

Autism Vision

Creating Classroom Connections
for Children With Autism



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Introduction

The *AutismVision: Creating Classroom Connections Program (AutismVision)* is a comprehensive resource for teachers, counselors, and other concerned adults who wish to educate typical children about autism. If you're reading this guide, you're probably an advocate for a child with autism. You may be looking for ways to increase the social acceptance of that child. *AutismVision* can help create a more accepting, socially inclusive classroom for *all* children in the school.

A “socially inclusive” classroom fosters healthy interactions between children with disabilities and those without disabilities.

Not long ago, scientists and educators knew little about children with autism and assumed they could not be educated in the same setting as other children. Usually, children with autism were kept apart from their typical peers and placed in separate schools. Today we have a much more enlightened view of autism that takes into account new research on the brain. In addition, Federal legislation now mandates the inclusion of children with disabilities in general education classrooms. These advances have changed our perceptions of children with autism and provide a foundation for progress in the future.

However, research shows that placing different types of children in the same classroom—without educating the children about these differences—doesn't automatically result in positive attitudes and acceptance. The addition of a structured intervention, such as *AutismVision* can help typically developing peers learn how to have healthy interactions with their classmates with autism.

AutismVision is designed for classrooms that include children whose symptoms fall within the low-to-moderate range on the autism spectrum. The information in this guide and the related video may not be appropriate if the child in your classroom has Asperger syndrome or is otherwise high-functioning. Please see www.danya.com/autismvision.asp for information on other classroom resources.

We developed *AutismVision* to foster the social inclusion of children with autism in general education classrooms. The program consists of a multimedia package designed to reach children ages 8 to 11. The overarching goals of *AutismVision* are to:

- Increase typical children’s understanding of autism
- Foster empathy and positive attitudes toward children with autism
- Promote positive social interactions between children with autism and their typical peers

Program Elements

AutismVision consists of the *AutismVision* video and this *AutismVision* Facilitator’s Guide.

The 12-minute video provides classmates with information about autism that is developmentally appropriate for children ages 8 to 11. Designed to promote tolerance and empathy, the video paints a picture of what the world is like for many children with autism—a place where sights, sounds, and other sensory stimuli can be overwhelming or scary. Increased understanding of the world of autism can lay the foundation for better interactions in the classroom.

This guide is designed to support the efforts of teachers and other advocates as they conduct the video presentation. Step-by-step information is provided and includes:

- Suggestions for conducting the video presentation
- Pre- and postviewing activities
- Additional exercises and ideas for discussion
- Fact sheets about autism
- Tips for creating a positive classroom environment
- Additional resources on autism to supplement the program

Guidelines for Program Facilitators

Although teachers are most likely to facilitate *AutismVision* in a classroom setting, any supportive or concerned adult can implement the program. An informed parent, school counselor, or leader from an autism support or advocacy organization can conduct the presentation without receiving specialized education or training. All necessary procedures are explained in this guide.

The following are general guidelines for conducting an effective presentation.

Be prepared and know your topic. Before conducting the program, be sure you have a good knowledge base on the topic of autism. This guide provides you with “Frequently Asked Questions” and “Additional Resources” sections for suggested reading. To familiarize yourself with the program:

1. Skim through this guide to get an overall impression of the program
2. Watch the *AutismVision* video
3. Read this guide in its entirety
4. Decide which pre- and postviewing activities you will use
5. Gather all materials needed to conduct the presentation
6. Review additional resources from among those listed in the back of this guide

Promote an atmosphere of compassion, understanding, and mutual respect. When presenting the program in the classroom setting, emphasize that everyone is different in some way and that we all must adjust to and respect differences. Explain that children with autism may have unusual ways of doing things, but these are just different ways of relating to the world. State clearly that it is important not to laugh or make fun of children with autism when they engage in unusual behaviors.

Encourage creative thought and discussion. Rather than asking “yes” or “no” questions, whenever possible, ask open-ended questions that allow children to do their own thinking. For example, ask, “What do you already know about autism?”

Dispel common myths about autism. If you find that students have misconceptions about autism, help them change their thinking by gently pointing out where they are mistaken. You should be prepared for children to have concerns such as:

- Autism is contagious; you can “catch” autism.
- Children with autism are dangerous.
- Other friends will make fun of me if I play with a classmate with autism.

