



BC-YOUTH

Understanding Autism Through the Eyes of Youth

Insights, friction points, and actionable opportunities
from the 2026 Youth Autism Awareness Survey.

RESEARCH BASIS

Based on research data from Metro Vancouver youth aged 12–17.

Presentation brought to you by Grace Lee.

Introduction

Our Research

We conducted a community research to collect survey results from youth ages 12-17 across various high schools in British Columbia to understand how Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is currently perceived and what struggles autistic youth experience learning and socializing in school environments.

We aim to gain a more **transparent understanding** of the current relationship between autistic youth and the general BC public, then using the information to incorporate effective methods of improving ASD life, learning, and communication at school.

Beyond Awareness

Survey Snapshot and Key Messages

We gathered and summarized survey data from our target audience to gain an accurate understanding of current school community and autism relationship.

SURVEY SNAPSHOT

526

Total responses

406

Autism awareness surveys

120

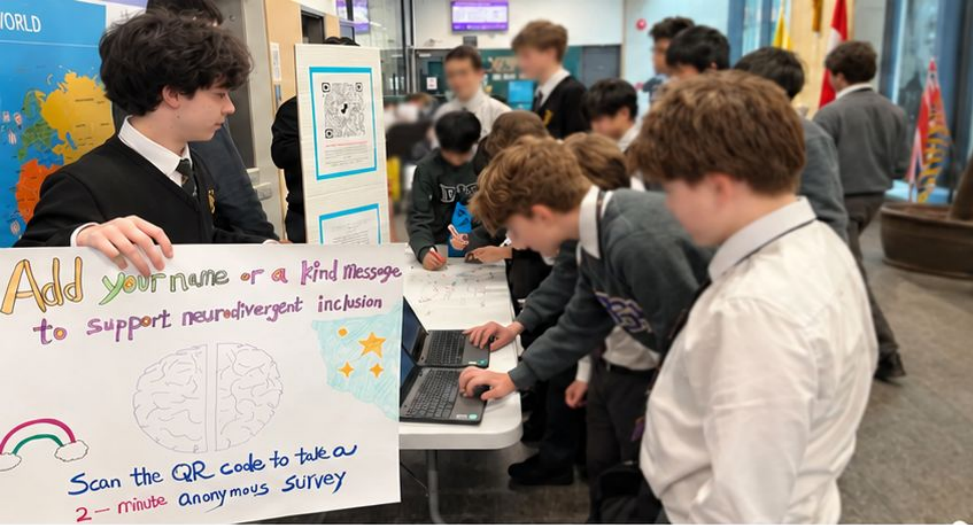
School communication surveys

12-17

Primary age range

14 + 10

Secondary schools/community events + autism family interviews



Results & Findings

The Voice of the Data: High School Students in BC

This data captures a pivotal demographic: the next generation of employers, coworkers, and community leaders. Their current understanding of autism offers a direct preview of the future, showing us a glimpse into how inclusive, accepting, and fair society will be for autistic individuals.

Persona Snapshot



72.5%
Students aged 12-17

60.8% Female



33.5% Male



73.9%
High school education level or less

90%+

Metro Vancouver Area

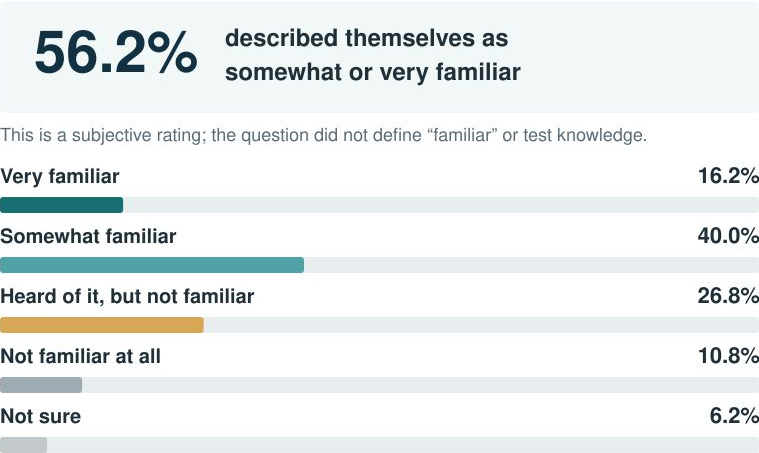
■ 44.6% Vancouver

■ 30.3% Richmond

Perceived Familiarity and Reported Contact

How respondents describe their familiarity with ASD and their contact with autistic people

