles while preserving conceptual depth. In doing so, mathematics becomes not only more accessible, but also more meaningful for learners on the autism spectrum.

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Catalight Academy from page 10

we are expanding that reach and deepening the rigor behind it.

By making high-quality autism education accessible remotely across urban and rural communities in the United States and abroad, we expand the number of practitioners capable of delivering modern, outcome-driven services while helping to address industry-wide workforce shortages that limit access to timely care.

The autism support industry cannot afford to anchor itself to outdated models while demand for services continues to grow. We must build systems that learn as quickly as science advances and as urgently as families need.

Today, Catalight Academy offers certificate programs in Calibrate, Chat, Compass-Behavioral, Everyday ABA and RUBI, along with continuing education courses, advanced certifications and specialized webinars. The programs emphasize parent-mediated models that equip clinicians with practical tools to integrate into everyday practice while strengthening and scaling their business efficiently to take on more clients. After completion, clinicians also gain credentials that are added to a public registry that verify specialized training.

When clinicians are better equipped, families benefit, but the ripple effect goes even further. The true measure of success, of course, is not enrollment numbers or certificates issued. It’s whether families feel empowered, children make meaningful gains and caregivers feel far more confident than overwhelmed.

Patients and their families receive support shaped by current evidence and real-world outcomes with fewer barriers and greater access to care. Families experience approaches designed not just for clinical settings, but for daily life.

Care is not static – it evolves as research expands, as family needs shift and as clinicians refine what works. Our educational systems must evolve with it.

Catalight Academy reflects the belief that learning should be dynamic and continuously improved by the very communities it aims to serve. When education advances with intention, care moves forward and lives are improved.

Brianna Fitchett, MPH, MA, BCBA, is the Vice President of Clinical Impact at Catalight, a nonprofit that provides access to innovative, individualized care services, clinical research and advocacy so people with developmental disabilities can choose their path to care. Fitchett leads Catalight Academy for the organization and is also an instructor.

Brianna Fitchett, MPH, MA, BCBA

Autism Award from page 12

The Daniel Jordan Fiddle Foundation

The Daniel Jordan Fiddle Foundation

The Daniel Jordan Fiddle Foundation was the first not-for-profit and only all-volunteer-run organization in the United States to focus on adult Autism and has been blazing trails since 2002. They create paths leading to fulfilling and potential driven lives. Their model programs, resources, public policy, and awareness initiatives are person-centered and derive from the needs and hopes of the diverse population of adults diagnosed with Autism and their families. The Daniel Jordan Fiddle Foundation’s visionary leadership led to the creation of the first and only adult Autism focused endowment funds located at Yale University, Brown University, University of Miami, Rutgers University, Arizona State University and The Medical University of South Carolina College of Health Professions assures a global focus on cutting-edge program development, research, family support, vital resources and public policy for decades to come. The Daniel Jordan Fiddle Foundation Leader in Adult Autism Award is presented annually by the Autism Society of America to recognize and inspire the world by honoring exemplary individuals and endeavors that highlight the strengths and potential of all individuals with Autism to live their best lives. For more information, visit djfiddlefoundation.org.

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- **Christopher Banks, Past President and CEO Autism Society of America**