CENTRE FOR AUTISM
MIDDLETOWN

# PEER UNDERSTANDING AND PEER SUPPORT

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# Contents

# INTRODUCTION

Historically, peer support has focused on teaching autistic young people to behave more like their non-autistic peers. Recent understanding of the impact of masking and the benefits of shared autistic interaction has challenged these traditional approaches. This Bulletin focuses on recent research that seeks to understand peer relationships from an autistic perspective and research that seeks to address autism stigma as a barrier to peer relationships.

The Bulletin begins with an interview with Vicki Smith, Specialist Speech and Language Therapist with Middletown Centre for Autism. With both professional and personal experience of neurodivergence, Vicki has a particular interest in challenging stereotypes and misunderstandings around autistic friendship. We asked her to explain how understanding of autistic friendship and communication has changed to give a context for modern peer support programmes.

*Please note that the views represented in this document do not necessarily reflect the views of Middletown Centre for Autism.*

*The language used in this Bulletin is autism-affirming and neurodiversity-informed. Some of the papers summarised use more medical and deficit-focused terminology and approaches. This Bulletin is created for autistic people, family members and professionals to learn more about research being conducted. The language chosen here is intended to be as inclusive as possible to the broad autism community.*

**Definitions:**

Neurodiversity is the scientific truth that people vary in the way that their brains process and respond to information.

'Neurotypical' describes the majority of people. While all brains are unique, most people think, sense and communicate in similar ways. Traditional education and employment settings tend to suit neurotypical people well because they are systems built by neurotypical people for neurotypical people.

'Neurodivergent' describes the minority of people. The way that they process and respond to information differs from the majority. They may struggle in traditional education and employment settings that are designed for neurotypical ways of processing and responding.

# INTERVIEW WITH VICKI SMITH

**How was 'peer support' historically used in schools in relation to friendship and what has the impact been?**

In recent years, there has been a shift in how research about neurodivergent friendships have been conducted. We have moved away from a deficit model where autistic communication styles need to be 'fixed' and instead have begun to view autistic communication and friendships from a more neuroaffirmative viewpoint. This has been largely thanks to the autistic and neurodivergent people who have shared their experiences and contributed to the literature and research.

Prior to this, research and supports focused on a deficit model and the 'teaching' of social skills in an attempt to 'normalise' autistic communication. This 'training' focused on teaching autistic children and young people to communicate in ways deemed appropriate by neurotypical communication standards. This included 'blending in' and 'masking' by ignoring and disregarding any discomfort felt in social situations e.g. sensory overwhelm, when making eye contact, changing tone of voice and monitoring facial expressions. Any breakdowns were perceived as a result of 'deficits' in how the autistic person communicated and viewed the world and others. Where peer support interventions were employed, autistic students were expected to mirror the behaviour and interests of their peers.

This one-sided understanding of autistic friendships and relationships changed with the development of the 'Double Empathy Theory' by Dr Damian Milton. This theory recognised that while autistic people may lack insight into non-autistic communication and culture, so too could non-autistic people lack insight into autistic culture, experiences and communication styles. This lack of insight resulted in 'mismatches' between the two different neurotypes. Further studies have expanded on Milton's research, with studies like Black et al. (2024), Crompton et al. (2020) and Sharman & Seedorf (2025) all reporting that autistic people felt more comfortable with friends who were also autistic or had other diagnoses (such as ADHD). Participants in these studies reported learning from other autistic people, they felt they could be their authentic selves, there was more understanding of concepts such as time blindness, sensory preferences, etc. and a shared lived experience that resulted in greater comfort and a reduction in masking.

Themes that have emerged from research about neurodivergent friendships have centred on the following:

- Feeling different from neurotypical people.
- Masking and/or suppressing identity, interests, etc. to better fit in and avoid stigma when engaged in friendships with neurotypical friends.
- The desire to socialise with others despite the inevitable burnout and exhaustion that follows.
- The relative ease and camaraderie that occurs when interacting with friends who 'get it' and understand their neurotype.



**From your work, what are some differences in autistic and non-autistic ways of expressing and sharing friendship?**

Autistic people's communication style can differ from neurotypical individuals'. 'Info dumping' and 'pebbling' are two terms coined to describe different communication styles. Both forms of communication are used as a means of connecting with others and may have a regulating aspect to them.

Info dumping is when the individual shares a large amount of information about their passion or a deeply meaningful topic. This may be a way of showing they feel comfortable with the person and that they wish to include them in their interest.

Pebbling is used to communicate 'I'm thinking of you'. This is done through the sharing of videos, pictures or messages based on the other person's interests or likes. It is used to maintain connection with others, even if you are unable to see them face-to-face.

**Have the experiences of non-speaking people been included in a modern understanding of autistic friendship and peer relationships?**

For autistic people who are non-speaking or who use alternative means of communicating, this ability to blend in lessens and, unfortunately, the level of social stigma may increase. The experiences of autistic AAC users remain largely absent from research with multiple studies documenting this as a gap in the literature. Research on friendship and non-autistic AAC users (Finke et al., 2025) highlighted that, like autistic people, AAC users were more likely to develop and maintain relationships with people with similar interests, personalities and lived experiences. Factors that impacted on AAC users' friendships included the robustness of their AAC system and their reliance on responsive communication partners to 'fill any gaps' in their communication.

**Has the changing understanding of autistic interaction and autistic friendship had an impact in an Irish context?**

While there has been a shift in how autistic and neurodivergent people are viewed in Ireland, there continues to be ongoing social stigma, which can result in internalised ableism. In the education setting, autistic students are often paired with non-autistic students in an attempt 'to help them make friends'. This, again, perpetuates the idea that if autistic students 'copy' non-autistic students they will develop friendships. School-based programmes such as the Learning About Neurodiversity at Schools (LEANS) and Neurodiversity Peer Support Toolkit (NEST) provide students and educators with opportunities to learn about neurodiversity and create an environment where mutual respect and understanding are the foundations of friendship.

**Have you seen any examples where a well-meaning misunderstanding around friendship has impacted autistic students?**

In one well-meaning school, a designated space (usually benches) was introduced for students to signal to others when they wanted to be included in play with others. As highlighted by one autistic student, this bench was the only comfortable place to sit and read when outside at breaktime. For them break time was a time for recovery and escapism through reading. They expressed their frustration at being interrupted by offers from other students to 'play' or reprimanded for not using the designated space correctly. This desire to be alone during break times and unstructured

times can be misunderstood as a lack of interest or desire in friendship. We know from autistic individuals that this is not the case, and they also wish to form connections and relationships with others.

For the young people I work with, the analogy of a battery emptying and recharging has been useful in explaining the mental and physical exhaustion they feel during social situations. The use of energy accounting tools, identifying drains and 'glimmers' (small, positive sensory experiences), as well as the SPACE model and spoons theory have provided greater insight into how autistic people's energy levels can fluctuate and affect their ability to engage in social interactions.

This is often misunderstood by non-autistic peers, who may interpret an autistic person's need for quiet or downtime as a lack of interest in friendship. However, respecting energy meters – and allowing autistic people to engage in friendships at their own pace and on their own terms – is crucial for fostering healthy, supportive relationships.

