

# Moving Forward

Issue: Spring, 2013

## THE MYSTERY OF AUTISM

“One size does not fit all.” This is the general consensus of teachers who work with students who have been diagnosed with autism.

Autism is one of the most mysterious disabilities of our time. There is such a wide range of characteristics and challenges that define autism. Some children are very bright, even gifted in terms of intelligence, while others have profound deficits. Some have language issues, while others speak well beyond their years. Some children do not want to associate with peers, while others really want to make friends, they just do not know how.

Some autistic children may have odd mannerisms, peculiar voice patterns, obsessions and resist change, but perform very well in the classroom. Whether or not they should be labeled “disabled” from an educational standpoint is fiercely debated. One certainty: traditional classrooms will have to make individualized adjustments.

**Autism Spectrum Disorder is (ASD) one of thirteen categories of disabilities recognized by the Indiana Department of Education. It includes Autistic Disorder, Asperger's and other pervasive developmental disorders.**

Adapting the classroom in order for autistic children to succeed is part of the art of teaching. Each child has a set of strengths and weaknesses that require teachers to adjust their methods in order to reach every child. The real key to teaching autistic children revolves around harnessing the uniqueness

of their traits and interests to enhance learning.

Teachers and parents should share and compare information as the child progresses through school. There will be student successes and struggles. There will be staff agreements and debates. The path to success can be rocky, but that is all part of the complex educational process.

The relentless pursuit of achievement, for any level of student functioning, is clearly the overall objective. Constant communication between home and school will help solve the mystery of autism, one student at a time.

### IN THIS ISSUE:

The Mystery of Autism	1
Inclusion in the Classroom	1
Enjoying Life Thoroughly	2
Thinking About Thinking	2
Autism Tool Box	3
Did You Know?	3
Changes in Diagnosis	4
Indiana Autism Resources	4

### ARE WE DOING OUR BEST TO INCLUDE AUTISTIC CHILDREN IN GENERAL EDUCATION?

*The answer will be based on a careful review of these factors:*

Assessment/Progress Data  
Behavior/Social Ability  
Ability Level  
Communication Skills/Methods  
Daily Living Skills  
Learning Style  
Family/Teacher Input



## One Person's Perspective

# Living and Thoroughly Enjoying Life In Spite of Autism

Excerpts from Susan Rubin-January 2010

My name is Susan Rubin. I am a student at Whittier College in Whittier, California, a self advocate and a person with low-functioning autism. I am here today to give you an idea of what it is like to be “disabled”—specifically, what it is like to have autism.

At the age of four, I was diagnosed with autism and moderate mental retardation. For most of my early years I was educated in Special Day classes with some integration into regular education classes for peer socialization. So, I lived the average life of a mentally retarded child, with little expectations or hope of a normal life.

At the age of thirteen, I was introduced by my speech therapist and psychologist to Facilitated Communication. My mother and I would practice constantly, and to everyone's surprise I was able to type, and as it turned out, I was smart.

I strongly believe that living with autism should not be any different from living without autism. All people actually have different strengths, weaknesses, and challenges. Instead of looking at us as a group with identical needs, we should be viewed as individuals who have needs in certain areas.



Each person with autism really is unique, so when I describe what autism is for me, you should not assume all people with autism are experiencing what I am. Also, when I describe very pleasant educational opportunities I have had, I know that my experiences are not typical of the educational experiences of most people with autism. I know this is also true for the support I receive as an adult.

I also know that not all families are as supportive as mine, and that all autistic people are not surrounded by amazing professionals and friends like I am. I do believe, however, that advocacy has played a very important role in my life.

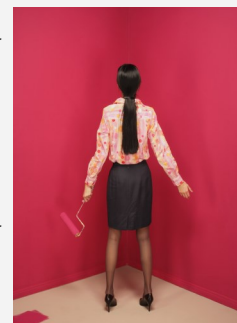
Education broadens the mind and enables students to develop critical thinking skills. This is true for all people. I have been fortunate to have been included in regular academic classes since the eighth grade, and graduated from high school with a regular diploma. As a student at Whittier College, I thoroughly enjoy learning. I firmly believe that students with autism should be educated just like other students.

**Having the label of autism often determines an educational program without regard to whom the individual really is. I believe we deserve to be educated the same way that every other child is. When people say an academic education is not appropriate or useful for us, they are wrong.**

*Susan Rubin is a functionally nonverbal published autistic author who was the subject of the Oscar-nominated documentary, **Autism Is A World**.*

### FIRST PERSON: “THINKING ABOUT THINKING”

“Great ideas were not always in my head. In fact, for the first thirteen years of my life, no ideas were in my head. This may be an example of true retardation—not thinking. But after I began using Facilitated Communication, my mind got organized and I began to think. I believe a person's autism can prevent him from thinking. I also believe a person can learn to think like I did. I am sadly an example of a person who must always exercise her mind, or I will quite decidedly regress to a non-thinking person.”