Other common myths about autism are addressed in the “Frequently Asked Questions” section of this guide.

At the end of the presentation, restate and emphasize the following “take-home” messages to the group:

- Children with autism are first and foremost children; they are like other children in many ways.
- Children with autism experience the world very differently. Sights, sounds, tastes, and feelings that seem normal to us might be scary and overwhelming for a child with autism.
- Children with autism need and want friends.
- Understanding autism is the key to creating connections.
- Children with autism have their own way of communicating—it’s almost like a different language.
- Autism is **not** contagious. No one dies from having autism.
- No one should ever tease or make fun of someone with autism.
- When a child with autism feels included, everyone in the classroom can learn and grow!

The primary goal of the program is to educate typical peers about autism. Therefore, it is recommended that the child with autism **not** be present in the classroom during the presentation. However, the decision about whether to exclude the child with autism during the presentation should be made by the facilitator and other school personnel in collaboration with the parents of the child with autism.

Conducting the Presentation

AutismVision can be used in any classroom that includes a student with autism.

Introduction and Pre-Viewing Activities. As a first step in learning about autism, the facilitator should conduct one or more pre-viewing activities with the class. (These activities are described in detail later in this guide.) The activities are designed to “prime” students for viewing the video.

Viewing the AutismVision Video. The next step is presenting the *AutismVision* video to the class.

Post-Viewing Activities and Wrap-Up. Following the presentation of the video, the facilitator should conduct one or more postviewing activities with the class. (These activities are described in detail later in this guide.) Postviewing activities are designed to help students process information in the video and build on skills acquired through the pre-viewing activities.

Detailed Pre-Viewing & Postviewing Activities

AutismVision is designed to be flexible. You can choose and tailor pre-viewing and postviewing activities to suit your own instructional style as well as the needs of your classroom. The table on the next page provides an overview of all the activities described in this guide, organized by name, brief description, amount of time they will take to complete, and materials needed. Use the table to help you decide how to organize your presentation.

Overview of Pre-Viewing and Postviewing Activities

Activity Number	Activity Name	Description	Time to Complete	Necessary Materials
Pre-Viewing Activity 1	Differences Among People	Helps students think about how individuals differ from one another	15–20 minutes	Paper, pencils, markers, newsprint
Pre-Viewing Activity 2	What Would You Like to Know About Autism?	Students share what they know about autism and discuss what they would like to learn	20–25 minutes	Paper, pencils, markers, newsprint, strips of paper
Pre-Viewing Activity 3	We're All the Same on the Inside	Shows students that, although we differ on the outside, we are very much the same on the inside	15–20 minutes	Eggs, bowls
Pre-Viewing Activity 4	Sensory Overload	Creates an environment with “sensory overload” to show typical children what it feels like to have autism	20–25 minutes	Small bell or xylophone, paper, pencils, markers
Pre-Viewing Activity 5	Switcheroo!	Simulates the confusion and frustration a child with autism may feel	20–25 minutes	Beverages in opaque containers, paper, pencils
Pre-Viewing Activity 6	Exploring Feelings About Autism	Helps build empathy through discussions about experiences in which students have felt lonely or isolated	15–20 minutes	Paper, pencils, markers, newsprint
Postviewing Activity 1	Differences Among People	Students compare postviewing ideas about differences among people with their pre-viewing responses. <i>(Corresponds with Pre-Viewing Activity 1)</i>	20–25 minutes	Pre-Viewing Activity 1 responses, markers, pencils, pens, newsprint
Postviewing Activity 2	What Did You Learn About Autism?	Students discuss what they now know about autism. <i>(Corresponds with Pre-Viewing Activity 2)</i>	20–25 minutes	Pre-Viewing Activity 2 responses, markers, pencils, pens, newsprint
Postviewing Activity 3	Promoting Empathy	Students develop a list of “ <i>dos</i> and <i>don'ts</i> ” for interacting with a child with autism.	One class period	Paper, pencils, newsprint, markers

The following pages provide detailed instructions on conducting pre-viewing activities, viewing the video, and conducting postviewing activities.

General tips for making activities fun for children:

- Use fun, colorful materials, such as colored markers and colored paper.
- During whole-class discussions, write the children's ideas on the chalkboard or newsprint whenever possible.
- Encourage children to work cooperatively in small groups when creating posters, murals, and other projects.

