



# World Autism Day

## Elementary Educator Toolkit



World Autism Day  
Journée mondiale de l'autisme



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2024

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# Introduction to World Autism Day

## World Autism Day

Autism Ontario's World Autism Day campaign unites families, schools, communities, government, and professionals in recognizing World Autism Day on April 2nd and brings to light the triumphs and struggles of people on the autism spectrum.

Autism Ontario is excited to have you participate and celebrate with us throughout April. Through this initiative, we are building stronger, more inclusive communities for people on the autism spectrum. We are highlighting ongoing work happening across the province and the work that still remains to remove systemic barriers and help autistic children, youth, and adults live their best life.

If you have questions, comments, or feedback, connect with us at [celebratethespectrum@autismontario.com](mailto:celebratethespectrum@autismontario.com). Thank you for being part of this important day and celebrating with us!

## Celebrate the Spectrum

Celebrate the Spectrum is our theme for World Autism Day 2024 celebrations. It is an opportunity for positive action to provide spaces of support and advocacy for our diverse communities while learning about autism and how to make our communities better for people on the autism spectrum.

The campaign is flexible, and there are many great ways to get your students involved, including:

- Hosting your school's own World Autism Day third-party fundraising event
- Creating a 'strengths link' with your class
- Writing an article for Autism Matters magazine
- Donating to Autism Ontario

Learn more at [celebratethespectrum.com](https://celebratethespectrum.com)

Please take photographs and share your stories and celebrations with us using the hashtags [#WorldAutismDay2024](https://twitter.com/WorldAutismDay2024) and [#CelebrateTheSpectrum](https://twitter.com/CelebrateTheSpectrum).

## What's next?

Check out [celebratethespectrum.com](https://celebratethespectrum.com) to find videos, supplementary activities, and information to help enhance your World Autism Day celebrations with Autism Ontario! These resources are available in French and English and are suitable for students as an orientation to autism.

Don't forget to share your classroom or school experiences with us! Visit [celebratethespectrum.com](https://celebratethespectrum.com) to learn how.



# Introduction to Classroom Activities

Autism Ontario has developed a series of classroom activities for students as an introduction to autism and neurodiversity. These activities have been created to help promote classroom discussion and improve inclusion and acceptance.

### Each classroom activity includes:

- Information on autism and/or neurodiversity
- An activity that the classroom can complete
- A discussion guide to encourage further conversation



Most activities include videos that celebrate the unique characteristics of autistic people. These videos will help students get to know autistic children and youth and focus on the unique strengths of people with neurodiversities.

The goal of the classroom activities is to promote awareness, inclusion, and acceptance of autism and neurodiversity, as well as creating awareness of each student's unique strengths and needs.

**Please preview these videos and activities with school personnel and/or your parent council, as appropriate, prior to showing them in the classroom setting.**

## Activity: TV Characters for Young Children

Two popular children's TV shows have recently added autistic characters. Their goal was to increase acceptance and inclusion and empower autistic children with a positive image of themselves in pop culture.

### Thomas and Friends



This Thomas and Friends episode features a new character, Bruno the Brake Car, and how he interacts with his friends. His voice-over was done by an autistic child, Elliot. The production studio embraced Elliot's strengths and needs in the recording process.

[Watch the video](#)

### Sesame Street



This Sesame Street clip introduces Julia to the cast of characters and begins to introduce what autism is and can look like. The cast of Sesame Street talks about their emerging friendship with Julia and how they communicate with her. They highlight some of Julia's strengths, as well as things she may need help with. For more resources and information created by the Sesame Street team, check out [their website](#).

[Watch the video](#)

## Discussion Guide

**After you watch the video, take a minute to discuss the following questions with your class:**

1. What are some of the character's strengths?
2. What are some things that the character likes?
3. What are some things that the character may need help with?

**It can be helpful to have students answer the questions about themselves as well:**

1. What are you good at?
2. What do you like to do?
3. What do you sometimes need help with?

## Tips for Peers and Friends Supporting Autistic Students in the Classroom and on the Playground

1

### **Get to know your autistic peers.**

What do they love to do? What are some of their favourite things? What are they good at? How do they let you know this?

2

### **Respect the person's independence.**

Can they do it on their own? How can we help without taking over? How can we all support classmates who may need a little extra help?

3

### **Be patient.**

Each of us has different needs. Sometimes we learn things fast, and other times it takes a little longer to understand how to do something. What are some ways we can practice being more patient with one another?

4

### **Be a good friend.**

Friends are very important. Friends can make you feel better when you are having a hard day or a sad day and celebrate with you when you are feeling good. How do you make friends? What are some of the ways we can involve and include one another?



## References

National Autistic Society. (2022). Mattel introduces first autistic character in Thomas and Friends. <https://www.autism.org.uk/what-we-do/news/mattel-introduces-first-autistic-character-in-thom>

Suskind, R. (2017). Why the team behind sesame street created a character with autism. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/innovation/team-sesame-street-created-character-autism-180967218/>



### Activity: Sensory Input and Overload

Our environments are filled with sensory information. For many people, especially those on the autism spectrum, this information can become overstimulating, which can lead to sensory overload. This video series attempts to show people what that sensory overload can be like. It has examples of sensory input during various times of a typical school day, including getting to school, walking around in the hallways, having lunch, and participating in classroom and gym settings.