1. SELF-REPORTED FAMILIARITY WITH ASD

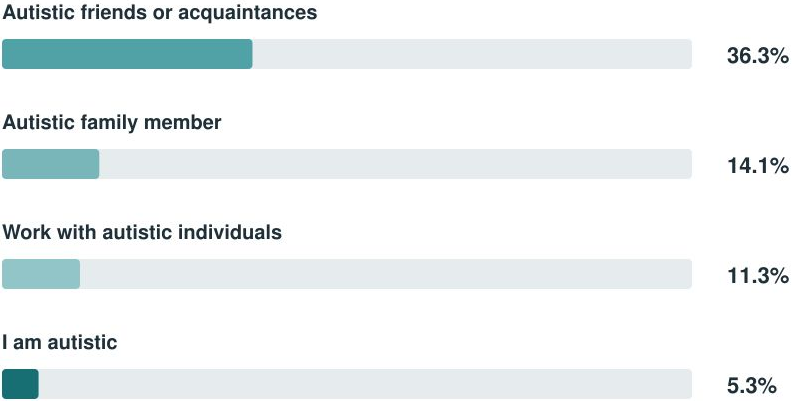


This is a subjective rating; the question did not define “familiar” or test knowledge.

N = 406 • Response options shown separately

2. REPORTED CONTACT WITH AUTISTIC PEOPLE

Reported forms of contact among respondents who answered this question.



N = 397

KEY FINDING

56.2% described themselves as somewhat or very familiar with ASD. Autistic friends or acquaintances were the most commonly reported form of contact (36.3%), suggesting that everyday peer contact may be an important context for perceived familiarity.

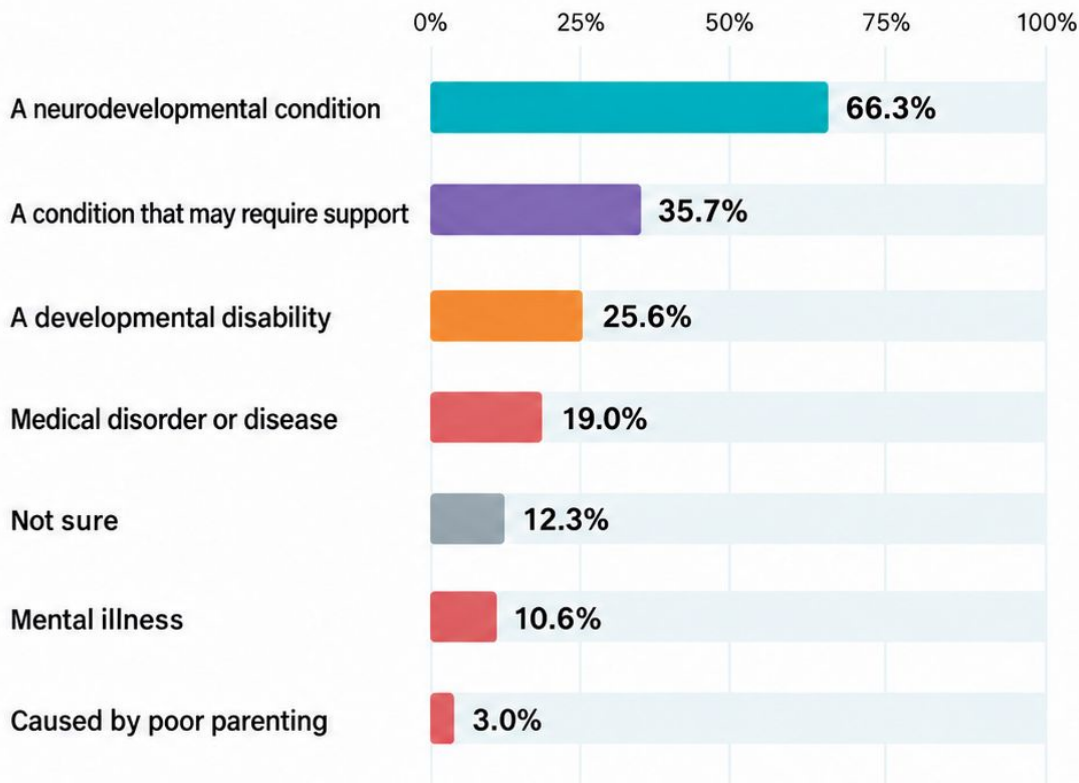
Defining the Spectrum: Core Recognition, Mixed Interpretation