### Can you give an example of a way of communicating that might be misunderstood?

In both the Irish education and legal system, a greater degree of importance is placed on outward signs of communication such as eye contact, tone of voice, facial expressions and body language rather than the content or context of communication. For example, when an autistic young person does not maintain eye contact, they are assumed to be 'disinterested', 'disrespectful' or 'untrustworthy'. This is also evident in our legal systems where eye contact is highly valued as an indicator of respect and truth. For autistic (and neurodivergent) individuals, maintaining eye contact can be distracting and overwhelming.

Our focus can shift from the message being communicated to our own internal monologue which can include many of the following questions: 'how long should we look at them?' 'Do I look away?' 'Am I staring?' 'Why are they looking at me like that?' etc. We may use movement, doodling to remain focused and engaged in the interaction. These strategies are often perceived negatively by non-autistic people.

### How might autistic young people try to bridge the gap with their non-autistic friends and peers, if a neurodiversity-informed approach isn't taken?

In my own work, autistic students and young people have described the systems and strategies they have developed over the years to help them to 'blend in'. As one young person described it, a 'cheat code' to supporting their interactions with non-autistic friends.

Another masking strategy used has been termed 'the chameleon effect'. This refers to when the autistic person takes pieces of their friend's personality or interest in an attempt to be accepted or fit in. This can result in the person copying others – their speech patterns, phrases, interests, etc. They may appear differently as they move between groups of friends. This may result in the autistic person losing sense of their own preferences and wishes. Masking can also result in emotional and mental exhaustion. Autistic individuals have reported feelings of uncertainty about who they are and lack of acceptance by others when they have begun to de-mask.

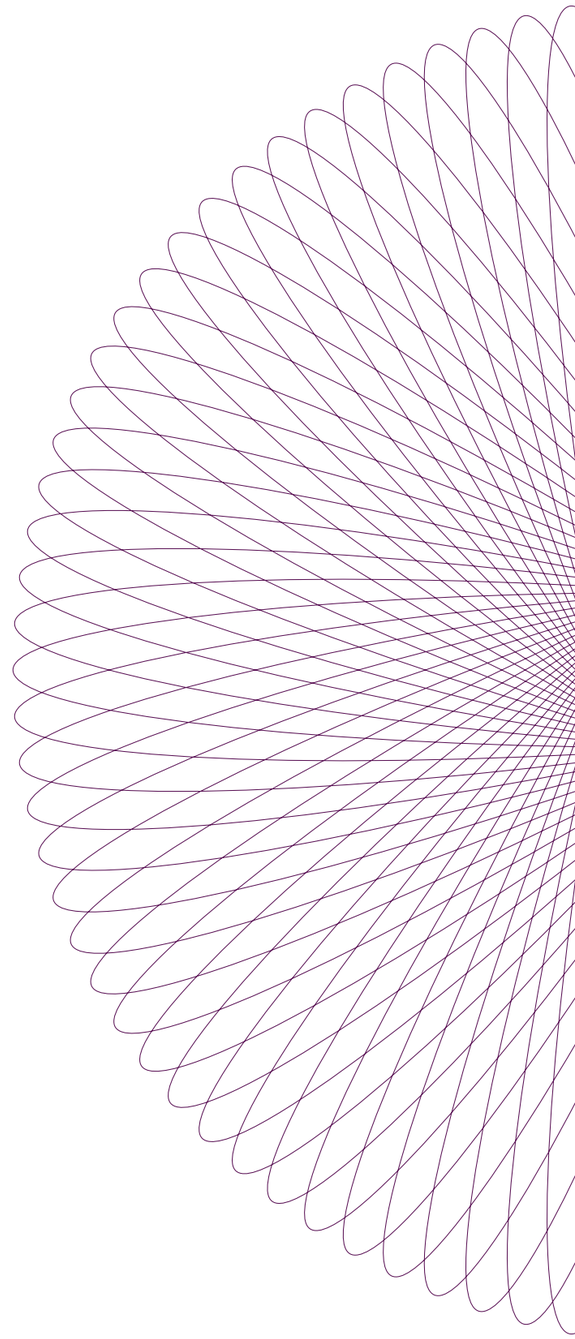


### Are there topics related to friendship and peer support that you think need more attention?

In MCA's most recent Research Bulletin on Leisure and Community, the importance of shared spaces where autistic people could connect was discussed. Articles included in that bulletin also discussed how online friendships provided autistic individuals with a safe, comfortable space where they could connect with others who shared their interests.

Online spaces allow autistic people greater control over their interactions. This includes allowing time to process and formulate their response to messages, a reduction in demands (social, sensory, environmental) and allows for the use of multiple means of communication, i.e. text-based, mix of text and spoken communication. Research has shown that for autistic people, online friendships can provide opportunities to communicate with others about shared interests while also providing them with a sense of belonging and a reduction in feeling 'alone'. Triantafyllopoulou et al. (2022) reported that participants reported higher rates of self-esteem when they felt they belonged to an online community. It is also important to note potential dangers around online engagement. This study reported that participants were more likely to be bullied online than to be the aggressors.

Our understanding of autistic friendships has evolved dramatically over the last decade. We continue to make the shift from a deficit model of autism towards one of acceptance and understanding of neurodiversity. Principles such as the Double Empathy Theory, recognising the impact of masking and ableism and validating autistic communication differences are all steps towards greater inclusivity.



# ‘MY AUTISM IS MY OWN’: AUTISTIC IDENTITY AND INTERSECTIONALITY IN THE SCHOOL CONTEXT

## BACKGROUND

Autistic identity can be defined as a positive sense of self and a connection to other people in the autistic community. All people have multiple identities (for example, race, gender, sexuality). Some intersecting identities may also impact a person’s experience of their autistic identity, for example, girls or people of colour are statistically less likely to receive an autism diagnosis.

The experience of school has a lasting impact on how autistic young people experience their autistic identity. The messages that they receive from staff, peers and broader structures and policies can shape their emerging autistic identity, as well as any other emerging identities. While schools are the central environment in which young people develop their identity, many autistic students experience exclusion, rejection and disproportionate punishment. Research has found that young people’s feelings about their autistic identity are directly influenced by their relationship with non-autistic peers and school staff, as well as perceived academic challenges associated with autism and their sensory experiences at school. For some, negative autistic identity was linked to a lack of connection from the autistic community, disabling interactions with school staff and a lack of autistic representation. The structures that shape the development of negative autistic identity may also compound the development of other intersecting identities.

## RESEARCH AIM

The researchers aimed to answer two questions through their study:

1. What messages do autistic people receive in school about their autism and their intersecting social identities?

2. How do autistic people engage with these school-based messages as they develop their identities?

## RESEARCH METHOD

The researchers interviewed autistic adolescents (4) and adults (6) who were recruited through local autism groups and through social media. They were aged between 15 and 35 years. They represented a range of genders, ethnicities and sexualities.

The interview questions were developed with accessible language and concrete topics that allowed researchers to ask follow-up questions. Researchers also took an accessible approach to the interviews, with participants offered options in line with their preferences: in the research office, in the participant’s home or online. Interviews took, on average, 79 minutes and they focused on school experiences, interactions/relationships with classmates and teachers, and the role that autistic identity played in school. Two of the interviewees were invited for second interviews to gather more in-depth information about emerging themes.



