



# UW AUTISM CENTER

CENTER ON HUMAN DEVELOPMENT & DISABILITY

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# Talking About Autism with Children and Teens

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August 19, 2020

# Workshop Objectives

Participants will:

- Gain a balanced, empowering view of autism as well as disability in general
- Understand the benefits of discussing autism openly while also respecting students' privacy needs
- Learn practical strategies, analogies, and resources for educating autistic children and their peers about the condition

# Who Am I?

- Dr. Natasha Lewis Harrington, Psy.D.
- Psychologist at the UW Autism Center, previously a postdoctoral trainee at the Autism Center and a UW LEND fellow at the Child Development Clinic
- Autistic, involved with the neurodiversity/autism acceptance movement since college

# Who Am I?

- Volunteer
- Respite provider
- ABA therapist
- Nanny
- Psychologist

# Why Am I Here?

- Providing therapy that is affirming of autistic identity and ways of being
- Offering an autistic perspective and community voice to parents, colleagues, and the public
- Finding common ground between the professional and autistic communities

# AUTISM AND NEURODIVERSITY

# What Is Neurodiversity?

**Neurodiversity** is like religious diversity or racial diversity: the idea that humans naturally come in all different kinds, in this case different types of brains (Walker, n.d.).



# Neurodiversity

(Whittle, 2010)

# Neurodiversity

# Neurodiversity

## Medical Model of Disability

- Having a disability means something is wrong with your brain or body
- Treatment should focus on preventing or removing impairment
- Seeks to make people as typical as possible
- The problem is in the person

## Social Model of Disability

- Disability is a problem caused by living in a world that only accommodates typical needs
- Impairment is not disabling if barriers are removed
- The problem is an interaction between the person and their environment (Identity-First Autistic, n.d.)

# Neurodiversity

## Xbox

*Play Halo*  
*Realistic graphics*

*Watch Netflix*

(Evan-Amos, 2016)

## Nintendo Switch

*Play Pokémon*

*Portability*

*Motion controls*

(Evan-Amos, 2017)

# Neurodiversity

## Autistic Brain

*Patterns  
and details*

*Precision*

*Fresh perspective*

(@caleb\_woods, 2017)

## Neurotypical Brain

*Big picture  
Conventional social intuition*

*Flexibility*

(Subiyanto, 2020)



# What Is Autism?

## DSM-V Criteria

- Impairment in social/emotional reciprocity
- Impairment in nonverbal communication
- Impairment in interpersonal relationships (American Psychiatric Association, 2013)

## Alternate Perspective

- Difficulty with typical expectations of reciprocity
- Reduced or atypical nonverbal communication
- Atypical approach to social relationships, difficulty understanding typical interpersonal expectations

# What Is Autism?

- At least two of the following:
- Repetitive or stereotyped behavior or language use
- Patterns of rigidity or ritual
- Unusual interests or unusually intense interests
- Atypical responses to sensory input (American Psychiatric Association, 2013)

# MODERN PERSPECTIVES



# Identity

## Person-First

“Person with autism”

Popular with parents and professionals

Emphasizes the autism as secondary to the person

Many non-autistic people view person-first language as affirming

## Identity/Community-First

“Autistic person”

Popular with self-advocates

Portrays one’s autism and personhood as inextricable

Many people perceive person-first language as demeaning (Brown, 2011)

# Research on Identity

Research has found connections between mental health outcomes and:

- Feeling accepted as an autistic person by others
- Self-acceptance as an autistic person
- Level of camouflage (Cage, Di Monaco, & Newell, 2017)
- Positive autistic identity—specifically, viewing autistic people positively as a group and identifying with that group (Cooper, Smith & Russell, 2017)



# Functioning Labels

- "High functioning" was a research term indicating no intellectual disability
- Daily living skills are often well below IQ scores
- A recent high-profile research article encourages professionals to get rid of the term entirely (Alvares et al, 2019)

# Autism as a Superpower?

(European Parliament, 2020)

# PRIVACY

# Privacy

- Does the child know?
- Do other adults know?
- Do peers know?
- What are the family's wishes?
- What are the child's wishes?

# Privacy

## Strategies:

- Talking generally about strengths and challenges
- Teaching about autism and other disabilities without singling children out
- Encouraging appreciation of diversity overall

# RESOURCES FOR AUTISTIC PEOPLE



# Resources:

## We're Amazing, 1, 2, 3!



(Kimmelman & Nelson, n.d.) <https://autism.sesamestreet.org/storybook/we-are-amazing/>



# Resources:

## Autistic Pride



"I like how passionate I can be about things. I like that I'm a very honest and genuine person (even when I mask). I like how loyal I am to the important people in my life. I like my inquisitive nature and how I ask questions to understand things."