66.3% recognized autism as a
neurodevelopmental condition

Support needs (35.7%) and developmental disability (25.6%) remain less clearly understood.

At the same time, misconceptions such as disease, mental illness and poor parenting still persist.

SELECTED DESCRIPTIONS • SHARE OF RESPONSES



All bars share the same 0–100% scale. Multiple descriptions may have been selected.

Comfort and Friendship Willingness Are Often Conditional

Responses to two questions about living, working, studying, and friendship with autistic people

COMFORT LIVING, WORKING, OR STUDYING ALONGSIDE AUTISTIC PEOPLE

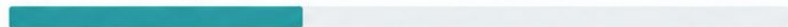
Question 12 • N = 406

40.4%

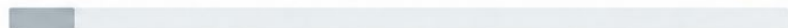
Depends on the situation
and the individual

Most frequently selected response

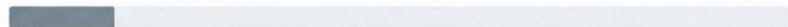
Comfortable or very comfortable 37.7%



Not sure 8.4%



Other response options 13.5%



Includes "not very comfortable," "not comfortable at all," and the duplicate conditional option.

WILLINGNESS TO BE FRIENDS WITH AN AUTISTIC PERSON

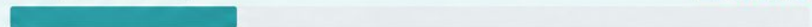
Question 13 • N = 406

38.5%

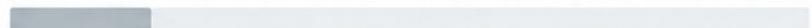
Yes, depending on the situation
and the person

Most frequently selected response

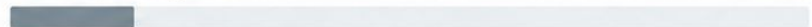
Yes, absolutely 28.4%



I'm not sure 17.6%



Other response options 15.5%



Includes "probably not," "no," "I am autistic myself," "prefer not to answer," and the duplicate option.

SURVEY RESULT

In both questions, the most frequently selected response depended on the situation and the individual (40.4% and 38.5%).

For friendship, 28.4% expressed unequivocal willingness, while 38.5% expressed conditional willingness.

What Youth Know About Autism

An open-ended prompt invited youth to share anything they knew or had heard about ASD, including information they were unsure about or believed might be inaccurate.

AREAS OF LIMITED OR INCOMPLETE UNDERSTANDING

29.7%

Knowledge gap

“I don’t know.”

“No idea at all!”

AREAS OF LIMITED OR INCOMPLETE UNDERSTANDING

39.5%

Partial or fragmented understanding

“It changes how people react or think”

“They are different in behaving and thinking.”

AREAS OF LIMITED OR INCOMPLETE UNDERSTANDING

6.2%

Inaccurate or stigmatizing content

“That their intelligence is capped at a certain level”

“they are weird”

EXISTING FOUNDATION

24.6%

Accurate and constructive understanding

“Autism is not an illness or disease. The brain processes information differently.”

“Autism characteristics are different from individual to individual.”

KEY FINDING

75.4%

did not yet demonstrate an accurate and connected understanding of autism.

Most reflected uncertainty or partial knowledge, not negative attitudes.