Pre-Viewing Activity 1: Differences Among People

Materials Needed

-  Newsprint/paper
-  Paper and pencils
-  Markers

Preparation

Write the following questions on a sheet of newsprint/paper:

- What are some differences between you and others?
- How does being different make **YOU** feel?
- Are differences all good or all bad? How can having friends who are different from you be a good thing?

Before asking participants to answer these questions, take a few moments to answer them for yourself. Think about your answers and the feelings they evoke. This will help you empathize with the students' feelings.

Procedure

1. Instruct students to write down their answers to the questions, individually or in small groups. Encourage them not to “think too much” about their responses. Instead, they should write ideas freely as they come up.
2. Allow students 5 to 10 minutes to respond to the questions.
3. Tell students to put their responses away in a safe place. Explain that they will need them for further discussion after they watch the video.

Pre-Viewing Activity 2: What Would You Like to Know About Autism?

Materials Needed

-  Newspaper/paper
-  Paper and pencils
-  Markers
-  Strips of paper

Questions can be written on strips of paper and placed in a bag or box for children to draw from during the activity.

Preparation

To help spur conversation, prepare a list of questions about autism in advance of the presentation. Sample questions include:

- Are people with autism ever happy?
- Can people with autism show affection?
- Do people with autism ever laugh?
- Will people with autism get better?
- Can we do anything to help [insert name of child with autism in your class] feel included?

Procedure

1. Begin the lesson by asking students what they already know about autism. Write down their ideas on a sheet of newspaper. Depending on the experience level of your group, you may not get a lot of information at this point. If no one offers anything, try providing this definition of autism:

Autism is something some people are born with that changes the way they experience the world. They may see, hear, and feel things differently or behave in ways that seem unusual to us.

Make sure you write down students' ideas. You will need them for other activities.

2. Ask students what they would like to learn about autism. If they're having trouble thinking of questions, they can draw from the box that holds the questions you prepared in advance.
3. Conclude the activity by asking students if they have any final thoughts about autism before they see the video. Tell students they will revisit these questions after they watch the video.

Pre-Viewing Activity 3: We're All the Same on the Inside

Materials Needed

-  One brown and one white egg
-  Two small bowls

Preparation

Discuss with your students the ways in which people are alike (for example, everyone has a nose, eyes, mouth, and so forth). Discuss how people are different (for example, some people have green eyes, some wear glasses, and so forth).

Procedure

1. Show students a brown egg and a white egg.
2. Discuss the eggs' similarities and differences.
3. Turn away from the class and break each egg into a bowl. Hide the shells.
4. Ask the students if they can tell which bowl contains the egg from the brown shell and which bowl contains the egg from the white shell.
5. Conclude the activity with a discussion about how people may look or act differently on the outside but that we are all similar on the inside.

As an extension to this activity, students could create a “chain of diversity.”

1. Using colored construction paper, ask students to cut two strips of paper.
2. On the first strip of paper, instruct students to write down one attribute that makes them similar to other classmates. On the second strip of paper, ask them to write down one attribute that makes them different.
3. Help the students create a paper chain that links together these similarities and differences.

The chain can be hung in your classroom as a visual reminder of how students' similarities and differences “link” them together.

Pre-Viewing Activity 4: Sensory Overload

Materials Needed

-  Small bell or xylophone
-  Newsprint/paper
-  Paper and pencils
-  Markers

Procedure

1. Tell students they are going to experience a little bit of what it is like to have autism.
2. Instruct children to perform two tasks at the same time. They are going to sing “Row, Row, Row Your Boat” while simultaneously writing the words to the Pledge of Allegiance on a piece of paper. Have students take out a piece of paper and begin writing and singing.
3. While they are performing these two tasks, begin ringing a bell or playing the xylophone and flicking the lights on and off.
4. Sustain the “sensory overload” experience for at least 5 minutes. Encourage students to continue their tasks throughout.
5. Give students a few minutes to recover from the experience. They may be giggling or chatting, but keep them on task by asking what the demonstration felt like. Were they able to complete their tasks? Did the experience make them feel nervous or jumpy? Write down their responses on a sheet of newsprint or the chalkboard.
6. Tell the students that what they experienced is a little bit like the experience of many children with autism. You might want to tell them that constant sensory overload is part of the reason these children engage in unusual behaviors.
7. End the activity by asking students if the experience helped them develop a better understanding of people with autism.

