



## Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and Child Abuse & Neglect (CAN)

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### What is Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)?

According to the National Autism Association, ASD is:<sup>7</sup>

- A neurodevelopmental condition characterized by social and cognitive impairments.
- A spectrum disorder that ranges from very mild to very severe and occurs in all ethnic, socioeconomic, and age groups.

Signs and symptoms of ASD include:<sup>7</sup>

- Communication difficulties such as maintaining eye contact and challenges with language and social skills.
- Repetitive behaviors including deep focus on specific routines or rituals and having intense interests.
- Struggles with hyperactivity and or impulsivity (acting without thinking).

Symptoms vary widely among people with ASD.

Autism is NOT a mental illness, bad behavior, caused by vaccines, or always associated with cognitive impairment.<sup>1</sup>

### Statistics and Facts

- 1 in 31 children in the U.S. has ASD as of 2022,<sup>10</sup> an increase from the 2020 rate of 1 in 36.<sup>5</sup>
- Males have an ASD prevalence at 3.4 times the rate of females (as of 2022).<sup>10</sup>
- Worldwide, approximately 1 in 100 children are diagnosed with ASD (as of 2022).<sup>12</sup>

## How Do Autism and Child Abuse & Neglect (CAN) Intersect?



Research shows individuals with ASD are more likely to experience child maltreatment, or adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). ACEs include, but are not limited to: physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, neglect, financial instability, parental mental illness, loss of a loved one, domestic violence, and community violence.<sup>4</sup>

Analysis of data from a U.S. national children's health survey found children with an ASD diagnosis experienced a higher probability of ACEs (categories 1-3 ACEs or 4+) which highlights the increased adversity among families of children with ASD, and how they impact their long-term health and social outcomes.<sup>2</sup>

Children with ASD experience significantly more ACEs, have lower levels of resiliency, poorer overall health, and a higher risk of mental health challenges compared to their peers.<sup>8</sup>

Children with ASD are at risk for more frequent, complex maltreatment and experience more physical abuse and neglect compared to maltreated children without developmental disabilities.<sup>6</sup> Further, for those with ASD, an immediate family member was named the abuser more often than when compared to maltreated children in the control group.<sup>6</sup>

Children with ASD and reported abuse are more likely to have significantly more intrusive thoughts, distressing memories, irritability, loss of interest, and lethargy than children with ASD and no reported abuse history.<sup>3</sup>

Children with disabilities who died due to abuse were more likely to have ASD, a developmental disability, or another physical impairment, with physical abuse being the most prevalent type of abuse resulting in death.<sup>9</sup>

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## Resources and Support

Lowering stress among parents and caregivers of children with ASD lessens the likelihood of CAN and greater support increases healthy coping mechanisms, further reducing the risk of CAN. Support is vital as:

- Parents, especially mothers, have higher stress levels when parenting their children with ASD than when parenting their neurotypical children.<sup>11</sup>
- Parents whose children have ASD report more depressive symptoms when compared to parents of children with ADHD, ASD+ADHD, and general population data.<sup>11</sup>

- Healthcare providers and social workers should work together to develop strategies to help caregivers cope with the mental, physical, and financial stressors connected to raising children with disabilities.<sup>9</sup>

Additionally, professionals working with the ASD population can offer support by using best practices, learning about CAN and the best ways to help those with ASD thrive in the face of adversity.

## Resources for Parent & Caregivers

- How Parents of Autistic Children Can Cope- Psychology Today blog post on prioritizing self-care for physical and mental well-being for a more positive parenting experience and ways to reduce stress.
- Managing Burnout While Caring for an Autistic Child- Autism Parenting Magazine article about caregiver self-care and ways to reduce stress when raising neurodivergent children.
- Parenting Stress and Autism Spectrum Disorder- Psychology Today article about the causes of stress among parents of children with ASD.
- Recognizing and Preventing Abuse- Autism Speaks web page with information on what abuse is, steps to reduce risk, and how to help a loved one who has experienced abuse.



## Resources for Educators

- Autism in the Classroom: Strategies for Success- Autism Speaks web page on strategies for success when teaching students with ASD.
- Fostering Resilience in Early Childhood Settings- TRANSFORM Center fact sheet highlighting the importance of teachers in early childhood settings to recognize and understand CAN.
- Fostering Resilience in Schools- TRANSFORM Center fact sheet exploring ways educators can help foster and promote resilience in students who experience CAN.
- Teaching Students with Autism: A Guide for Educators- National Education Association toolkit for K-12 educators with tips to capitalize on students' strengths, strategies to address challenges, and provide support.



## Resources for Healthcare Providers & First Responders

- 8 Tips for Medical Professionals Treating People with ASD- information from Psychology Today on ways healthcare providers can effectively treat and communicate with patients who have ASD.
- About Autism: Tips for First Responders- National Autism Association brochure to recognize signs of a person with ASD, tips on search and rescue, and interacting with people with ASD.
- Positive Childhood Experiences: Opportunities for Resilience in the Context of Adversity- TRANSFORM Center fact sheet highlighting positive childhood experiences and ways healthcare and service providers can promote positive experiences for children and families.

## Further Learning and Resources



### Resources

- Autism & Bullying: Tips for Prevention- National Autism Association brochure about types and signs of bullying (peer abuse), statistics, and tips for parents.
- Autism and Trauma: Research Updates- Autism Research Institute webinar about the intersection of trauma and ASD, the relationship between childhood adversities, trauma, and mental health, and the need for trauma assessments specific to the ASD community.
- Support groups can offer emotional/social support and community resources can help parents cope with caregiver stress and find connections for their children. Visit Autism Speaks "Finding your Community" page for connections to ASD peer groups, parent support groups, and other social support groups.
- Support for Family Members- Autism Speaks web page with resources to support family members of people with ASD.

### Autism Organizations

- Autism National Committee- <https://autcom.org/>
- Autism Research Institute- <https://autism.org/>
- Autism Society- <https://autismsociety.org/>
- Autism Speaks- <https://www.autismspeaks.org/>
- Autism Care Network (a network of treatment and research centers supported by Autism Speaks)- <https://www.autismspeaks.org/autism-care-network>
- Autism Up- <https://autismup.org/>
- National Autism Association- <https://nationalautismassociation.org/>
- The Autism Project- <https://theautismproject.org/>
- The Color of Autism Foundation- <https://thecolorofautism.org/>
- The National Autism Data Center- <https://nationalautismdatacenter.org/>



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