Limited Confidence in Positive Outcomes After Disclosure

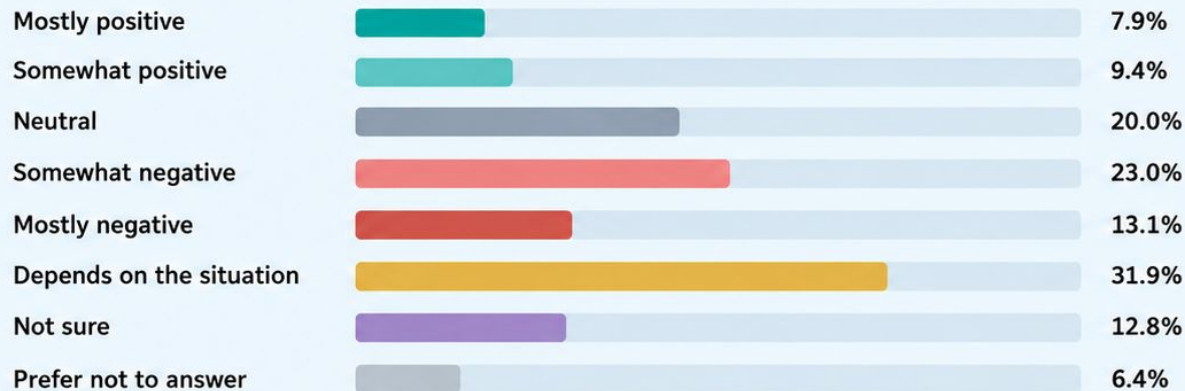
KEY FIGURE

7.9%

Mostly positive effect

Few respondents expected disclosure to lead to clearly positive outcomes.

EXPECTED EFFECT OF DISCLOSURE (N = 405)



ADVOCACY OBSERVATION

Many parents of children described as “high-functioning” avoid public appearances, interviews or disclosure because they fear stigma and discrimination. Their children’s communication challenges and the demands of long-term caregiving can leave parents exhausted, with limited capacity to advocate publicly for autistic people.

Perceived Risk of Discrimination or Bullying

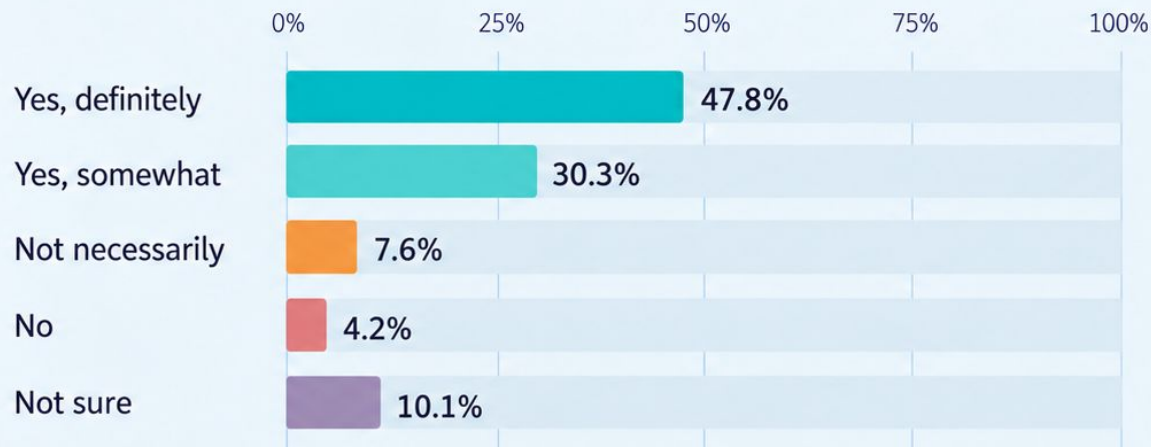
KEY FINDING

78.1%

Yes, autistic people face higher risk

47.8% Yes, definitely + 30.3% Yes, somewhat

PERCEIVED RISK (N = 406)



INTERPRETATION

The results indicate a widespread perception that autistic people face elevated risk of discrimination or bullying.