## RESEARCH FINDINGS

Participants discussed how their school experiences shaped their identities.

### What messages do autistic individuals receive in the school context about their autism and their intersecting social identities?

#### Teacher messages

1. Teachers’ assumptions shaped how they interacted with autistic students. Participants discussed how learning that a student was autistic changed how teachers interacted with them, viewing all of their behaviour through the lens of autism.

2. Teacher messages around autism and their attitude towards students varied depending on the students’ intersecting identities. For example, race and gender influenced how they understood a student’s autistic experience.

*‘[Autistic girls get misunderstood] because girls are socialised to keep our problems to ourselves for the most part. And just go along with what other people want. Make other people happier so we’re more likely to keep quiet about things that are bothering us, or try and wash off our own problems.’*

#### Social messages

1. **Peers stigmatise autistic students**. Autistic students found that their interactions with non-autistic classmates were influenced by their classmates’ assumptions about autism.

2. **Social experiences varied based on students’ intersecting identities**. Autistic students with other marginalised identities (e.g. sexuality or gender) found that they were further marginalised through, for example, victimisation or microaggressions.

### How do individuals engage with these external school-based messages as they develop their identities?

1. **Active choices about identity and disclosure**. Participants discussed their deliberate choices to disclose their diagnosis based on an awareness of the risks that disclosing may bring. Disclosure is also influenced by their other intersecting identities.

2. **Embracing autistic strengths**. Participants identified personal strengths that they associated with autism. This focus on strengths acted as a form of resistance against stigma.

*‘I was put in different [special education] programmes when I was younger, …and I do feel like it might’ve made me somewhat more isolated from my classmates. But at the same time, I feel like that’s made me more compassionate too.’*

1. **Redefining and reframing autism**. Participants challenged stereotypes and questioned definitions and classifications related to autism. This gave them control over how autism is understood.

*‘It presents so widely differently in people, that it’s both unfair and incredibly rude to assume that autistic people are by definition less intelligent or more intelligent because that’s not fair either. They’re not more or less anything. It’s just different.’*

## IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE (by the authors)

- Research shows that young people who hold multiple marginalised identities (e.g. girls with disabilities, multiracial students with disabilities or LGBT+ students with disabilities) are more likely to face mental health challenges and disconnection from school. Teachers may be able to help shape autistic and non-autistic students' views of autism.

- Training may help teachers to challenge assumptions and place them in a position to challenge ableism and become allies who can affirm and include autistic students.

- School may be a useful place for autistic students to build community. Opportunities for shared experience and representation may support in building autistic role models and creating a space to explore activism.

- Beyond the classroom, masking is common across all autistic people as they feel forced to hide or dim their identities to avoid stigma. Both higher education and employment settings could create environments that support disclosure and acceptance. Such settings would reduce stigma and allow autistic people space to advocate for themselves.

### Full Reference

Cohen, S.R., Joseph, K., Levinson, S., Blacher, J. & Eisenhower, A. (2022). 'My autism is my own': Autistic identity and intersectionality in the school context. *Autism in Adulthood*, 4(4), 315–327. https://doi.org/10.1089/aut.2021.0087



# 'SOMEONE LIKE-MINDED IN A BIG PLACE': AUTISTIC YOUNG ADULTS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS AUTISTIC PEER SUPPORT IN MAINSTREAM EDUCATION

## BACKGROUND

The number of autistic students in mainstream education settings is increasing. While autistic pupils have different social and communication styles, they understand the concept of friendship, and many want to have close friends. Research shows that having one or two close friends can have a positive impact on later adjustment and can lessen the impact of stressful life events. However, autistic young people are more likely to report difficult experiences with peers, such as low levels of support, as well as rejection and bullying.

Historically, interventions to support friendship have focused on teaching neurotypical social skills to autistic young people. They typically highlighted normative strategies to minimise autistic behaviour and adopt social behaviour more associated with neurotypical interaction. Some programmes have chosen to pair autistic and non-autistic peers in an effort to improve social inclusion or improve academic attainment. The emphasis on behaving like non-autistic classmates could lead autistic young people to take exhausting steps to mask their identity.

Peer support programmes that focus on shared support as part of a minority group (such as LGBT+ students) may offer a more positive approach. Little research exists on the potential benefits of an autistic-autistic peer programme. Research shows that both autistic college students and schoolteachers are positive about the potential for this type of programme. Some evidence exists to suggest that an all-autistic peer programme may be beneficial. Autistic people report higher rates of comfort and ease around other autistic people, and autistic adults report feeling more understood by their autistic peers during their school years. Further, feeling part of the autistic community has been found to reduce feelings of suicidality.

## RESEARCH AIMS

The study aimed to understand the experiences of autistic young people in relation to their perspectives on autistic peer support and their experiences of peer relationships, autistic identity and support at school.

## RESEARCH METHODS

The researchers interviewed 13 autistic young adults aged between 18 and 30 years. Eight were male and five were female. A variety of methods were offered in order to conduct the interviews: in person, over the phone, over video or via text chat. Interviews took 45–60 minutes to complete.

All interview questions were reviewed by autistic people to make sure that the wording was clear and accessible. In order to ensure that lived experience was represented on the research team, the project featured an autistic research consultant and an autistic co-author. They advised on every step of the project.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

### A number of themes were uncovered.

### Theme 1. An ethos of inclusivity

Participants thought that peer support had potential to create an ethos of inclusivity and should be based on accepting and celebrating difference.

**Subtheme:** finding like-minded peers. Participants stated that they would have liked to share time with like-minded people. In adulthood, most had developed beneficial and validating relationships with other autistic people.

**Subtheme:** embracing being autistic. Some participants discussed how negatively autistic identity was viewed when they were in school. Most discussed how supporting young people to address their internalised ableism would be beneficial.

**Subtheme:** accessibility and inclusivity. Participants highlighted the importance of a calm, comfortable place for autistic young people in the school environment. They also mentione d the need for clear language and a reliable schedule to manage the peer relationship within. They acknowledged the importance of supporting intersectional identities and they suggested that peer support could be open to all neurodivergent students.

**Subtheme:** leadership and recognition. Participants felt that autistic students should play a key role in the leadership and direction of the peer programme. Equally, having a support adult to co-ordinate and moderate is essential. They emphasised that an autistic adult may be best suited to this role. Participants also noted that those in the peer support programme should be recognised for their contribution, responsibility and skill.

**Subtheme:** training, knowledge and expertise. Participants highlighted the need for training so that peer support is manageable and sustainable. They also highlighted the need for training for any staff coordinators involved.



### Theme 2. Flexibility

**Subtheme:** frequency and group size. Participant responses highlighted the need to adapt to pupil need and preference, ensuring a comfortably sized peer group and sessions that are appropriately frequent.

**Subtheme:** combining activities and support. Flexibility was also emphasised in relation to the structure of sessions, most preferred a mix of support and activities, with a need to adapt activities to student interests.

**Subtheme:** focus of support. Participants varied in relation to their preference for the focus of support. Topics included making friends, sharing challenges and support strategies, navigating school life and sharing a specifically autistic perspective.

### Theme 3. Benefits and challenges of embedding peer support in the wider school community

**Subtheme:** stigma associated with diagnosis. Participants noted that many did not disclose their diagnosis while at school.

