



Supporting the Mental Health of Autistic Students

Purpose: to provide school staff with key information about the intersection of autism and mental health and to guide reflection and action that aligns with the evidence.

A note about language: This info sheet prioritizes **identity-first language** (e.g., autistic students) versus person-first language (e.g., student with autism). This reflects the preferences of many individuals with lived experience. It is important to honour self-identification as a key identity-affirming practice by centring the preferences of the individual students and families within your school communities.

Introduction

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD), or **autism**, is a neurodevelopmental condition that reflects several socio-communicative and behavioural differences or difficulties, including:

- social interaction and engagement
- communication
- emotions (expression or understanding)
- behaviour/interests/activities (e.g., intensity of interests, repetitive movements)
- sensory processing

The prevalence of autism in Canada has grown considerably, and autistic students are part of most class communities. Due to systemic inequities, ableism and increased stressors and physical health concerns, autistic youth are more likely than their neurotypical peers to experience co-occurring mental health conditions, poorer overall mental health, school disengagement and harm or trauma. This highlights a growing need for programs and services to support autistic youth and their families. It is essential that school staff have key information about the intersection of autism and mental health to support the well-being of autistic students and families in Ontario.



Key evidence

Schools play a critical role in fostering conditions that promote well-being, early identification of emerging mental health concerns and coordination of supports. **Several factors are consistently associated with improved mental health and well-being for autistic students:**

- inclusive, whole school approaches that promote safety, authentic belonging and peer connectedness
- identity-responsive approaches that affirm neurodivergent identities
- staff training to build confidence in supporting autistic student mental health
- flexibility and adaptation in school programming and expectations

Five areas of action and reflection that align with these factors are outlined below.

1. WELCOME

Whole school, inclusive, identity-affirming and responsive approaches.

Adopt whole school approaches that promote an authentic sense of belonging and inclusion for every student.

- Create mentally healthy learning environments with routines and structures that reflect the many ways students communicate, learn and interact.
- Provide structure and visual supports, address sensory needs like distracting stimuli and offer flexibility and adaptation in programming.
- Intentionally bolster healthy relationship, problem-solving and bullying prevention skills for *all* students. This can help to increase inclusion, decrease stigma and reduce the need for masking (“camouflaging”... trying to blend in with societal expectations by suppressing symptoms or traits (source: [Mental Health Commission of Canada](#))).

Autistic students who feel affirmed and experience a genuine sense of belonging may feel more engaged and will hopefully have less missed school time (Adams, 2022).

Meaningfully engage autistic students in mental health promotion as it leads to stronger and more effective results.

- Intentionally recruit students who are neurodivergent and/or those accessing special education supports and services for school and system-wide leadership opportunities.
- Ensure that leadership opportunities support and encourage autistic students’ diverse abilities and strengths (e.g., mental health leadership opportunities, mental health champions) by taking an inclusive design approach and providing students with accommodations they require to contribute and lead.



Support students as whole individuals by considering their multiple, intersecting identities. Recognize and affirm each student's identity and its connection to well-being.

- Understand that students' intersecting identities may result in experiences of ableism, alongside other forms of oppression. Offer learning, supports and services that are inclusive and responsive, addressing and dismantling barriers identified.
- Recognize autism as an identity by amplifying the perspectives and lived experiences of autistic students to create neuro-affirming, student-centered school environments.
- Foster opportunities for connections with peers who may share autism as an identity, as this can help bolster a sense of community, belonging and pride for some students.

Reflection questions:

In my role...

- How can I intentionally get to know autistic students to amplify their multiple, intersecting identities?
- How can I reinforce the whole-school approaches in place to support belonging for all students?
- How can I invite autistic students to meaningfully participate in student engagement initiatives that are focused on promoting mental health and well-being?

2. PROMOTE

Create school environments that foster peer connection and understanding, build trusted adult relationships and elevate strengths.

Foster peer connection and understanding to promote belonging and well-being.

- Shape neuro-affirming environments by building peer awareness and understanding about autism through education and opportunities for meaningful connection.
- Create and support structured opportunities for autistic students to build a variety of connections, which can help widen their social circles within the school and community. Peer connections and role models can be important for autistic students.
- Consider creating opportunities for autistic students to connect with other autistic students (e.g., autistic students are more likely to unmask and have lower anxiety when around other autistic students).

Recognize and address deficit-oriented and ableist attitudes about autism, which can be disabling, negatively impact autistic students' mental health and well-being and contribute to victimization and bullying.

- Amplify strengths, abilities and ways of knowing and being based on students' intersecting identities.
- Ensure approaches, policies, procedures and structures intentionally identify and elevate (rather than diminish) the strengths and abilities of autistic students.