Perceived Level of Public Understanding of Autism

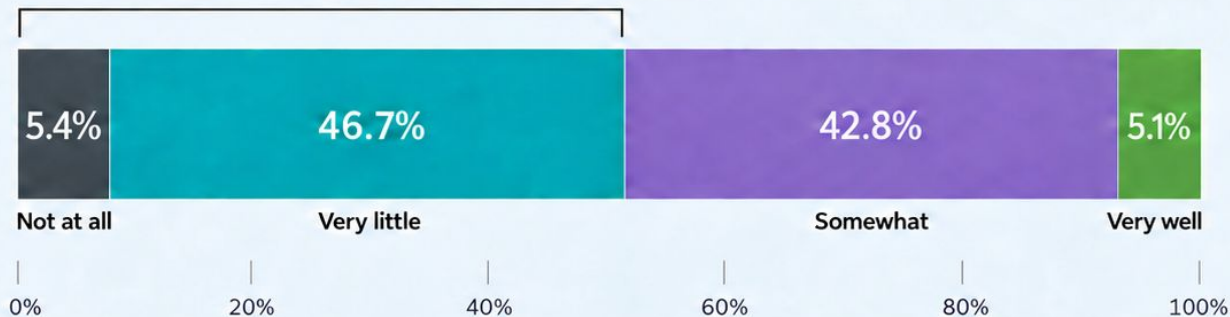
KEY FINDING

94.9%
perceived public
understanding of autism
as insufficient.

Includes “Not at all,” “Very little,”
and “Somewhat” responses.

RESPONSE DISTRIBUTION (N = 406)

52.1% perceived an **extreme lack of understanding**



INTERPRETATION

While 94.9% perceived public understanding as insufficient, 52.1% placed it in the two lowest categories.

This measure reflects respondents' perceptions of public understanding; it is not a direct assessment of public knowledge.

A Place to Belong

“My autism makes me lonely. It’s very difficult to make friends and communicate my ideas.”

Autistic survey participant

Two mothers shared that their high-school daughters with high-functioning autism are eager to connect and have a strong desire to build friendships. However, communication barriers make it difficult for them to express themselves and connect with others.

Autism Family Interview

“My child has had no friends since childhood and has never had a birthday party. Thank you so much for celebrating my child’s birthday today and singing ‘Happy Birthday.’ I was deeply moved.”

Every Mind Belong Event by BC-Youth

“My greatest wish is simply that when other children go out to eat, they will invite my child along. I would be deeply grateful.”

Autism Family Interview

Photos from BC-Youth’s Every Minds Belong Event Tour



Listen to Their Voices

**“Lack of proper education is the main reason.
PLEASE PLEASE PLEASE EDUCATE THEM!”**

Autistic survey response · Question 22, row 103

“I try to connect with human being. But most of the time they don’t understand me, and I don’t understand them. People often laughs at me, but I don’t know why.”

Autistic Interview

“Sometimes sounds/crowds/situations are so overwhelming i want to cry.”

Autistic survey response · Question 9, response 103

At work, coworkers sometimes blamed him for things he struggled to explain. After learning he was autistic, his employer reduced his regular five-day schedule to on-call work.

Autism Family Interview · Employment story

Photos from BC-Youth’s Every Minds Belong Event Tour



What we can do based on findings

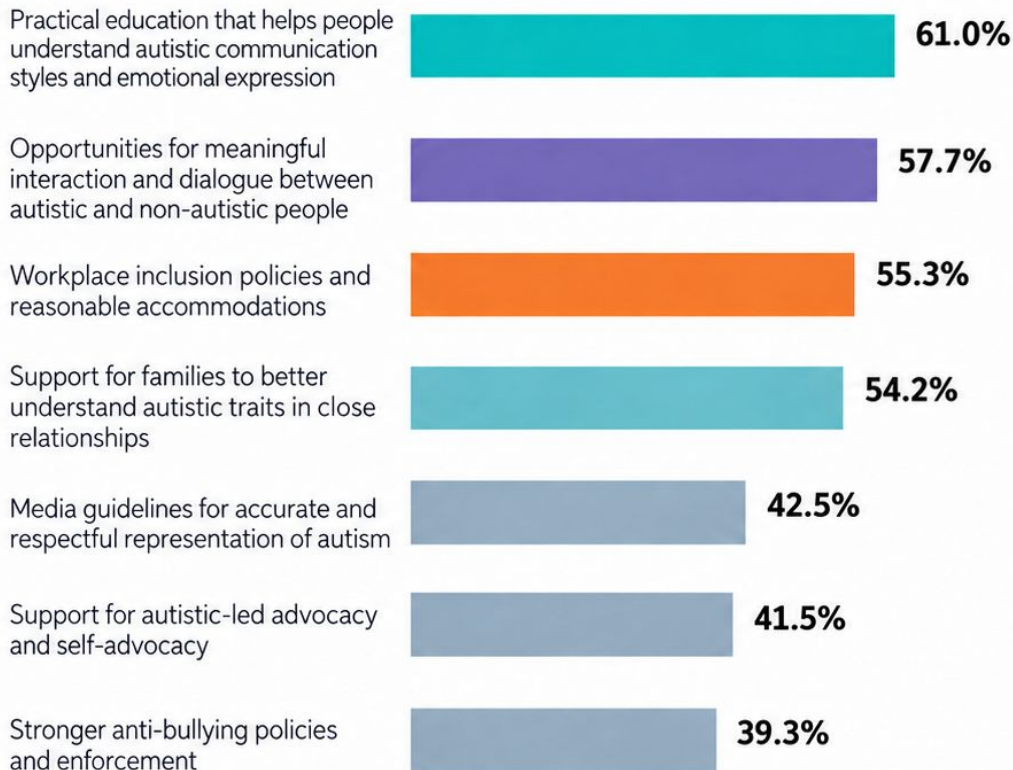
Education and Meaningful Contact Lead the Way