**Subtheme:** increased understanding and acceptance of autism. Non-autistic students' understanding of autistic experience is low. A peer support programme may serve as an opportunity for all neurodivergent students to learn about each other. This may increase solidarity and support across neurodivergent students.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE (by the authors)

For those thinking of implementing a peer support programme, it is interesting to note that no participants favoured the idea of peer support from non-autistic pupils.

A central activity that peers can engage with and complete such as creative writing, music, yoga or role-playing games may be useful to initiate and sustain social interaction. Shared interests may be a useful foundation for interaction and potential friendships.

Ongoing training is essential for all those involved. For adult facilitators, training to understand and embrace a positive autistic identity is essential.

### Full Reference

Crompton, C.J., Hallett, S., Axbey, H., McAuliffe, C. & Cebula, K. (2023). 'Someone like-minded in a big place': Autistic young adults' attitudes towards autistic peer support in mainstream education. *Autism: the international journal of research and practice*, 27(1), 76–91. https://doi.org/10.1177/13623613221081189

# AUTISM AWARENESS INTERVENTIONS FOR CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS: A SCOPING REVIEW

## BACKGROUND

Since the 1994 Salamanca Statement on inclusive education for students with special educational needs in mainstream schools, emphasis has been placed on a rights-based approach to inclusion. While this inclusive approach may bring benefits, inclusive policy does not always equate to real inclusion. Autistic young people have been found to experience higher rates of bullying and they experience more social challenges with non-autistic peers. However, the focus of research has rarely been on non-autistic peers' contribution to school inclusion. Inclusion requires positive attitudes from peers, but this may not always be the real-world experience of autistic students. Research has found that a lack of peer understanding and awareness can compound the social challenges experienced by autistic students.

When non-autistic peers are given a chance to learn about autistic experience, their perception of autism appears to alter. The content of that learning can vary. It may include:

**Descriptive information** – which highlights the similarities between autistic and non-autistic people.

**Explanatory information** – which includes factual information about the presentation and challenges that might be experienced by autistic people.

**Directive information** – which gives instruction and guidance on how to confidently interact with autistic peers.

Less is known about the effectiveness of teaching non-autistic students communication strategies to better communicate with their autistic peers.

## RESEARCH AIM

The paper aimed to examine research focusing on programmes designed to improve autism awareness for non-autistic children and adolescents. The researchers wanted to find out if these types of autism awareness programmes could change non-autistic students' knowledge, understanding, attitudes or intentional behaviour. They also wanted to know what form these programmes take and what recommendations can be learned for future programmes.

## RESEARCH METHODS

Researchers used six electronic databases to find papers published between 1997 and 2018 that contained the key terms relating to autism, education, attitudes, understanding and awareness.

Papers were included if they reported on knowledge, attitude, intentional behaviour and stigma levels of non-autistic students who had taken part in an autism education programme. To see if interventions were impactful, they needed to include measures before the programme and measures following the programme.

One researcher coded the information in the studies, while two others confirmed the coding. They evaluated each programme based on a number of factors such as: type of information delivered, length of programme, style of programme delivery and impact measures.

A total of 402 studies were initially identified. Once researchers applied all of their criteria, 11 articles were included for analysis. Across all of the studies, 3,180 participants were included. They ranged from 10.39 years to 19.9 years, and 903 were part of control groups who had not taken part in an awareness programme.



## RESEARCH FINDINGS

### Type of Information delivered

Ten studies reported on the type of information shared. Two studies shared descriptive, explanatory and directive information. One shared descriptive and explanatory information. Three studies compared the effect of different types of information: descriptive and/or explanatory information. Two studies gave limited information about their programmes' content, but they did provide some information about explanatory content.

### Method of delivery

Delivery ranged from PowerPoint slides, with no contact or in person delivery, to a varied programme that included group work, roleplay, presentation, simulation, modelling and discussion. A number of programmes included video-based information with child actors playing autistic students (the majority did not feature autistic actors). A small number of programmes featured direct involvement from one or more autistic students.

### Length of intervention

Programmes varied from a one-off session to 19 weeks. The shortest used video material that lasted between 2 and 22 minutes. One programme used online learning that could be completed at the student's pace, but averaged one hour. Another programme took up 10 one-hour sessions, while another was two full class sessions with six small group sessions. The longest took place over a full school term (19 weeks).

### Intervention provided by

All programmes were designed and/or delivered by researchers. Two studies involved a teaching assistant or expert. Online and video programmes used no personal delivery of content.

### Reported findings

Depending on what outcomes were measured, studies reported an increase in autism knowledge, lower stigma or improved attitudes.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE (adapted by the reviewer)

- While the studies included gave limited information about why programmes lasted for certain lengths, research shows that longer programmes with multiple sessions may be more beneficial.
- Content that includes descriptive and explanatory information appears to be more impactful. Including practical, directive information and shared contact between autistic and non-autistic people may add to this benefit.
- Programmes focused on older students appear successful, as there may be a greater opportunity to provide detailed, autism-specific information.
- Programmes in the present study focused on changes in understanding of non-autistic students. Future programmes should also focus on the impact that these programmes have on autistic students.

### Full Reference

Cremin, K., Healy, O., Spirtos, M. & Quinn, S. (2021). Autism Awareness Interventions for Children and Adolescents: a Scoping Review. *Journal of Developmental and Physical Disabilities*, 33(1), 27–50. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10882-020-09741-1



# 'WE ARE DIFFERENT, THAT'S A FACT, BUT THEY TREAT US LIKE WE'RE DIFFERENT-ER': UNDERSTANDINGS OF AUTISM AND ADOLESCENT IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

## BACKGROUND

A central part of adolescence is the establishment of an individual identity. This typically happens as young people are trying to discover which social and cultural groups they fit in with. Limited research has looked at how autistic people understand their individual identities, alongside how they feel about where they may fit in with peers.

Historically, understanding and conversation about autism has been framed through a negative, medical model lens. This may negatively impact how autistic young people perceive their identities. More recent neurodiversity-informed perceptions of autism may provide a positive representation, but navigating these competing ideas about autism can be challenging.

Some studies have found that autistic young people resist their autistic identity publicly, but over time, difficulty in accepting a diagnosis lessens, to differing degrees. Research has shown that, looking back, autistic young adults and their parents describe adolescence as a stressful time marked by bullying and a perceived need to mask. Increased understanding of autism across the school community may reduce autistic students' negative experiences.

## RESEARCH AIMS

The study aimed to answer three questions:

- How do autistic young people and others in their social environments understand autism?
- How do these understandings relate to young people's identity development in early adolescence?
- How do these understandings relate to young people's school experiences in mainstream settings?

## RESEARCH METHODS

The research team interviewed autistic students, their parents and teachers. They conducted 36 interviews with 13 autistic children, 36 interviews with 31 teachers and 38 interviews with 14 mothers and 2 fathers. All children were about to transition (or had recently transitioned) from primary to secondary mainstream school.

Young people were given the option to have a parent present for their interview. Both parents and young people were given the option of having their interviews at home, school or the researchers' university. Teachers were interviewed in their schools. Mean interview lengths were: 23 minutes for young people, 19 minutes for teachers and 34 minutes for parents.