Pre-Viewing Activity 5: Switcheroo!

Materials Needed

-  Beverages in opaque containers (such as soda cans, milk cartons, or juice boxes)
-  Paper and pencils

Preparation

Ask for one or two volunteers.

Procedure

1. Send the volunteer(s) out of the room or to another area of the classroom. No peeking!
2. Instruct the rest of the group to switch the liquids in each container. For instance, put milk in the cola can, cola in the juice box, and water in the milk carton.
3. Explain to the group that when the volunteers come back to the classroom, they will ask those students to predict what is in each container. They can try to explain to the volunteers what they've done, but without using any of the following words: *juice, beverage, drink, container, soda, milk, water, switch, move, or change*.
4. Bring the volunteers back in. Ask the group to encourage the volunteers to correctly guess what is in each container. But remember, the group can't use any of the words on the list above!
5. Conclude the activity by recording the volunteers' predictions and asking them to take a taste out of each container.
6. Ask the volunteers to talk about what the experience was like for them. Were they confused about what the class was trying to get them to do? Were they surprised when they tasted what was in the containers? Were they frustrated when they didn't understand what everyone else in the classroom knew? Did they feel left out?

7. Point out to the class that this activity gave them a small experience of what it is like to have autism. Autism is a bit like having the world work in unexpected ways and not being able to communicate with people to find out the “rules.” This explains why some children with autism like to know ahead of time what’s going to happen during the school day.
8. Tell students that children with autism often feel lonely and isolated. Point out that even though they sometimes seem to want to be alone, it may be that they just don’t know how to join in activities with their classmates. Their unusual behaviors are the ways in which they attempt to communicate or calm themselves down when the environment is too stressful for them.

Pre-Viewing Activity 6: Exploring Feelings About Autism

Materials Needed

-  Newsprint/paper and markers
-  Paper and pencils

Procedure

1. Ask students to take a few moments to think of experiences that made them feel isolated from their peers. Give them some examples, such as:
 - Being teased about clothing or a haircut
 - Having friends leave them out of a fun activity
 - Having a physical difference, such as a scar
2. Tell students to write down their experiences.
3. After students have written down their ideas, ask for volunteers to share them with the group.

If students are shy and no one wants to speak, be prepared to offer an example from your own life. Being open about your own experience can help the children in your classroom open up.

4. Discuss the students' experiences. Draw parallels between these experiences and the lives of people with autism. Tell students that while their experiences of being left out may have happened only once or twice, people with autism may have these kinds of experiences every day.
5. Conclude the activity by asking students how they might try to reach out to a child with autism. Record their ideas on a sheet of newsprint or the chalkboard. Tell them that they will have a chance to see the list again after they watch the video.

Viewing the *AutismVision* Video

After conducting the pre-viewing activities, the next step is to view the *AutismVision* video with the class.

An Example of an Introduction to the Video

“Now we’re going to watch a video called AutismVision. This video will teach you what it’s like to have autism. After you watch it, we’ll talk about it and do some more activities that will help us better understand autism.”

The *AutismVision* video runs for 12 minutes and contains the following elements:

- A group of children being “transported” through the world of autism
- Interviews with brothers and sisters of children with autism
- Footage of children with autism in multiple settings

We recommend that you emphasize these key points:

- Children with autism are first and foremost children; they are like other children in many ways.
- Children with autism experience the world very differently. Sights, sounds, tastes, and feelings that seem normal to us might be scary and overwhelming for a child with autism.
- Children with autism need and want friends.
- Understanding autism is the key to creating connections.
- Children with autism have their own way of communicating—it’s almost like a different language.
- Autism is **not** contagious. No one dies from having autism.
- No one should ever tease or make fun of someone with autism.
- When a child with autism feels included, everyone in the classroom can learn and grow!

Then ask if the students have any specific questions.