61.0%
Practical education

Education, meaningful interaction, workplace inclusion, and family support emerged as the strongest priorities.

Respondents also called for accurate media representation, stronger anti-bullying policies, and autistic-led advocacy.

PRIORITIZED MEASURES • SHARE OF RESPONSES



Multiple selections allowed. Small write-in responses are not shown.

Schools and Personal Networks Shape Autism Awareness

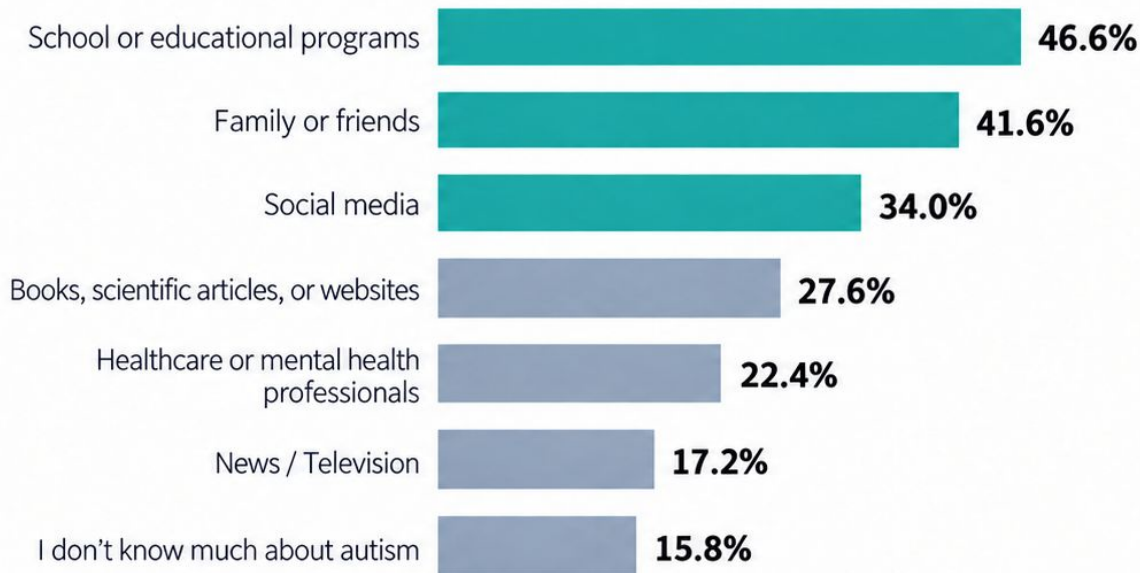
46.6%

School or educational programs

Formal education was the most commonly reported source of autism information, followed by family or friends.

Social media and published resources also played a substantial role, while fewer respondents relied on news, television, or healthcare professionals.

PRIMARY INFORMATION SOURCES • SHARE OF RESPONSES



Multiple selections allowed. Small write-in responses are not shown.