The researchers listened to the audio recordings of the interviews repeatedly and re-read the transcripts. Once very familiar with the interviews, they could find themes.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

### Theme 1. Identifying with autism

#### 1a Negotiating difference

Some young people felt that their autistic identity was a strong, positive part of who they are, and publicly identified that they were autistic. Others saw difference as a negative. They wanted to fit in and did not want what they considered to be a 'label'. Despite these different attitudes to autism, all of the young people wanted to be treated like everyone else. A number had refused school support, even when they thought it may have been helpful.

#### 1b Changing understandings over time

Over time, young people changed how they felt about being autistic. Some 'realised' that they were autistic and became 'embarrassed' about their diagnosis. Others shared their diagnosis but felt that they were treated differently as a result. This caused them to keep their diagnosis to themselves in future. Parents stated that autism acceptance and understanding was a shared responsibility across their family.

#### 1c Social camouflaging at school

Many of the young people, even those who saw their diagnosis as positive, tried to keep it private. Parents reported that young people camouflaged their autism so that they wouldn't stand out as different. While some teachers knew that students behaved differently between home and school, they did not recognise school as a stressor.

Many of the young people chose to keep home and school life completely separate. They felt that home was somewhere that they could be themselves, but homework blurred this safe boundary. Some young people placed boundaries around friendships, refusing to invite friends to their home and keeping special interests and favourite possessions to themselves.

### Theme 2: Social construction of autism

#### 2a The autism label

Parents stated that, although the label of 'autism' was a route to support, many think that it is negative. For some, this made the decision to seek a diagnosis difficult. Autistic young people felt that their non-autistic peers saw autism negatively, which could result in bullying. Parents worried that a label of 'autism' may influence how teachers view a young person's academic ability. Some school staff felt that supports could have negative consequences, and as a result they tried to limit their use (e.g. ear defenders) so that autistic students would stand out less. Some parents also worried about the negative impact of supports, choosing to keep their child out of extra provision. Both parents and teachers often spoke of autism as a hierarchy, highlighting if autism was considered 'mild'.

#### 2b Individuality and sameness in autism

While young people were aware that autism varies greatly, they did acknowledge commonalities across autistic people. Parents expressed concerns about how teachers responded to behaviour that differed to their expectation for autistic young people. Some teachers expressed doubt about whether a diagnosis was warranted, hindering access to supports.



Both parents and specialist teachers said that teachers needed to see autistic young people as individuals, while teachers focused on having a clear definition of autism, which would allow them to provide broad supports.

Parents discussed the importance of young autistic people interacting together.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE (by the reviewer)

The responses of others impacted how autistic young people integrated autism into their developing identities.

- Young people described their autistic identity based on the external representations that they encountered – both medical model and neurodiversity. Promoting more positive representations may lessen internalised ableism.
- Some teachers held assumptions about autism. Many saw autistic students as similar and in need of the same supports. When behaviour differed from their understanding of autism, they questioned diagnoses. There is a need for teachers to see autistic students as individuals through the provision of training that can outline how individual supports might be created.
- Teachers also appeared to underestimate students who were diagnosed as autistic. A cultural shift at school that is founded on neurodiversity may better overcome misunderstandings and challenges in shared communication. Further, as many students mentioned bullying at school, this cultural shift may impact how non-autistic peers understand and communicate with their autistic classmates.
- Parents felt that young autistic people would benefit from interacting with other autistic students. This would help to improve understanding of autistic experience and potentially challenge internalised ableism. Thought would need to be given to how this could be achieved in a mainstream setting without over-emphasising difference between autistic and non-autistic students.
- Opportunity needs to be provided for parents to engage with post-diagnosis supports, which may help them to explore what diagnosis means to them and examine any assumptions or bias that they may hold.
- Whole school training is necessary to create a neuro-inclusive culture within schools. It is important to question who should facilitate this training and support so that demand on teachers is limited and to ensure that changes are implemented in a neuro-affirming and supportive way for all students.

### Full Reference

Mesa, S. & Hamilton, L.G. (2022). 'We are different, that's a fact, but they treat us like we're different-er': understandings of autism and adolescent identity development. *Advances in Autism*, 8(3), 217–231. https://doi.org/10.1108/AIA-12-2020-0071

# SUPPORTING AUTISTIC COLLEGE STUDENTS: EXAMINING THE MENTORING, ORGANIZATION AND SOCIAL SUPPORT FOR AUTISM INCLUSION ON CAMPUS (MOSSAIC) PROGRAM

## BACKGROUND

Despite having strong academic skills, many autistic students face barriers within higher education that can limit their enrolment, retention, academic achievements and postgraduate employment. Some support programmes have been developed to address these barriers. Some have focused on offering pre-transition activities to help students begin adjusting to student life before college begins. Peer mentorship is another potentially useful approach. In these supports, a student peer is available to provide guidance and support related to academic, employment and social life. These sorts of programmes have been used with many groups, including international students, ethnic minority students and students who have intellectual disabilities.

Some small studies have looked at the impact of peer mentorship programmes for autistic higher-level students. Findings suggest that the one-to-one nature of mentoring is very useful for autistic students, producing improved grades and more positive peer interactions.

## RESEARCH AIMS

The aim of this study was to find out about the experiences of peer mentors and autistic mentees, as well as to find out what colleges could do to support autistic students.

## RESEARCH METHODS

Twenty-five students (13 autistic and 12 non-autistic) took part. They were recruited through flyers placed around campus. All were taking 4-year courses, and mentors needed to be in their third or fourth year.

The MOSSAIC (Mentoring, Organiza¬tion and Social Support for Autism Inclusion on Campus) programme featured four elements: 1. One-to-one peer mentoring, 2. Events involving mentors, mentees and faculty (these may be educational or recreational), 3. Weekly study café for academic work and 4. A weekly seminar focusing on navigating college life and autism in adulthood. Mentees could choose which activities to participate in.

Efforts were made to pair mentors and mentees based on shared interests. All mentors were given training that focused on understanding autism/neurodiversity, the challenges of transitioning to college, building relationships, understanding peer mentorship, shared communication, understanding sensory regulation and goal setting. Mentees also met weekly with an autistic advocate who was part of the team.

To understand the perspectives of mentors and mentees, researchers conducted individual semi-structured interviews. Questions were co-developed with three autistic adults who acted as advisors for the project. These interviews were then coded by three researchers to find themes.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

### Mentee themes

*Reason they joined the programme*

Autistic students joined the programme because they felt that their needs (academic, social and emotional) were not being met. Some wanted to create a version of an autism support group that they had previously used.



*Takeaways from the programme*

Many autistic mentees felt that they had increased social awareness through the programme. They described feeling more comfortable around others, keeping in contact more and developing new relationships. The most common academic takeaway was increased self-advocacy skills.

### Mentor themes

*General experience*

Non-autistic mentors reported that they learned more about autism and appropriate supports.

*Programme training*

Mentors found the variety of trainers helpful, in particular the autistic advocate. They wanted opportunity to practise real-life scenarios that captured common challenges that autistic students might experience.

*Structure of meetings*

For most, meetings were initiated by the mentor and usually took place in a study room, public place or outdoors. They typically happened once a week and took 30–60 minutes.