Postviewing Activity 1: Differences Among People

Materials Needed

- ✍ Responses from Pre-Viewing Activity 1
- ✍ Paper and pencils
- ✍ Newsprint/paper
- ✍ Markers

Procedure

1. Ask students to take out their responses from the “Differences Among People” pre-viewing activity.
2. Tell students something like the following:
“As you saw in the video, children with autism do some things differently than you or I. However, autism is just one way a person might be different from another. There are many differences among people. Can you give some examples of how people are different?”
(If necessary, give examples of differences, such as skin or eye color.)
3. Break the class up into smaller groups for the next discussion. Ask each group to think of at least three ways people can be different. Give the groups about 10 minutes to complete their lists. They can use their ideas from the pre-viewing activity. Suggest that they also discuss the following questions:
 - *Have you ever felt different from others?*
 - *How did being different make you feel?*
4. Bring the entire class back together. Ask each group to share the results of its small-group discussions. On a piece of newsprint or on the chalkboard, list all the responses. Ask the children whether this activity helped them feel more empathy toward people with autism.

5. Conclude the activity by making a group list of recommendations on how to treat a classmate with autism. Suggestions might include:
 - Treat the student with autism the same way you treat everyone else.
 - Don't exclude the classmate with autism from any school activities.
 - Be polite and respectful. Don't tease or make fun of the student with autism.

Postviewing Activity 2: What Did You Learn About Autism?

Materials Needed

-  Responses from Pre-Viewing Activity 2
-  Newsprint/paper
-  Markers
-  Paper and pencils

Procedure

1. After showing the *AutismVision* video, ask students what they learned from it. Their ideas may include:
 - People with autism experience the world differently than most people.
 - Children with autism sometimes have an assistant who helps them cope with the classroom experience.
 - Each person with autism is unique. Although they share certain characteristics, people with autism can be very different from each other.
 - People with autism have difficulty communicating, which explains many unusual behaviors.
 - People with autism like routines and do not like things to change from one day to the next.
2. Ask students if they still have questions about autism and list them.

You may want to record students' ideas and keep them posted in the classroom. These points can serve as a reminder of the difficulties children with autism face every day. This should be done with sensitivity to the child with autism and always at the discretion of the classroom teacher.

3. Answer the children's questions if you can, or allow other children an opportunity to answer them. The guide's "Frequently Asked Questions" and "Additional Resources" sections may be helpful to you. If you don't know the answer to a question, it's all right to tell the class that you'll have to look up the answer and get back to them.
4. Some questions might provide a springboard for additional activities, such as:
 - Students can draw pictures and write stories based on the questions and answers discussed.
 - A worksheet can be generated so students can connect correct answers with the matching questions.

Postviewing Activity 3: Promoting Empathy

Materials Needed

-  Paper and pencils
-  Newsprint/paper
-  Markers

Procedure

1. Tell students they're going to develop ideas on how to treat their classmate with autism—and how *not* to behave with him or her. You may wish to show the last segment of the video again.
2. Divide students into groups of two or three. Ask them to think of three ways of interacting with their classmate and three ways *not* to behave with him or her. Allow between 10 and 15 minutes to complete this activity.
3. After students have completed their lists, bring the class back together. Ask the groups to present their ideas by either talking about their lists, acting out their ideas, or combining the two. Students may come up with the following ideas:
 - Be tolerant of unusual behaviors. If a child with autism does something you find peculiar, such as insisting on standing in the same place in line, try to go along with these behaviors as best you can.
 - If you see a child with autism sitting alone, go over and say “hi.” If the child doesn’t respond, don’t be sad. Hang around for a little while and see if he or she responds. If not, try again later. Be patient and try different ways to reach a child with autism.
 - If the class is going to a different room and it looks like the child with autism is confused, go over and help him or her find the way.
 - If a child with autism does something inappropriate during class, such as shouting or getting up and spinning, don’t laugh. Instead, allow the teacher or special assistant to calm him or her down.

4. Discuss behaviors children should *not* engage in when dealing with a child with autism. For example:
 - Never tease a child with autism.
 - Never imitate a child with autism or laugh at his or her behavior.
 - Never do anything that would make a child with autism feel uncomfortable, such as touch him or her abruptly or shout, especially if he or she is sensitive to sound.
5. Conclude the lesson by congratulating students on thinking of good strategies. Tell them that their ideas will help the child with autism feel much more comfortable in class.