Schools Are the Clearest Priority for Greater Autism Awareness

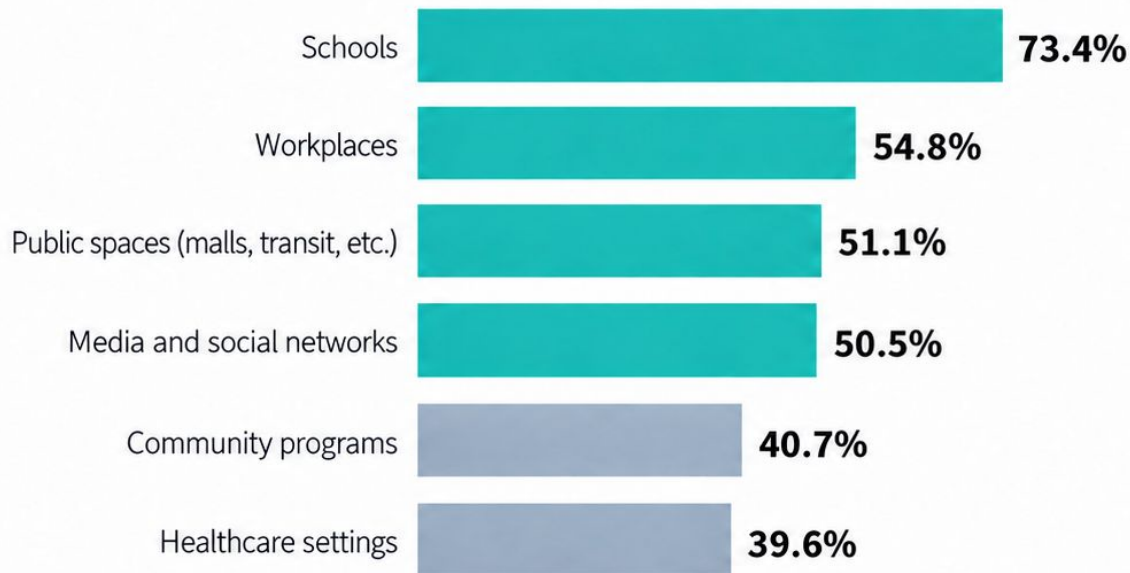
73.4%

Schools

Nearly three in four respondents identified schools as a setting where autism awareness should improve.

Workplaces, public spaces, and media or social networks were also selected by about half of respondents, indicating a need for awareness across everyday environments.

SETTINGS FOR IMPROVED AWARENESS • SHARE OF RESPONSES



Multiple selections allowed. Small write-in responses are not shown.

Strong Interest Centers on Understanding Autism and Communication

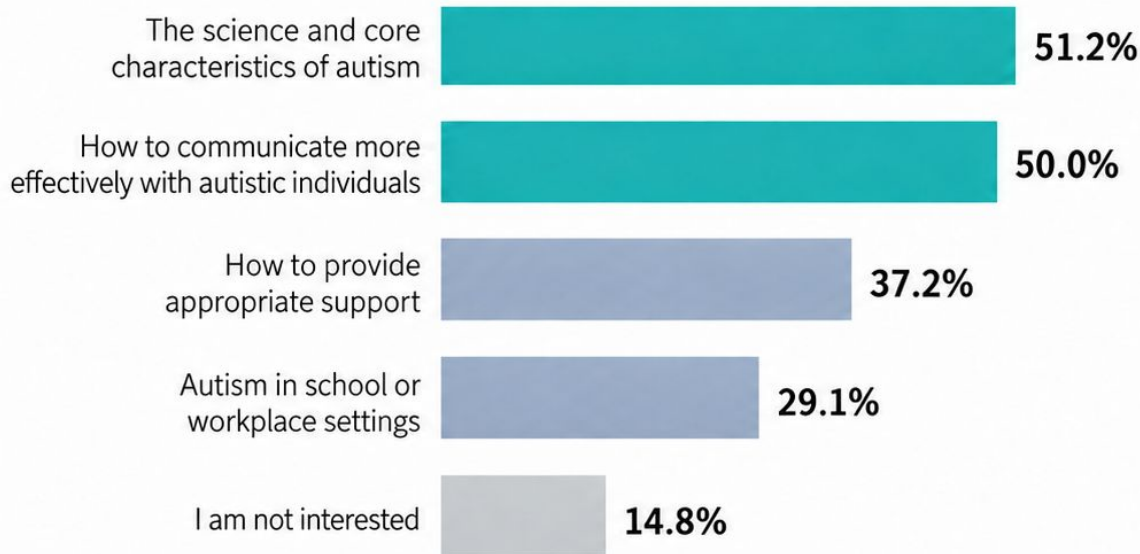
51.2%

Science and core characteristics

The science and core characteristics of autism was the most selected learning topic, closely followed by effective communication.