*Challenges*

Mentors sometimes felt unsure how to help mentees in matters related to mental health. Some mentors mentioned factors that impacted mentorship such as academic stress, cancelled mentorship meetings and mentee's embarrassment to be seen in public together.

### Mentee and Mentor Overlapping Themes

*Goals*

Both groups spoke of focusing on goals that mentees had. Mentees highlighted social, time management, academic and professional goals. Some mentors found that they need to adjust their expectations around goals, following the preferences of mentees.

*Relationships*

Both groups described the positive relationship that developed through mentorship. While some mentees found that the relationship improved their college experience, others found that the relationship became less comfortable over time. Some focused on the lack of shared interests, identities, diagnosis, race and age as a challenge.

*Programme feedback*

Many mentees had a positive experience with the programme and found their mentor helpful and a positive role model. Both mentors and mentees highlighted the need to include autistic and other neurodivergent mentors. Mentees felt that having an autistic mentor would remove the feeling that they needed to support the mentor to better understand autism. Mentors also highlighted a need to have more experienced mentors.

Other recommendations included broadening venues and supporting access to services such as professional counselling, accessibility supports and autism groups. While mentors were happy with the meeting structures, mentees suggested a broader range of activities, including those that involved other autistic people. Mentees also highlighted the positive opportunity to socialise with other autistic mentees. Autistic mentees also mentioned how positive it was to have an autistic person involved as programme staff, as they felt that they had an understanding of autistic culture. Mentors also stated how beneficial it was to have an autistic advocate as part of the staff team.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE (adapted by the reviewer)

- In numerous ways, autistic mentees stated the benefit of being around other autistic people. Programmes should include more opportunities for autistic mentees to socialise with fellow mentees and to have access to autism-specific groups/events.
- Both mentees and mentors highlighted the benefit of the autistic advocate. Programmes should include autistic advocates and lived-experience perspectives at their core.
- Programmes should consider pairing autistic mentors and autistic mentees. This offers the opportunity for mentees to have an autistic role model on campus, as well as someone who understands autistic culture and experience.
- Each mentee brought their own set of goals for what they wanted to achieve through the mentor programme. For this reason, an individual adapted approach to mentorship may be most beneficial.
- Supports should be in place should mentees have needs beyond the scope of training provided to mentors. This may include mental health supports, academic supports and autism-specific supports.

### Full Reference

Locke, J., Osuna, A., Myrvold, R.J. & Closson, J.S. (2024). Supporting Autistic College Students: Examining the Mentoring, Organization and Social Support for Autism Inclusion on Campus (MOSSAIC) Program. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 54(6), 2094–2107. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-023-05969-w



# PEER PREFERENCES AND CHARACTERISTICS OF SAME-GROUP AND CROSS-GROUP SOCIAL INTERACTIONS AMONG AUTISTIC AND NON-AUTISTIC ADOLESCENTS

## BACKGROUND

Peer engagement is an important part of the school experience, however autistic students in inclusive education have been found to struggle with peer interaction, experiencing higher levels of rejection and isolation. Research shows that, for many, these challenges increase in secondary school.

Historically, research has focused on the behaviour of autistic students, with differences in communication interpreted as deficits and the cause of social challenges. More recent research has focused on the bidirectional nature of communication, highlighting that any challenges to communication are shared by all involved in the interaction. This approach uses the Double Empathy Problem to understand the mismatch in communication between autistic and non-autistic people. In support of this, research has found that autistic adults tend to be more comfortable, understood and accepted when interacting with other autistic people. A number of studies have found better relational outcomes for autistic-to-autistic communication as compared to autistic-to-non-autistic. This means higher rapport, more accurate information retained and greater intention for future interactions.

## RESEARCH AIMS

This study aimed to better understand peer interactions in inclusive secondary education. Using Double Empathy as their foundation, the researchers asked two questions:

- Do students' peer preferences change over time? Their focus was on who autistic students preferred to spend time with: autistic or non-autistic students.
- Do characteristics of peer interaction change over time? Their focus was on the purpose and type of social interaction initiations and responses.

## RESEARCH METHODS

The study was longitudinal. It focused on observing the social behaviour of autistic students over the course of five months. Twelve students agreed to be video recorded as they took part in their STEM-based school club, which met twice a week for 45 minutes.

Researchers focused on sections of the recordings that featured an opportunity for one of the students to interact with their peers without teacher involvement. They coded these interactions based on social initiations and responses.

The team worked with an autistic expert as an advisor throughout the project.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

In single peer interactions, autistic students were more likely to initiate with a fellow autistic student. Non-autistic students were more likely to initiate interaction with non-autistic peers. Over time, students were more likely to initiate interaction with their own neurotype group.

Autistic students were also more likely to respond to other autistic peers and both groups increased same-neurotype group responses over time. Looking at gender, researchers found that boys were more likely to initiate with other boys, while girls favoured other girls. Over time, both boys and girls increased initiation across genders.

Autistic students were more likely to initiate interaction for functional, practical reasons compared to non-autistic students, while initiations toward autistic students were also more likely to be functional. Autistic students were more likely to make relational initiations (such as sharing or joking) towards other autistic students.

Non-autistic students were less likely to respond to autistic students by extending the topic of conversation. Autistic students speaking to other autistic students were more likely to extend the topic and add relevant information. Autistic students were less likely to experience high levels of responding from non-autistic peers, whereas there were much higher levels of reciprocity between autistic peers.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE (by the reviewer)

The study showed that both autistic and non-autistic students showed a preference for interacting with peers who shared their neurotype, and this preference increased over time.

- These findings highlight the need to shift away from a deficit-based understanding of interaction and communication for autistic people. Rather, a focus on shared barriers to communication may be beneficial.

- School-based interventions have typically focused on changing autistic young people to make their social behaviour more like their non-autistic classmates. This study highlights the importance of allowing autistic people to be themselves and giving them space to find connection with other autistic students.

### Full Reference

Chen, Y.L., Senande, L.L., Thorsen, M. & Patten, K. (2021). Peer preferences and characteristics of same-group and cross-group social interactions among autistic and non-autistic adolescents. *Autism: the international journal of research and practice*, 25(7), 1885–1900. https://doi.org/10.1177/13623613211005918



# SYNAPSE: A CO-DESIGNED NEURODIVERGENT PEER SUPPORT PROGRAMME FOR HIGHER EDUCATION SETTINGS

## BACKGROUND

The move to university is a significant transition for all students, involving increased academic demands and the challenge of navigating new social environments. Students are also expected to understand the 'hidden curriculum', which can be understood as the informal and unspoken cultural and social expectations that guide expected behaviour within the university setting. These expectations can create barriers for autistic students, contributing to stress, isolation, and, in some cases, withdrawal from studies.

Peer mentoring is often promoted as a way to reduce stress and support students' transition to higher education. However, traditional models typically position neurotypical students as 'mentors' and autistic students as 'mentees', which can reinforce existing power imbalances and perpetuate negative stereotypes. This study aimed to develop a more inclusive and empowering model of peer support for neurodivergent students.

## RESEARCH AIM

The aim of this study was to co-design and implement a peer mentoring programme that addressed both the needs and priorities of neurodivergent students (including autistic students). Specifically, the researchers sought to:

- Identify the key outcomes that both neurotypical and neurodivergent staff and students within the university wished to achieve.