Extensions for Creating Socially Inclusive Classrooms

The activities in this section are designed for use with children with autism and their typical peers. Since research suggests that children with autism have an easier time interacting with others on a task when they are interested in the topic, we've included a range of activities that can be tailored to the needs of your students. For example, if a child with autism likes art, he or she could work with a classmate on an art project. If the child with autism prefers games, he or she can play games with other classmates.

Not all of these activities will be appropriate for all children in the target age range of 8 to 11. Thus, to help match students to appropriate activities, each one has been identified as either ★—"easy," ★★—"moderate," or ★★★—"difficult."

Extension 1: Art Projects

★ **Project 1**

Working in pairs, ask students to draw pictures of themselves when they were babies and as they are now. Have the students share, in words or pictures, how they've changed over the years.

★★ **Project 2**

Working in pairs or in small groups, ask students to create a scrapbook of things they like to do. Encourage them to draw pictures for the scrapbook or cut photos out of newspapers and magazines. Have them share the completed scrapbook with other classmates.

★★★ **Project 3**

Working in small groups, ask students to create a mural of a typical day at school. The mural can be created with a variety of media, including paint, colored pencils, and pastels. Ask students to place themselves in the mural.

Extension 2: Board Games

★ Project 1

Provide games such as “Candy Land” or “Chutes and Ladders” for use during recess. Ask students to pull the names of other players out of a hat. Encourage students to play with children other than their best friends.

★★ Project 2

Play a game that requires more skill, such as “Connect Four” or “Guess Who?” “Connect Four” may work well with a child who likes numbers, while “Guess Who?” is a good game for a visual learner.

Extension 3: Movement Games

★ Project 1

Lead the class in “Simon Says.” Then have students take turns in the “Simon” role.

★★ Project 2

Suggest that the class play a slightly more complicated game, such as “Hot Potato” or “Red Light, Green Light.” Give the child with autism the role in which he or she is most comfortable.

Extension 4: Sharing Stories

★★ Project 1

Copy stories written by famous people with autism, such as Temple Grandin and Tito.¹ Either read the stories aloud or have students read them quietly to themselves. Then discuss the accomplishments of these individuals with autism. What were they able to accomplish? What obstacles did they overcome?

★★★ Project 2

Ask students to write a couple of paragraphs describing obstacles they overcame. Make sure they include what the obstacle was, what they had to do to overcome it, and what they learned from the experience. Encourage the child with autism to write as much as he or she can, using tools he or she would typically use.

¹ Stories written by Temple Grandin are available at <http://www.autism.org>, and Tito’s stories can be found at <http://www.cureautismnow.org>

Frequently Asked Questions

This section of the guide is designed to provide the program facilitator with basic information about autism in a question-and-answer format. These pages can easily be photocopied and shared with colleagues and other interested individuals. References for more detailed or specialized information about autism are provided in the “Additional Resources” section of this guide.

What is autism?

Autism is a developmental disorder that affects a person’s ability to communicate and interact with other people. This disorder affects different people in different ways. Some individuals are relatively high functioning on their own, while others need more assistance. Some people with autism are highly verbal, while others do not speak at all.

What are the symptoms of autism?

There are three major groupings of autism symptoms:

- *Problems with social interactions*, such as lack of eye contact and inability to maintain attention
- *Problems with communication*, such as infrequent use of language or odd language patterns
- *Problems with changes in routine or repetitive behaviors*, such as flapping arms or spinning around

What are some common characteristics of autism?

Although no two people with autism are the same, most exhibit several of the following characteristics:

- The need for sameness and a resistance to change
- Difficulty using language to communicate needs
- Repeating words or phrases instead of responding to what is said
- Laughing, crying, or appearing happy or unhappy for reasons not clear to others
- A preference for being alone

- Acting-out behaviors, such as tantrums
- Difficulty socializing with others
- Resistance to physical contact with others
- Little or no eye contact
- Lack of imaginative play
- Inappropriate attachment to objects
- Obsession with certain topics or objects
- Over- or undersensitivity to sensory input
- Over- or underactivity
- Uneven motor development, such as clumsiness

It is important to note that these characteristics tend to vary greatly from day to day and from person to person.

When do symptoms of autism first appear?

Symptoms of autism can begin immediately after birth, but often, parents begin to notice them when the child is between 12 and 18 months old. This is the age at which most infants begin to use language and show interest in social activities. A diagnosis of autism is usually made when the child is between 2 and 3 years of age, but new research is looking at ways to diagnose children as young as 12 to 14 months.