(Reframing Autism & Nelson, 2020) <https://www.tinyurl.com/autisticpridebook>



# Resources:

## Stimmy Kitty



(Asbell, n.d.) <https://www.steveasbell.com/>



# Other Models

- Lilo from *Lilo & Stitch* (Mintz, 2020)
- Blue Power Ranger in the 2017 movie
- Prince Zuko from *Avatar* (khaki-da, 2018)
- Holtzmann from the 2016 *Ghostbusters*
- Pixar's "Loop" and "Float" shorts

# Other Models

- Greta Thunberg (climate activist)
- Dan Aykroyd (original Ghostbuster)
- Satoshi Tajiri (inventor of Pokémon)

# RESOURCES FOR PEERS



# Resources:

## We're Amazing, 1, 2, 3!



"Can I play?" Abby asks Julia. "Can I play?" But Julia doesn't look at Abby. "Oh, and sometimes Elmo waits a long time for Julia to answer," Elmo adds. So Abby and Elmo wait.

(Kimmelman & Nelson, n.d.) <https://autism.sesamestreet.org/storybook/we-are-amazing/>



# Resources:

## What's Up With Nick?

### Meeting a Kid with Autism

"While learning about Nick's autism, we found out that everyone with autism is different. It is called a spectrum because no kid with autism is the same as another. Another kid with autism probably won't act the same way Nick does. They probably won't look you in the eyes even when they are talking to you, but it doesn't mean they are ignoring you when you are talking to them. They are still listening even though they are looking somewhere else.

There are also kids with autism that don't talk much and will use different ways to tell you what they want to say. Kids with autism might flap their arms or rock back and forth. You may not be used to this since other kids in your class don't do it, but that is just what makes them comfortable."

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(Organization for Autism Research, n.d.)

<https://researchautism.org/resources/kit-for-kids/>





# Resources:

## When George Met Carl



Hopefully, the people on the planet begin to understand you

(PBS Kids, n.d.) <https://www.tinyurl.com/whencarlmetsgeorge>



# Resources:

## A hair-dryer kid in a toaster-brained world

"So, in our pretend world, even though Bud has a perfectly wonderful hair dryer brain, it's going to be hard for him, because we toaster-brained people have decided that the most important thing that people do in our world is make toast. And Bud probably can make toast with his hair dryer, right? But he is going to have to work a lot harder to make toast with his hair-dryer brain than we will with our toaster brains. It will probably take him a lot longer to make his toast. And no matter how hard he works, his hair-dryer toast will probably always look different from our toaster toast."

The room filled with murmurs of understanding.

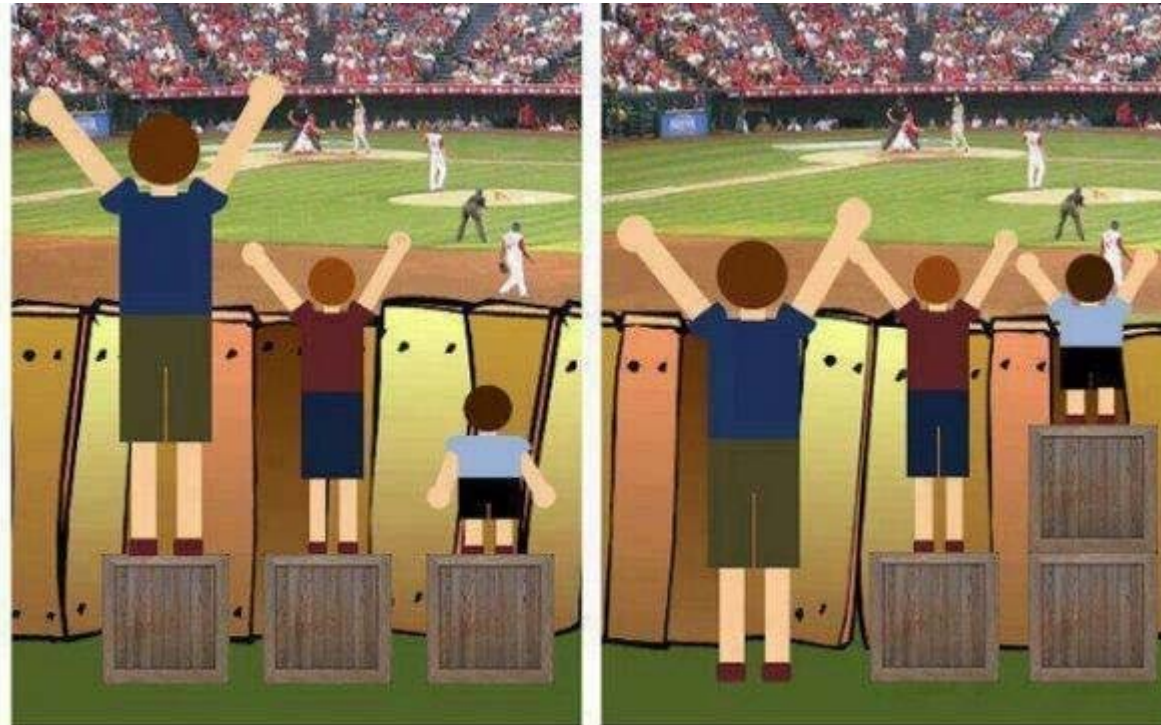
"But, on the other hand - think about THIS! When we toaster-brain people have wet hair? We are REALLY going to hope that Bud and his hair-dryer brain are around." (MOM – Not Otherwise Specified, 2010)

<https://tinyurl.com/dryertoaster>



# Resources:

## Equality vs. Fairness



“Fair is when every one gets what they need.”

(Bower, 2013) <https://tinyurl.com/fairvsequal>



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