- Explore what outputs or activities would support the delivery of a successful peer mentoring programme.

- Determine which practical and organisational factors should be considered when developing and implementing such a programme.

The broader goal was to create a model of peer support that promoted equality and supported the retention of neurodivergent students (including autistic students).

## RESEARCH METHODS

This study took place at an Irish university and adopted a participatory co-design approach involving staff and students as partners. Seventeen neurodivergent students, eighteen neurotypical students, three disability service staff, and two researchers participated in the process. A logic modelling workshop was used to map desired outcomes and the steps needed to achieve them, supporting the creation of a visual roadmap of programme design. Students who identified as neurodivergent were not required to register with the Disability Support Service (which reduced barriers to inclusion). Workshop discussions were audio-recorded and analysed using reflexive thematic analysis to identify common themes. The final output was a visual logic model which outlined key outcomes, activities, and resources for the programme.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

The approach taken in this study facilitated the identification of key overarching themes as well as more practical considerations.

The three key themes were as follows:

- Connectedness
  - » Neurodivergent students valued opportunities to meet others who shared similar experiences and to build a sense of community and belonging.
- Knowledge and Awareness of Neurodiversity
  - » Neurodivergent students were often motivated to increase understanding and advocacy across the wider university.
  - » Neurotypical students hoped to learn more about neurodiversity for personal and professional development.
- Empowerment
  - » Stakeholders emphasised the importance of giving neurodivergent students a voice and promoting equality.
  - » A distinctive feature of the programme was the introduction of a co-mentoring model, as neurodivergent students articulated discomfort with the more hierarchical labels of 'mentor' and 'mentee'.



Other more practical considerations included the need to provide a dedicated, quiet, and sensory-friendly space for meetings and offer flexibility in the types of mentoring relationships and group activities. Regular check-ins were noted as vital to support the wellbeing and retention of neurodivergent students.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The study highlights important ways to improve peer support for autistic students in higher education and in turn overcome known barriers to success and retention for this cohort:

- Facilitating 'social connectedness' should be a central goal of peer mentoring for autistic (or otherwise neurodivergent) students.
- Position neurodivergent students as co-mentors to recognise their lived experience and expertise, promote equality and minimise the potential for uneven power dynamics within the mentoring relationship.
- Use inclusive, person-preferred language to respect identity and reduce stigma.
- Offer flexible mentoring pairing options (which may be based on student interests or their course disciplines).
- Consider offering more practical group sessions that focus on developing confidence and self-advocacy skills.
- Use visual and structured approaches to support participation as this can be particularly beneficial for autistic students.
- Identify and address potential barriers to participation in peer mentoring programmes, such as requiring formal disclosure or registration with university support services.
- Consider offering formal recognition of participation in peer mentoring through certification or other similar approaches, as this may have ongoing benefits in terms of securing future employment or volunteering opportunities.

### Full Reference

Coyle, A., O'Hare, L. & Ramey, D. (2025). Synapse: A co-designed neurodivergent peer support programme for higher education settings. *Autism: the international journal of research and practice*, 29(7), 1711–1726. https://doi.org/10.1177/13623613251320448

# EXPLORING AUTISTIC COLLEGE STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS AND MANAGEMENT OF PEER STIGMA: AN INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

## BACKGROUND

While many autistic young people can thrive academically in higher education, research shows that some may struggle socially. Stigma can impact how someone feels about themselves and how they interact with those around them. The theory of stigma management suggests that stigma is based on the perceptions of both stigmatised and non-stigmatised people. Each person forms opinions about public stigma and a belief about whether the stigma applies to them. This then shapes what stigma management strategies they may use.

1. Avoiding stigma

When people believe public stigma, but do not believe that it applies to them, they may use management strategies that focus on avoiding stigma. Masking is an example of how an autistic person may seek to avoid judgement of stigmatised autistic traits. In a further effort to avoid stigma, some autistic people may try to mirror the behaviour of non-autistic people, or they may work painfully hard to 'overcome' a perceived challenge.

2. Accepting stigma

When people agree with public stigma and that it applies to them, they may use stigma management strategies that focus on accepting that stigma as standard, leading them to isolate or apologise. This form of acceptance is more likely to be linked to a reluctance to disclose, often only disclosing when absolutely necessary.

3. Advocacy

Another stigma management strategy that can have a hugely positive impact is advocacy. This might involve challenging public stigma and advocating for themselves and their community. Research shows that taking ownership of a diagnosis, self-advocacy, feeling accepted and having a supportive network are all associated with a successful experience in higher education.

## RESEARCH AIMS

The researchers aimed to find out what college students' perceptions were of peer stigma. They also wanted to know how autistic college students managed their own perceptions of that stigma.

## RESEARCH METHODS

Ten college students were recruited to take part. Nine were male, one was female, and they ranged in age from 18 to 25 years. All were diagnosed as autistic, and they were enrolled in a support programme at their public university. They were recruited via email.

Semi-structed interviews were individually conducted in the office of the autism support programme. Each student was given a copy of the consent form and questions before the interviews began. Seven questions were asked of all students and interviews took between 30 minutes and one hour.

Researchers took many steps to remove their own bias and assumptions as they reviewed each of the interviews.



## RESEARCH FINDINGS

Three central themes were found.

1. Students try to avoid stigma from their peers by concealing traits associated with autism.

All students were aware of stigma associated with autism and they attempted to change their communication or behaviour to try to fit in with non-autistic students. Six students believed that they were passing as neurotypical. The same six students were also the most anxious about their communication and behaviour on campus and they felt that autistic students were stigmatised in the university. The students used strategies such as masking, camouflaging, mirroring and self-monitoring. The four students who felt that they did not pass as neurotypical shared that they rarely felt stigmatised on campus. These students reframed negative experiences as, for example, misunderstandings, which provided a buffer against stigma.

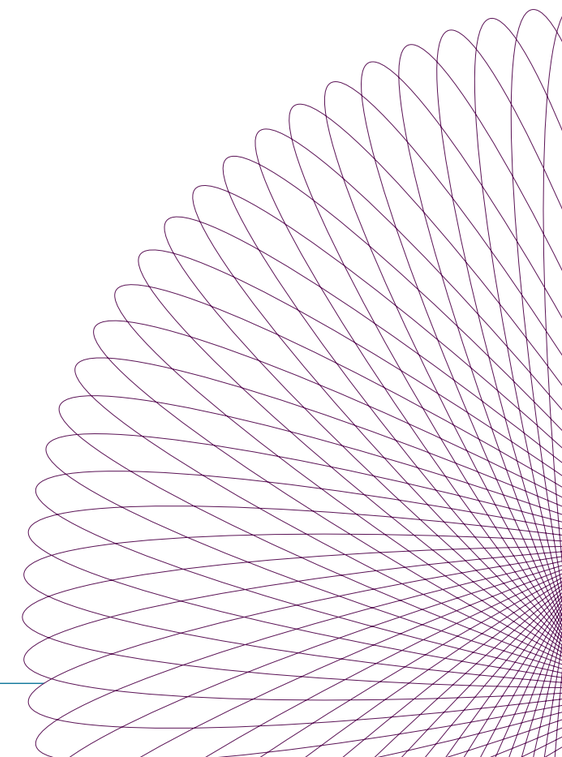
2. Favourable social comparison

Students managed stigma by favourably comparing themselves to other autistic people. Eight of the ten students felt that they were more like their non-autistic peers than their autistic peers. Some expressed pity or blame for fellow autistic students who could not hide their autistic behaviour. Students who had reported that they could not pass as non-autistic compared themselves to autistic community members more broadly, stressing that they had fewer support needs and using functioning labels to distance themselves from other autistic people. While this approach may serve to boost confidence, it also requires judgement and stigmatisation of the autistic community. The students did not place any responsibility on non-autistic peers to be inclusive or understanding.