Amplify the knowledge and range of experiences that students bring from their communities and families as they are invaluable to supporting their mental health and well-being.

- Use planning methods and approaches that intentionally begin with the goals of dismantling barriers and fostering access, engagement and expression (e.g., Universal Design for Learning).
- As you get to know autistic students and their intersecting identities, learn about their stressors and explore what has worked for them in the past or in similar situations. Bolster stress management and coping strategies, ensuring activities focused on building mental health literacy are accessible to every student.
- Remember that some stressors—such as prejudice, discrimination, racism or ongoing challenges like health or finances—are not the student’s responsibility to manage alone. Encourage students to seek support from a trusted adult, as well as using their personal coping strategies.

Build positive connections to trusted adults that autistic students can go to for information and support.

- Support autistic students to identify trusted adults in their [circle of support](#) within and beyond the school community that feel safe, comfortable and accessible (e.g., special education staff, guidance educators, school mental health professionals, administrators, community service providers, Chaplains, Elders, etc.).
- Provide dedicated, intentional support before, during and after school transitions and other times when established connections and routines change (e.g., orientation opportunities).

Reflection questions:

In my role...

- What can I do to foster meaningful connections among students to support the specific needs of autistic students and build understanding about the different ways people learn and interact?
- How can I support strength-based mental health promotion and skill-building that is accessible and inclusive?
- How do I build trusting relationships with autistic students and provide intentional support (e.g., during transitions)?

3. PARTNER

Partner with and support families by valuing, integrating and amplifying their perspectives and expertise.

Recognize the critical role that parents and caregivers play in supporting the learning needs and mental health of their children. Meaningful family engagement promotes autistic students’ well-being and is a key driver for inclusion.

- Build authentic, two-way connections that foster trust and understanding to center the lived experiences and expertise of families in supporting the mental health of autistic students. When appropriate, students should also be involved in decisions about engaging parents and caregivers as key members of their support network.



- Commit to ongoing communication, frequent check-ins, amplifying strengths, celebrating accomplishments, involvement in decision-making and addressing barriers.
- Have regular conversations about mental health and well-being with parents and caregivers to make it easier to reach out if there is a concern.

Be mindful of barriers and the different relationships families may have with schools, education or mental health supports.

- Consider barriers to successful engagement and how they might be addressed (e.g., distrust due to lived experiences, fear of diagnosis/stigma, language barriers, high levels of parenting stress navigating multiple systems, often without tools or support).
- Recognize and acknowledge the inherent power imbalance between school staff and families, which may be further impacted by societal power and privilege. Intentionally create affirming and collaborative environments that amplify the valuable expertise and insights of families.

Collaborate across the circle of support when autistic students are also experiencing mental health concerns.

- School staff, parents and caregivers and mental health professionals can work together to form a circle of support around autistic students who are also experiencing mental health concerns, such as an anxiety or mood disorder.
- Build strong relationships. Regular check-ins with students and families can help changes be identified early so that timely and meaningful support can be provided.
- Ensure that the wisdom, expertise, needs and preferences of autistic students and their families remain central throughout ongoing communication and coordination amongst home, school and service providers. Support students and families in determining what is right for them, amplifying choice and agency.

Reflection questions:

In my role...

- How can I meaningfully collaborate and engage with parents and caregivers of autistic students in our school to help inform our planning and approaches?
- How can I use my position and access to amplify marginalized student and family perspectives in mental health and well-being?
- How can I create space to understand and address any barriers that autistic students and their families may be experiencing?



4. UNDERSTAND

Increase awareness of and support for mental health concerns among autistic students.

Examine and address systemic barriers and heightened stressors that may impact autistic students.

- Autistic students are significantly more likely than their neurotypical peers to experience mental health conditions such as anxiety, depression and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, and they are also at greater risk of suicide and school disengagement.

The risk for mental health concerns becomes even greater when autistic students face compounding experiences of oppression and marginalization based on multiple, intersecting identity markers, such as race, gender, sexuality and disability.

- Autistic students may experience stressors related to social encounters, sensory needs, transitions, preferred interests/activities, expectations within the school environment and experiences of oppression.
- Provide access to safe, familiar spaces where autistic students may choose to unmask and engage in stims (e.g., flapping, rocking, bouncing, etc.) to navigate emotions and recover at school. This can help reduce stress and increase comfort.

Prioritize early identification and support to improve mental health and learning outcomes and reduce the need for more intensive services later.

