

NMAEYC Annual Early Childhood Conference
2025

Autistic Students Are Everywhere

— The Full Picture of Autism in
Early Childhood —

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Saturday, March 29
9:30-10:30 UNM SUB
Ballroom B

HOW AUTISM IS PORTRAYED BY THE MEDIA:



HOW AUTISM ACTUALLY LOOKS:



💬 Mrs. SPEECHIEP ∞

Our Why: Unmet Needs of Autistic Students

- ❑ Autistic children and teens have **double the rates of suicide and suicidal ideations** than non-autistic students.(Connors, Ionadi, Mazefsky,2023). This can show up as early as preschool.
- ❑ When children are not identified as autistic early, they **miss crucial interventions**
- ❑ Autistic students are **everywhere** in the school. They are in regular education classes as well as special education classes. All school staff need to be trained to support autistic students. Schools need to be structured to meet the needs of autistic students.
- ❑ Our approach supports all students.

Consequences of Underdiagnosis: Education and Developmental Impacts

- **Delayed Interventions:** Missed opportunities for early accommodations, speech therapy, and behavioral support (Neurodivergent Insights, 2023).
- **Misdiagnosis:** Many autistic individuals receive incorrect diagnoses (e.g., ADHD, conduct disorder, or emotional disturbance), leading to inappropriate treatment plans (Mandell et al., 2007).
- **School Pushout & Exclusion:** Students without the right supports may struggle academically and socially, increasing dropout risks (Travers et al., 2022).

Consequences of Underdiagnosis: Mental Health and Lifelong Impacts

- **Mental Health Challenges:** Unrecognized autism often leads to anxiety, depression, and burnout, especially in those who mask (Hull et al., 2020).
- **Lifelong Disadvantages:** Lack of diagnosis can affect access to disability services, school success, accommodations in higher education, and employment opportunities (Ohl et al., 2017).



Barriers to Diagnosis and Support

Exploring Underdiagnosis and
Misdiagnosis



New Mexico Public Education's Definition of Autism

(a) Developmental disability significantly affecting **verbal and nonverbal communication**, and **social interaction** generally evident before age three that adversely **affects a child's educational performance**.

Other characteristics often associated with autism are **engagement in repetitive activities and stereotyped movements, resistance to environmental change or change in daily routines and unusual responses to sensory experiences**.



Neurodiversity Affirming Definition of Autism

Autism is a **natural variation in brain development** that affects how a child **communicates, interacts, processes information, and experiences the world**. Autistic children may use **different ways** to express themselves, engage in play, and respond to sensory input. Autism is not something to 'fix'—it is a lifelong way of being. **With supportive environments, clear communication, and flexibility in teaching, autistic children can thrive and fully participate in learning and play.**

Gendered Bias in Autism Identification

- Many autism **diagnostic tools were developed with a cisgender, male-centric model**, leading to underdiagnosis in trans and nonbinary individuals (Lai et al., 2015).
- **Girls often present differently than boys**, with special interests that blend in socially and less noticeable social communication differences (Lai et al., 2015).
- Studies suggest the real gender ratio may be closer to **4:3** rather than the commonly cited 4:1 **male-to-female ratio** (Ratto et al., 2018).
- Women and gender-diverse individuals are more likely to **mask autistic traits**, making clinical identification difficult (Hull et al., 2020). (More on this later)
- Higher **vulnerability to victimization** (Neff)
- More prone to experiencing **internalizing disorders** like anxiety, depression, self harm and eating disorders.

Gendered Experiences of Autism

- Studies indicate that **autistic individuals are more likely to identify as transgender or nonbinary compared to the general population** (Warrier et al., 2020).
- Up to **70% of autistic adults report identifying outside of the gender binary** (Strang et al., 2018).
- Gender diversity may be incorrectly viewed as a **symptom of autism** rather than an **authentic identity**, leading to stigma and misdiagnosis (Strang et al., 2018).
- Many gender-diverse autistic people experience increased **pressure to mask both their autistic traits and their gender identity**, leading to significant mental health challenges (Davidson & Tamas, 2016).