Myths About Autism and Mental Retardation-Sue Rubin (2003)

# AUTISM STRATEGIES FOR HOME AND SCHOOL

Although there is no specific blueprint for dealing with higher functioning autistic children, there are general strategies that have proven to be effective:



- ◆ Be consistent. Autistic children perform best with predictable outcomes. Most children do best with routine and structure.
- ◆ Role model situations that you know may cause a negative reaction. Demonstrate constructive ways of handling stressful events.
- ◆ If possible, let the child know when something in their day or their schedule has changed well ahead of time. Make a plan for that change together.
- ◆ Many students, not just autistic ones, need help with social skills. Try to incorporate social skills into the curriculum by reinforcing specific positive responses when they occur. “Class, did everyone see how Johnny waited for me to stop talking to another adult before he approached me for help? Great job, Johnny!”
- ◆ Try to find a learning modality that works best for a child. If he/she hates to write, utilize a computer to complete reports or assignments. If auditory skills are more developed, try books on tape to reinforce lessons. Back up more complex material with visual prompts.
- ◆ Be keenly aware of the triggers that may cause a melt down for an autistic child. Loud noises, a change in schedule, a great deal of frustration are common culprits that may push a child into losing control.
- ◆ Create breaks in the day to just stretch, move around, or just allow for some down time. This will improve the frustration level of all children.
- ◆ Directions and explanation should be direct, concrete and as brief as possible.
- ◆ Some students need time to respond to questions. Be patient and wait for the child to process a response at their own speed.
- ◆ If an autistic child has a special interest in the weather, trains, dinosaurs or other areas, try to link it to learning to make the material more exciting.
- ◆ If possible, have the child choose from several assignments to give he/she some ownership and control over what they have to do.
- ◆ Stay positive. Although the characteristics of autism can pose great challenges, focus on what a child can do. Don’t let the diagnosis dictate a plan of attack. Work with the child to determine a style that will best enhance learning.

## *Did you know?*

- Autism now affects 1 in 88 children and 1 in 54 boys.
- **Autism is the fastest-growing serious developmental disability in the U.S.**
- Autism costs a family \$60,000 a year on average.
- Autism receives less than 5% of the research funding of many less prevalent childhood diseases.
- There is no medical detection or cure for autism.

## *A person with an Autism might...*

- Avoid eye contact and want to be alone.
- Have trouble understanding other people's feelings or talking about their own feelings.
- Repeat words or phrases over and over (echolalia).
- Give unrelated answers to questions.
- Get upset by minor changes.
- Have obsessive interests.
- Have unusual reactions to the way things sound, smell, taste, look, or feel.



# CHANGES IN AUTISM DIAGNOSTIC CRITERIA

Proposed changes in the diagnostic criteria for autism are intended to improve the identification process and help mental health professionals target specific interventions based on the specific needs of each individual.

## Among the changes proposed are:

- A blanket term of autism spectrum disorder will be used. Asperger's syndrome and Pervasive Developmental Disorders, Not Otherwise Specified (NOS) will be removed.
- The required three criteria, i.e., communication/social impairments, repetitive behaviors, and limited imagination will now be replaced with social/communication and restricted/repetitive interests and behaviors.

How the new ASD diagnostic criteria will change special education eligibility is not known at this time. When the new guidelines go into effect, the Indiana Department of Education will create a committee to revise the state's ASD eligibility guidelines and evaluation procedures to assist schools and parents.

Source: Indiana State Board of Education Special Education Article 7 (February 2010)

## INDIANA AUTISM RESOURCES AND ADVOCACY

HANDS Resource Center <http://www.HANDSinAutism.org>

Indiana Resource Center for Families with Special Needs  
(800) 332-4433 <http://www.insource.org/>

The ARC of Indiana (Information on Waiver)  
<http://www.arcind.org/index/Help-for-Families/Indiana-Medicaid-Waiver-Program.asp>

Interactive Autism Network (IAN)  
<http://www.ianproject.org/>

First Steps (Indiana)  
(800) 441-STEP <http://www.infirststeps.com>

Indiana Center for Accessible Materials  
<http://www.icam.k12.in.us/>

PATINS Project (Technology) <http://www.patinsproject.com/>

Indiana Resource Center for Autism  
<http://www.iidc.indiana.edu/index.php?pageid=275>

Autism Resource Network of Indiana <http://arnionline.org/>

Autism Society of Indiana  
(800) 609-8449 <http://www.inautism.org>

## **SPECIAL EDITION**

Written by Barb Butcher  
Edited by Susan Quinn  
School Psychologists

### **School City of Hammond**

Dr. J. Watkins, Superintendent  
Connie Manous, Special Education Director

219-933-2400

#### **School Board**

Deborah White  
Anna Mamala  
George T. Janiec  
Cindy Murphy  
Marilyn Jones

“Autistics are the ultimate square pegs, and the problem with pounding a square peg into a round hole is not that the hammering is hard work.

It's that you're destroying the peg.”



**Paul Collins**