- Build strong connections with autistic students to notice changes from their unique baseline or typical ways of being, including in their autistic traits, ways of interacting with others and behaviours that may signal a mental health concern. Pay special attention to changes that persist in spite of supports related to autism, life stressors and any physical health needs. Notice changes in engagement with an autistic student's focused interests, usual routines and established habits.
- Be aware that [signs of mental health concern \(ONE-CALL Desk Reference\)](#) differ across students. Changes can sometimes be misunderstood and may be attributed to the student's autism profile without considering other potential causes, such as an emerging mental health concern (e.g. depression in autistic children and youth).
- If you are concerned about suicide, ask the student directly and follow your board's suicide prevention protocol to seek immediate help. Remember that asking about suicide does not cause suicidal thoughts; it can show care, encourage help-seeking and open the door to support. Refer to [Prepare; Prevent; Respond: Suicide Prevention/Life Promotion Quick Reference Guide for School Staff](#) for facts, warning signs and key considerations in responding.

Establish timely, proactive and developmentally informed responses as part of daily practices for all staff.

- The intersection between learning needs, neurodevelopmental disorders and mental health needs can be complex. Wherever possible, collaborate with the student and those in their circle of support to understand the student and their needs in a more holistic way.



- Partner with autistic students and their families to identify meaningful strategies to help them communicate their feelings, choices and preferences about help-seeking and mental health support.
- Work alongside students and their parents and caregivers to swiftly identify and address issues related to oppression and discrimination.

Reflection questions:

In my role...

- How can I deepen my understanding about the ways in which signs of mental health concerns may present differently in neurodivergent students?
- How can I help ensure emerging mental health concerns are not attributed to students' existing diagnoses or profiles?
- In what ways can I continue collaborating and building strong connections with autistic students and their families, when mental health needs are present?

- Who is noticed early? Who is misread?
- Who is more likely to receive early intervention and support?
- Who is more likely to be disciplined or only to be supported when in crisis?

— Dr. Cyril Cromwell, 2026

5. INCLUDE

Build capacity as a community to effectively support autistic students' learning and mental health.

Recognize our individual and collective responsibility to continually learn and increase our capacity to support autistic students' mental health needs at school.

- Engage in and promote ongoing learning to support autistic students' mental health within your role and daily practice (e.g., share available information, training opportunities, etc.).
- Become familiar with structures and services that support autistic students' mental health, within and beyond the school (e.g., internal and external pathways to mental health care, supports to families, services that specialize in programming for autistic students).

Plan and adapt programming and services to bolster and support the mental health of autistic students.

- Similar to academic accommodations, students with autism access and engage in mental health learning, supports and services more effectively when adapted to their strengths and needs. Programming designed to support a range of neurodevelopmental profiles maximizes accessibility and supports inclusion.



- For autistic students experiencing mental health concerns (e.g., anxiety, mood concerns, attention-related concerns), offer [accommodations and modifications \(Supporting Minds Strategies at a Glance\)](#) to help students be successful in the classroom, finding ways to foster choice and agency and to incorporate their special interests.
- Consider offering adapted programming to support academic accommodations, social-emotional skill development, academic and/or post-school counseling and self-advocacy training which may address the specific needs of autistic students.
- Consider ways to adapt services and interventions offered by school mental health professionals to reduce access barriers and support autistic students in their natural learning environments (e.g., involve parents/guardian, incorporate their special interest, explicitly teach emotion recognition, increase use of visuals, simplify cognitive activities and use a structured approach).

Reflection questions:

In my role...

- What training or information can I access or share to adapt and tailor mental health learning, supports and services for autistic students?
- How can I bolster my awareness of school and community mental health supports and services for autistic students and their families?
- How do I adapt my practice to support a range of abilities, while amplifying students' strengths?

Schools play a critical role in supporting the mental health of autistic students as they shape daily routines, relationships and access to trusted adults. When staff are equipped to meet diverse needs and collaborate with students, families and communities, schools can create supportive, connected environments that significantly enhance student well-being.

Related resources

Resources for staff learning

- [Identity-affirming school mental health: a frame for reflection and action](#)
- [MH LIT suite of courses](#) (includes a course for special education resource teachers)
- [Mentally Healthy Classroom Reflection Tool](#)
- [Special Education Resource Kit](#)
- [Talking with Parents and Families about Mental Health](#)



Resources to use when supporting students

- [Wayfinder – Download your sequenced guide to teach about mental health](#)
- [School Mental Health Promotion Calendar: your month-by-month resource guide](#)
- [Student website: School Mental Health Ontario](#)
- [My Circle of Support – Student Help-Seeking Resource](#)
- [Connect Quest](#)
- [Student Engagement Toolkit](#)

Resources to share with parents and caregivers

- [By your side – Parents and caregivers](#)
- [Noticing Mental Health Concerns for Your Child](#) (Available in 14 languages)

