

Insights is published by ESS as a service for educational professionals. Each issue highlights an important research article and provides practical applications of the findings for the classroom and the school environment.

## Autism Awareness

In April, 1970 [The Autism Society](#) began a nationwide campaign to raise awareness about autism. Almost 50 years later, April is still designated as [National Autism Awareness Month](#), a time to raise awareness about both the strengths and challenges of those individuals on the Autism Spectrum.

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neuro-developmental condition that affects how an individual processes and integrates information, and causes social, communication, and behavioral impairments. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), more people than ever before in the United States are being diagnosed with ASD. Data reported in 2014 from the 11 states being monitored by the CDC indicated that 1 in 59 children were identified with ASD, while previous estimates ranged from 1 in 68 to 1 in 150 children. Some of this increase is due to a broader definition of ASD and better efforts at earlier diagnosis, although experts believe that a true increase in the number of people with ASD is also likely.

There appear to be many causes for ASD, including environmental and biological factors, and since ASD often occurs within families, there is likely a genetic link as well. Despite the concerns of some parents and health care professionals, the CDC's assessment of available research data is that there is no link between vaccines and autism. ASD occurs in all racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups, and is about 4 times more common among boys than among girls.

Eighty three percent of individuals with ASD carry one or more additional developmental, psychiatric, or neurologic diagnosis. Ten percent have one or more distinct psychiatric condition, in particular anxiety and/or depression. Among adolescents with ASD, approximately one third are clinically depressed, and 40% meet diagnostic criteria for anxiety. Besides neurobiological factors, it is likely that mental health symptoms result from the extreme stress of trying to fit into a non-autistic world, where autistic individuals are often misdiagnosed and misunderstood.

While additional research is needed to fully understand the factors that contribute to ASD, all autism experts agree that early identification and intervention are critical to maximize

an individual's success. Signs of autism can be discerned in children as early as 18-24 months old, and early intervention strategies can target language and social skills, as well as emotional/behavioral regulation. It is also critically important that psychiatric disorders are recognized and treated in autistic students, as these can significantly interfere with both academic and social development.

During Autism Awareness Month, teachers can contribute to the well-being of autistic individuals:

- Familiarize yourself with some common signs of autism, e.g. poor eye contact; difficulty understanding the feelings of others; obsessive interests; difficulty tolerating minor changes; trouble understanding personal space boundaries; difficulty understanding jokes, sarcasm, or teasing, etc. <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/signs.html>
- On April 2 every year Autism Speaks begins its yearly awareness and advocacy campaign, [Light It Up Blue](#), to support people with autism. Encourage students to wear a blue shirt or ribbon on that day to help raise awareness.
- Refer students to ESS or other district professionals if concerned about possibly undiagnosed autism, and/or you notice mental health symptoms in an autistic student.
- Inform parents about the CDC's free "milestone tracker" app that can be downloaded and used to determine if young children ages 2-5 are on target developmentally. The app includes tips and activities to aid development, as well as information on when and how to seek help. <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/actearly/milestones/milestones-2mo.html>

### RESOURCES:

<https://www.jesselewischooselove.org> (entire curriculum is free and can be accessed at this site)

<https://www.jesselewischooselove.org/choose-love-calendar/>

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