How many people have autism?

At the time of the publication of this guide, rates of autism were estimated at between 3 and 4 cases per 1,000 children. Autism is found at similar rates in all races and cultures and in all social and economic groups. However, autism is far more common in boys than in girls; there are four boys for every one girl diagnosed with autism.

Is autism contagious?

You cannot “catch” autism from someone who has it. Researchers believe that autism is the result of a person’s genetic makeup and unknown factors that trigger the onset of symptoms.

Is there a cure for autism?

At the time of publication of this guide, there is no cure for autism. Many researchers and educators are presently studying autism. As our knowledge and understanding increases, new methods of helping people with autism are emerging. What we do know is that the earlier the disorder is diagnosed and the earlier treatment begins, the better the prognosis for the person with autism.

How should children with autism be treated?

Children with autism should be treated the same as other children and included in society as much as possible. If they can speak, conversation should be encouraged. If they use other forms of communication, such as sign language, pictures, or communication devices, we should try to understand them. Research shows that an effective way to reach children with autism is through their individual interests. Thus, in the classroom setting, it is important to find out what the child with autism is interested in and create opportunities for interaction centered on those interests.

What are some common myths about autism?

Since the disorder was first recognized in 1943, there have been many differing views of autism. Unfortunately, these views have led to some misinformation and myths. Common misconceptions about autism include:

- *The belief that people with autism cannot feel love, have empathy, or show affection.* In fact, people with autism can and do feel love, have empathy, and show affection, but they may express them differently.
- *The belief that people with autism do not want to interact with other people.* In fact, people with autism do want social interaction, and children with autism want and need friends. They simply have a hard time knowing how to interact with other people and need help learning how to do so.

- *The belief that people with autism are dangerous to others.* Although some people with autism are prone to behavioral outbursts, the vast majority of people with autism are not dangerous. With the use of early intervention techniques, most challenging behaviors can be eliminated or reduced.

Creating a Supportive Classroom Environment

Integrating a child with autism into the classroom can be a challenge, especially if you have no previous experience to draw upon. Some simple strategies, such as those described below, can help create a supportive classroom environment.

- ***Emphasize the importance of teamwork.*** Stress that although each student is an individual, every student is a member of the larger team.
- ***Structure the classroom in a simple, logical way.*** For example, designate one section of the room for reading stories, one for doing math, and a third for science. It helps children with autism—and others who need structure—accomplish the activities required of them.
- ***Have a “quiet corner or space” in the classroom for anyone who needs a break from activity.*** A few chairs and/or a table placed away from the main hub of activity can provide all children with some necessary quiet time during the busy school day.
- ***Reinforce positive behaviors.*** A system that rewards desired behaviors benefits all students, not just those with autism.
- ***At the end of each day, go over the schedule for the following day.*** Provide a “picture schedule” as a visual aid. Post the daily schedule in the same location. If possible, try to conduct academic subjects and activities at the same time every day.
- ***If a special event is planned, such as an assembly, give the class as much advance notice as you can.*** Children with autism tend to have difficulty with changes in routine and can deal with them more successfully when they have some preparation time.
- ***Discuss rules for emergency procedures, such as fire drills.*** Have a plan in place to help the child with autism stay calm and reach safety during these events. For example, each child in the classroom could be paired with a buddy during emergency events. If possible, request advance notice before planned drills.

- *Try to keep sounds, sights, and smells to a minimum.* Children with autism are often either hyper- or hyposensitive to environmental stimuli. Therefore, sounds, smells, and visual stimuli that seem quite ordinary to typical classmates can be intrusive to the child with autism. Teachers who work with children with autism often keep lights low, play soothing background music, or provide headphones as a way to minimize stress.

Additional Resources

Resources for Facilitators

British Columbia Ministry of Education. (2000). *Teaching students with autism: a resource guide for schools*. Victoria, BC: Office Products Center. Available at <http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca>

This guide provides information and teaching strategies for educators of students with autism.

Greene, R. (2001). *The explosive child* (2nd ed.). New York: HarperCollins. Available at <http://www.explosivechild.com>

This book is highly recommended for educators and parents who deal with easily frustrated children.

Hesmondhalg, M., & Breakey, C. (2001). *Access and inclusion for children with autistic spectrum disorders: 'Let me in.'* Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley.