Respondents also expressed interest in learning how to provide appropriate support for autistic individuals and in understanding their experiences and challenges in school and workplace settings.

TOPICS OF INTEREST • SHARE OF RESPONSES



Why Students See Education as the First Line of Prevention

Students repeatedly linked bullying to misunderstanding, stigmatizing language, and limited knowledge of autistic communication and sensory differences.

01

Misunderstanding difference

Autistic behavior is interpreted as strange, intentional, or socially inappropriate.

“People are unable to understand why autistic people act differently.”

02

Stigmatizing language

“Autistic” is used as a synonym for stupid, weird, or socially unacceptable.

“Calling someone autistic just means they’re stupid or dumb.”

03

Limited practical knowledge

Students lack guidance on communication differences, sensory needs, and appropriate support.

“Most people don’t understand what autism actually looks like.”

04

Stereotypes reinforced socially

Peers, online content, and discriminatory jokes normalize inaccurate beliefs.

“Nobody disproves the joke and people build onto it.”

KEY FINDING

42.3%

explicitly called for education or awareness, making it the most common coded theme. However, many responses said “educate more” without defining content, frequency, or evaluation.

The Main Implementation Gap Is Between Awareness and Accountability

Students proposed education far more often than reporting, investigation, protection, or consequences for bullying.

AWARENESS

42.3%

Education and awareness

"Teach students about neurodiversity."

LIVED EXPERIENCE

9.2%

Autistic voices and direct contact

"A firsthand view is more powerful than secondhand information."

ENVIRONMENTAL SUPPORT

24.5%

Support and reasonable accommodation

"Public spaces should have sensory rooms."

ENFORCEMENT

11.7%

Monitoring, reporting, or consequences

"Closer monitoring for bullying."

KEY FINDING

3.6×

Education appeared 3.6 times as often as enforcement-oriented action.

School districts need both prevention and a documented response process when bullying occurs.

What Young People Want to Ask Autistic People

Eight recurring themes in the submitted questions

01 Everyday Experience and Inner Life

Daily life, thought, perception, routines, and what makes a day easier or harder.

Representative question

“What does being autistic feel like in your everyday life?”

02 Understanding and Misconceptions

Common myths, public assumptions, and what autistic people wish others understood.

Representative question

“What is one misconception you wish people would stop believing, and what is the reality?”

03 Support and Accommodation

Helpful attitudes, practical support, accessible environments, and useful resources.

Representative question

“What kinds of support, behaviour, or attitudes from others make your life easier?”

04 Communication and Social Connection

Conversation, friendship, relationships, trust, and respectful communication.

Representative question

“How can non-autistic people communicate with you more effectively?”

05 Sensory and Emotional Regulation

Overload, difficult environments, recovery, and strategies for managing distress.

Representative question

“What does sensory or emotional overload feel like for you?”

06 Treatment by Others and Belonging

Bullying, discrimination, stigma, exclusion, safety, and social acceptance.

Representative question

“How do you deal with judgment, discrimination, bullying, or exclusion?”

07 Strengths Identity and Interests

Positive aspects of autism, personal identity, interests, preferences, and joy.

Representative question

“What is your favourite thing about being autistic?”

08 School Work and Adulthood

Education, employment, commuting, independence, and transition to adult life.

Representative question

“What support is most important during the transition to adulthood?”

Recommendations

1

Encourage schools to display autism awareness posters. Youth volunteers can also help post them in libraries and community centres.

2

Co-create short videos with autistic people, families, and professionals about lived experiences, accurate information, practical tools, and peer-to-peer communication skills. BC-Youth would be glad to be actively involved in developing the videos and outreach materials, bringing a youth perspective.

3

Show the videos to students and staff during the school day and facilitate discussion afterward.



Thank You!

With heartfelt gratitude for your support
in creating a community where every
neurodivergent individual feels understood
and accepted, safe to be themselves,
able to thrive at their own pace,
and truly belong.