3. Label stigma and limited disclosure

The students found autism labels very stigmatising. They used a variety of ways to describe their diagnosis: person-first language, identity first language, Asperger's and functioning labels. Two chose to use 'Asperger's' as they felt it was less stigmatised.

They shared a range of responses to their diagnosis, from shame to ambivalence to acceptance. Many showed internalised stigma in how they felt about their autistic identities. One student focused on his diagnosis in relation to benefits and resilience. About half of the students described positive attributes that they have. However, they also believed that autism stigma shaped the public's view of individual autistic people.



## IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE (adapted by the reviewer)

Public stigma and lack of understanding can impact the inclusion of autistic students on campus, however the students in this study placed no responsibility on their peers to decrease autism stigma. Instead, they focused on changing themselves because they had internalised autism stigma.

- While programmes to reduce autism stigma in non-autistic students are important, it is also essential to address internalised stigma that autistic students may hold.
- Internalised stigma can prevent autistic students from engaging with supports as they are reluctant to disclose their diagnosis. Support providers may need to be more proactive in highlighting the supports available and the benefits they may bring.
- Training in neurodiversity, advocacy and Universal Design for Learning should be provided to help address stigma at all levels of higher education, including autistic students themselves.
- Autistic students who live with internalised stigma are less likely to spend time with other autistic students. As internalised stigma is addressed, it may also be useful to offer opportunity for autistic students to form meaningful relationships with fellow neurodivergent students. Equally, an opportunity to witness autistic people as role models on campus may help to reduce internalised stigma.

### Full Reference

Underhill, J.C., Clark, J., Hansen, R.S. & Adams, H. (2024). Exploring autistic college students' perceptions and management of peer stigma: An interpretative phenomenological analysis. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 54(3), 1130–1142. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-022-05867-7



# REDUCING STIGMA TOWARD AUTISTIC PEERS: A PILOT INVESTIGATION OF A VIRTUAL AUTISM ACCEPTANCE PROGRAM FOR CHILDREN

## BACKGROUND

Inclusive education experiences have been associated with improved academic attainment, increased opportunity for friendship and greater understanding and acceptance. Inclusive education may play an important role in reducing the stigma directed towards autistic young people.

Research shows that non-autistic students hold inaccurate beliefs about autism, and they are unaware of potential challenges that autistic people may experience. This lack of knowledge may directly contribute to stigma experienced by autistic young people. Theories developed to explain stigma and how attitudes may change, focus on how improving knowledge and understanding may reduce stigma. Autism acceptance programmes may create an opportunity to combat this stigma.

## RESEARCH AIMS

The present study aimed to pilot a 5-week autism acceptance programme designed to increase non-autistic students' understanding of autism and improve their attitudes to their autistic schoolmates. The researchers wanted to know if an online acceptance programme could help non-autistic children to learn and retain knowledge about autism, as well as reduce stigma. They also wanted to know if it is possible to successfully implement such a programme.

## RESEARCH METHODS

The autism acceptance programme was initially run with twenty-three non-autistic children aged between 8 and 10 years. It was held online in autumn 2020. The students attended a private primary school in the US Midwest. Both child and parent reports suggested that the children had no experience with autistic peers. The students' teacher had 31 years' teaching experience and she had taught all primary school age groups. While she had taught autistic students in the past, none of her current students were diagnosed as autistic.

The autism acceptance programme had five themes: 1. Understanding the facts and reducing stigma, 2. Strengths of autistic peers, 3. Similarities and differences between autistic and non-autistic students, 4. Exploring the sensory world of autistic people and 5. Promoting kindness and friendship between autistic and non-autistic children.

Each session took roughly 35 minutes and featured videos, workbooks, PowerPoint presentations, discussions, activities and public domain videos. Each element of the programme was approved by stakeholders made up of autistic adults and parents of autistic children.

The researchers measured the students' knowledge about autism using the 'Autism Knowledge' questionnaire. They also asked the students to describe what they thought autism was. These measures were taken before the programme, immediately after the programme and one year later.

The feasibility of the programme was recorded in a number of ways. The research team recorded attendance and participation of students. They logged any technical difficulties, and they kept a checklist of how well programme elements were carried out. The participating children completed feedback scales to outline their thoughts on programme activities. The students' teacher also provided feedback.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

Following the programme, students showed that they had learned from all of the modules and that their learning was maintained one year later. The greatest increases in learning related to being able to describe autism, recognising strengths associated with autism and building friendships with autistic schoolmates.

In relation to the feasibility of the programme, only minor problems (such as internet connection) were recorded. The students viewed the programme and all activities favourably. They particularly liked the videos and activities. The teacher also found the programme positive.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE (by the reviewer)

Stigma is a barrier that autistic people consistently face. This pilot programme appears to show one useful way of addressing stigma.

- Teaching non-autistic young people to understand what it means to be autistic, as well as to recognise unique strengths, may be a starting point to combat the long-term causes of stigma.
- Using principals of universal design that incorporate activities, videos and conversation is likely to draw students in to increase their learning.
- Stakeholders such as autistic adults and parents of autistic young people are essential to ensure that all materials shared with students accurately and appropriately represent autistic experience. Perhaps the inclusion of autistic people as facilitators or guests would further increase the learning.

### Full Reference

Davidson, D. & Morales, D. (2023). Reducing Stigma Toward Autistic Peers: A Pilot Investigation of a Virtual Autism Acceptance Program for Children, *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, 14. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyt.2023.1241487



# CONCLUSION

**Friendships and relationships with classmates are an important part of the education experience. A traditional approach has demanded that autistic young people change themselves to fit a non-autistic way of being. In this Bulletin, we see research that challenges this approach. The research highlights assumptions about what peer relationships 'should' look like and it addresses the barriers that impact relationships. At the heart of all of these studies is the concept of stigma: internalised stigma held by autistic young people and stigma that influences how classmates and educators accept autistic young people for who they are. Addressing stigma is a shared responsibility that begins with creating a safe, affirming environment for all students.**

# YOUR OPINION

**The Centre trusts that you have found this Research Bulletin informative. It would be appreciated if you would take a few minutes to provide the Centre with feedback in relation to this Bulletin by clicking on the survey link below.**

**Research Bulletin Feedback Peer Understanding and Peer Support**

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**Useful links**

**LEANS Project**

**Neurodiversity Peer Support Toolkit (NEST)**



# NOTES

# NOTES

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The Centre's Research and Information Service welcomes any correspondence including suggestions for future bulletins to: research@middletownautism.com.

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