Racial Disparities in Autism Diagnosis

- Black children are diagnosed **1.4 years later** than White peers, and Latinx children **2.5 years later** (Mandell et al., 2002).
- Indigenous children are **13% less likely** to receive an autism diagnosis at all (Zuckerman et al., 2017).
- Black children are **5.1x more likely to be misdiagnosed with conduct disorder** before an ADHD or autism diagnosis (Morgan et al., 2017).
- In the US white children are **19% more likely** than Black children and **65% more likely** than Latinx children to be diagnosed with autism.
- **Structural racism** in healthcare and education contributes to these disparities (Meghani et al., 2009).



Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA)

- Also called **Pervasive Drive for Autonomy**
- “**Demand avoidance**” = not being able to do certain things at certain times (for example, refusing to get dressed, refusing to bathe, or refusing to go to school).
- Extreme and pervasive presentation
 - Falling down when asked to brush teeth
 - Having a meltdown when asked to change a shirt
 - Not a trauma response per se (although trauma can be involved)
 - Not related to a sensory sensitivity.
 - PDA is rooted in anxiety, but not about the activity itself: the anxiety is induced by the **demand** and real or perceived **loss of control/autonomy**

Students with PDA are Often Not Recognized as Autistic

- PDA can lead to **increased rates of misdiagnosis** as Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD) or behavioral problems, which results in the wrong interventions (Green et al., 2018).
- Many PDA students **struggle with traditional educational models**, leading to higher rates of school refusal and exclusion (O'Nions et al., 2014).
- The PDA Society estimates that **70% of students with PDA are unable to attend school**



PDA in the schools



This is a video from Casey Ehlich

Autism and Masking

- Masking involves **camouflaging autistic traits to fit into an allistic (non-autistic) world**, often leading to exhaustion and mental health issues (Hull et al., 2020).
- Can be a conscious or **unconscious adaptive strategy** for safety
- More pervasive with Autistic **women and gender diverse folks and people of color**
- Can involve **scripting, phrase repetition, careful observation, and mimicking**
- May cause **intense inner criticism, repression, and shame**
- Contributes to high rates of **depression and anxiety**



Diagnostic Overshadowing- We have a hand out for this

- Occurs when **symptoms of a coexisting condition are incorrectly attributed to an existing diagnosis**, leading to misdiagnosis or lack of treatment (Reiss et al., 1982).
- Common in autistic individuals, especially in those with **co-occurring** mental health disorders.
- Leads to **inadequate support, increased distress**, and **higher risk** of school exclusion (Doherty et al., 2022).

Example: A masking autistic student with depression and self-harming behavior. They are given counseling for the depression and/or self harming behavior but not accommodations for autism.

Systemic and Classroom Solutions

Accommodations and Action
Strategies



Six Accommodations for Autistic Students

- Support and affirm students efforts to communicate their needs and wants.
- Incorporating students' **special interests** into learning (Koenig & Williams, 2017).
- Providing **adaptive communication**. **Student need access to adaptive communication supports and staff that are trained to use them.** (Ashburner et al., 2008).



Six Accommodations for Autistic Students, cont.

- Assist student with **regulation** (include movement and whole body learning).
- **Create routines and support students with transitions and changes.** (Wong et al., 2015).
- Accommodate **sensory needs** of students (bright lights, strong smells, loud noises)



Accommodations for the Whole School

- **Training all staff**, including substitute teachers, on autism-friendly practices (Travers et al., 2022).
- Designing classrooms and campuses for **neurodiverse accessibility** (e.g., quiet spaces, sensory-friendly areas, inclusive recess equipment) (Baron-Cohen et al., 2009).
- **Addressing exclusionary discipline practices** that disproportionately affect neurodivergent and BIPOC students (Skiba et al., 2011). Everyone needs to be trained on de-escalation strategies. The legally protects students and staff and fully implements IEPs and BIPs and 504 plans.





Thank You!

Camille Wilder
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Handouts

- Neurodiversity Terminology
- Autism and Co-Occurring Conditions
- Autism Resources
- Early Childhood Signs of Autism
- Integrating PDA Goals for IEPs

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