

Neurodiversity/Autism Acceptance Month

A framework for history, belonging
and academic connection



Fayette County
Public Schools



History

Every April, people celebrate Neurodiversity and Autism Acceptance Month. This movement marks a major change in how we think about autism. Instead of looking at autism as a medical disease that needs to be cured, people now celebrate it as a natural and valuable difference in how the human brain works.

The history of this month started back in 1972, when a group called the Autism Society of America created "National Autistic Children's Week." By April 1984, this grew into "Autism Awareness Month." For a long time, the main conversations about autism were led by doctors and people who were not autistic themselves. They focused mostly on "awareness" campaigns that treated autism like a tragic burden on families, and they spent most of their time trying to find a medical cure.

Eventually, individuals with autism grew tired of others speaking for them. They wanted to lead their own conversations. In 2011, an advocate named Paula Durbin-Westby and the Autistic Self Advocacy Network (ASAN) started the very first Autism Acceptance Month. They specifically changed the word "Awareness" to "Acceptance." They did this to demand equal rights, better support in schools and workplaces, and true inclusion in the community. Finally, in 2021, the Autism Society of America officially changed its calendar to match this new goal, making April a nationwide time for acceptance and celebration.

Key Concepts & Symbols

The Neurodiversity Paradigm

In the late 1990s, a sociologist named Judy Singer came up with this idea. It states that brain differences—like Autism, ADHD, Dyslexia, and Tourette's—are just natural variations in human biology. It is a lot like how nature needs many different types of plants and animals to be healthy. This view says these differences are not medical diseases that need to be wiped out.

The Infinity Loop (Gold or Rainbow)

Autistic advocates prefer using a gold or rainbow infinity symbol rather than a puzzle piece. The infinity loop shows that the human mind and the autism spectrum have endless variations, twists, and unlimited potential.

The Puzzle Piece Controversy

You still see the puzzle piece symbol a lot, but many autistic people reject it. They feel the puzzle piece hints that they are "missing a piece," hard to understand, or a problem that needs to be solved. They believe this symbol sends a hurtful message that they are incomplete.

Identity-First vs. Person-First Language

In many healthcare settings, people use "person-first" language, like saying "a person with autism." However, a huge majority of the autistic community prefers "identity-first" language, which means saying "an autistic person." They see autism as a deep, natural part of who they are, not a sickness or an extra burden they have to carry around.

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Barriers To Belonging

Invisible Barriers

Environments That Cause Sensory Overload

Regular classrooms can be very overwhelming for an autistic student's senses. Buzzing fluorescent lights, echoing hallways, crowded walls covered in posters, and loud school bells can cause real physical stress. Just trying to handle all these sights and noises uses up an enormous amount of energy, leaving the student exhausted before they can even focus on their schoolwork.

The Double Empathy Problem

Created by researcher Damian Milton, this idea shows that communication problems between autistic and non-autistic people go both ways. Studies show that non-autistic people are often just as bad at reading autistic body language and social cues as autistic people are at reading regular social cues. Even so, schools usually blame the autistic student for the mix-up, forcing them to do all the hard work to change how they talk and act.

The High Cost of "Masking"

Many neurodivergent students hide their natural habits just to blend in and avoid being bullied. This is called "masking." For example, a student might force themselves to make painful eye contact, fake their conversations, or stop themselves from flapping their hands when they are excited. Hiding who they are takes a ton of mental energy and can lead to severe exhaustion, extreme anxiety, burnout, and mental health struggles.

Common Misconceptions

"Autism is a straight line from high to low"

People often look at the autism spectrum as a straight line that goes from "mild" to "severe." In reality, the spectrum is shaped more like a wheel or a color web with many different sections. For example, a student might have amazing, genius-level math skills, but struggle deeply with loud noises or handwriting. Because everyone has different strengths and struggles, labeling someone as just "high" or "low" functioning is wrong and hurtful.

"Autistic people don't feel empathy"

This is a false stereotype that makes autistic people feel very isolated. Many autistic individuals actually feel other people's emotions deeply and intensely. The difference is that they might process or show their care in ways that look different from what people expect.

"Stimming is just bad behavior"

"Stimming" stands for self-stimulatory behavior. This includes actions like rocking back and forth, spinning objects, pacing, or repeating words. These actions are actually healthy and important tools that help a student calm down. Stimming allows a neurodivergent nervous system to process overwhelming sights and sounds or handle big emotions.

Common Microaggressions

"You don't look autistic!": This dismisses a student's neurodivergent reality based on an outdated, media-driven stereotype, invalidating the immense effort they put into navigating a neurotypical world.

"Everyone is a little bit autistic these days": Minimizing a lifelong, pervasive neurological difference as a universal quirk dilutes the actual systemic barriers, struggles, and distinct experiences that autistic individuals live through daily.

"Look me in the eye when I'm speaking to you": Forcing eye contact can cause genuine neurological discomfort or sensory distortion for an autistic student, forcing them to focus on the eye contact itself rather than actually hearing or processing the words being spoken.

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Education Connections

Alignment with FCPS Portrait of a Graduate

- Critical Thinker: Studying the evolution of psychological models—moving from early institutionalization and behavioral compliance toward neurodiversity advocacy—challenges students to analyze how societal definitions of "normalcy" are constructed and maintained.
- Effective Communicator: Standardizing multiple communication modalities (including AAC devices, written text, visual aids, and verbal speech) expands communication frameworks, teaching all students that authentic connection transcends rigid neurotypical norms.
- Empowered Learner: Utilizing Universal Design for Learning (UDL) frameworks allows neurodivergent and neurotypical students alike to customize their learning pathways, leaning into intense special interests as valid, high-level academic drivers.
- Creative Problem Solver: Evaluating the sensory, digital, and structural architecture of school spaces challenges students to design innovative, universally accessible physical and digital spaces that optimize comfort and productivity for all human minds.
- Collaborative Team Member: Building teams that intentionally leverage different cognitive processing styles—such as pairing a strong holistic thinker with a deeply detail-oriented pattern finder—models the multi-disciplinary cognitive diversity required in modern scientific, tech, and creative industries.

KY Standards Alignment

- Using Evidence: Gathering relevant evidence from credible sources; in Grades 6-12, determining accuracy, context, bias, and intended use.
- Communicating Conclusions: Constructing explanations and/or arguments using reasoning and information; in Grades 6-12, using claims and evidence from multiple sources while acknowledging counterclaims, strengths, and limitations of the arguments.
- 1.C.CV.1: Describe basic democratic principles.
- 1.G.HI.1: Describe how culture and experience influence the cultural landscape of places and regions within their communities and state.
- 2.C.CV.1: Evaluate how civic virtues guide governments, societies, and communities.
- 5.C.CV.1; 8.C.CV.1: Describe the democratic principles of equality before the law, inalienable rights, and consent of the governed...
- HS.C.CV.3: Analyze the impact of the efforts of individuals and reform movements on the expansion of civil rights and liberties locally, nationally and internationally.
- HS.C.PR.2: Explain how active citizens can affect the lawmaking process locally, nationally and internationally.
- Autistic Self Advocacy Network (ASAN): autisticadvocacy.org
- Neurodiversity Hub: neurodiversityhub.org