This book describes one school's experience with inclusion of children with autism.

Kluth, P. (2003). *"You're going to love this kid": Teaching students with autism in the inclusive classroom*. Baltimore, MD: Paul H Brookes.

This book is written as a guide to educators who have children with autism included in the classroom.

National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH). (1997). *Autism*. Bethesda, MD: National Institutes of Health. Available at <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/publicat/autism.cfm>

This brochure from NIMH provides useful information about autism.

National Research Council. (2001). *Educating children with autism*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press. Available at: <http://www.nap.edu>

This book provides the latest research concerning the education of children with autism.

Sewell, K. (2000). *Breakthroughs: How to reach students with autism*. Verona, WI: Attainment Company, Inc.

This book provides parents and teachers with "hands-on" techniques for working with children with autism.

Siegel, B. (1998). *The world of the autistic child: Understanding and treating autistic spectrum disorders*. New York: Oxford University Press.

This book provides excellent information for those who want to learn more about autism.

Sigman, M., & Capps, L. (1997). *Children with autism: A developmental perspective*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

This book is recommended for those interested in acquiring more in-depth knowledge of autism.

Web Sites for Facilitators

Autism Society of America

<http://www.autism-society.org>

This site provides a wide range of autism information and services to families and educators.

Cure Autism Now

<http://www.cureautismnow.org>

This site serves as an information exchange for families affected by autism and sponsors research and events devoted to finding a cure.

MAX Foundation

<http://www.maxfoundation.org>

This site promotes special-education awareness and provides links to information on autism.

National Alliance for Autism Research (NAAR)

<http://www.naar.org>

NAAR's site hosts information about the latest advances in autism research.

National Information Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities (NICHCY)

<http://www.nichcy.org>

This site provides information on disabilities and disability-related issues.

The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Autism Site

<http://www.nichd.nih.gov/autism/>

This site provides access to the most current research and information on autism.

Organization for Autism Research

<http://www.researchautism.org>

This site provides information on applied research to the autism community.

Resources for Children

Amenta, C. (1992). *Russell is extra special: A book about autism for children*. New York: Magination Press.

This book portrays a story about a boy with autism.

Carlson, R. W. (2002). *My brother Kevin has autism*. Lincoln, NE: Writers Club Press.

In this book, two brothers provide insight into autism through poetry and pictures.

Lears, L. (1998). *Ian's walk: A story about autism*. Morton Grove, IL: Albert Whitman & Co.

This book describes how two sisters discover the world of autism through their brother's perspective.

Lewis, B. (1997). *What do you stand for?: A kid's guide to building character*. Minneapolis: Free Spirit.

This book helps children understand ethics and how to develop a strong sense of self.

Meyer, D. J. (Ed.) (1997). *Views from our shoes: Growing up with a brother or sister with special needs*. Bethesda, MD: Woodbine House.

Siblings share their experiences as the brother or sister of someone with a disability.

Messner, A. W. (1996). *Captain Tommy*. Arlington, TX: Future Horizons.

This book tells the story of how one boy befriends a classmate with autism.

Moser, A. (1991). *Don't feed the monster on tuesdays!: The children's self-esteem book*. Kansas City, MO: Landmark Editions.

This book helps children understand self-esteem.

Simmons, K. (1996). *Little Rainman: Autism through the eyes of a child*. Arlington, TX: Future Horizons.

In this book, a mother describes the sensory challenges faced by her child with autism.

Thompson, M. (1996). *Andy and his yellow Frisbee*. Bethesda, MD: Woodbine House.

This book tells the story of a boy with autism who has a fascination for spinning objects.

Web Sites for Children

Kid's Quest on Disability and Health

<http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/kids/>

This site, sponsored by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, leads children on a quest to learn more about common childhood disabilities.

KidsHealth

<http://www.kidshealth.org>

This site has a special children's section on children's health problems.

Values: Making Choices for Life

<http://library.thinkquest.org/J001709/>

This multicultural site helps children understand values such as honesty and compassion.

Kids Next Door

<http://www.hud.gov/kids/>

This site, sponsored by the Department of Housing and Urban Development, has information for children about being a good citizen.

National PTA

<http://www.pta.org>

This site contains activities and resources for families and children on communication and other important issues.