For more information on the sensory experience, this link also includes a webinar mini-series entitled Exploring the Senses that introduces the sensory system and needs and gives ideas for supportive strategies and tools.

[Watch videos on this topic](#)

#### Discussion Guide

We all experience sensations differently. A loud, busy place like the school gym might be exciting for one person and stressful for another. A smell or taste that one person enjoys might make another person say “yuck”!

**Can you think of any sensations (e.g., sights, sounds, tastes, smells, touch, movement) that you really enjoy?**

- Something you love to taste?
- Something you love to smell?
- A song that makes you turn up the music?



**Can you think of any sensations (e.g., sights, sounds, tastes, smells, touch, movement) that might be overwhelming for you?**

- Something you don't like to taste?
- Something you don't like to smell?
- A sound that makes you cover your ears?



Sometimes people will use different strategies in response to sensations.

Some children may experience sensations more than others. For example, children may wear noise-cancelling headphones if certain sounds bother them or to help them concentrate while doing their school work. Sometimes, someone who is feeling overwhelmed might just need some space and time until they feel better.

- If someone is looking for more sensory input, what might you offer to help them feel better?

Some children may experience sensations less than others. For example, children may use fidget tools to get more of a sensation or to feel calm. Sometimes, children might make noise (singing or talking) when they are excited or stressed out.

- If someone is looking for less sensory input, what might you offer to help them feel better?



## Other Resources Related to the Sensory System

### Children's Books

- Listening to My Body by Gabi Garcia
- My Body Sends a Signal by Natalia Maguire
- I Hear a Pickle: and Smell, See, Touch, and Taste It, Too! By Rachel Isadora
- Fun with My 5 Senses by Sarah Williamson
- My Five Senses by Alike
- Look, Listen, Taste, Touch, and Smell: Learning About Your Five Senses by Pamela Hill Nettleton
- The Listening Walk by Paul Showers

### Books for Caregivers

- The Out-of-Sync Child by Carol Stock Kranowitz
- Sensational Kids by Lucy J Miller
- Building Bridges Through Sensory Integration by Paula Aquilla and Ellen Yack
- Beyond Behaviours: Using Brain Science and Compassion to Understand and Solve Children's Behavioural Challenges by Mona Delahooke



As we celebrate the spectrum together, we celebrate that we all have unique interests, strengths, and needs. The videos in this series demonstrate some of the unique needs we might see in someone on the autism spectrum.

## Part I: The Importance of Using Clear Communication

People with neurodiversities often benefit from clear language and the use of visuals. This activity includes two videos that show what it might be like if you cannot speak or cannot understand what people are saying.

### Activity: Plain Language

[Watch the video](#)

This video shows the importance of using clear language when talking to a neurodivergent person or someone who may not understand. Everyone understands better if the language used is clear and direct. If you have someone in your class or school that you think may not understand, it might be the way things are said, not their ability to understand. Speak clearly and say exactly what you mean.

#### Instructions:

1. Separate into pairs or small groups.
2. Place a divider between the students so they can hear each other but can't see each other.
3. Student 1 draws a simple picture without showing the other student(s) (e.g., person, flower, dog, cat, tree).
4. Student 1 then describes how to draw or gives drawing instructions to the other student using only words.



#### Discussion Questions:

- Was it easy or hard to explain your drawing to your partner or group?
- What would have made it easier to communicate with your partner or group?
- Can you think of an example of a statement or expression that can mean more than one thing?  
Examples: "You killed it!" "Spill the tea" "It's lit!"
- How can we communicate so students on the autism spectrum will better understand us?

## Activity: Use of Visuals

[Watch the video](#)

In this example, we made up a word: “VLOCKNAR.” It shows what it might look like if someone doesn’t understand what is being asked of them. If you are trying to communicate with someone, it often helps to speak clearly and maybe use a picture or a gesture. That’s why you’ll often see autistic people using sign language, gestures, or picture boards in addition to or instead of speaking.

### Discussion Questions:

- Why did this student have trouble understanding “VLOCKNAR”?
- What happened to help this student understand “VLOCKNAR”?
- How else could you help someone on the autism spectrum when giving them verbal instruction?

## Part II: Understanding Meltdowns

Sometimes children and youth get so upset that they may have a “meltdown.” A meltdown, also known as a tantrum, can happen anywhere, at any time, and can seem to happen for “no reason at all.” We know that that isn’t the case: it can be a child or youth’s way of telling us that they can’t cope with something.

## Activity: No Reason At All

[Watch the video](#)

This video shows how seemingly small problems can add up over the day to create a lot of stress and even a meltdown.

### Discussion Questions:

- What is a meltdown, and why does it happen?
- Have you ever had a meltdown? How does it feel?
- Can you think of some examples of problems or “stressors” in your day that might lead to you having a “meltdown?”
- What can we do if we see a person on the autism spectrum have a meltdown?



## Activity: Stressors

### Instructions:

#### Option 1 (best for younger children)

1. Find a large container, tray, or bag.
2. Nominate one student to hold the container.
3. Have each student identify something that stresses them out; this can be something that makes them sad, angry, worried, or scared.
4. Have each student place an item in the container to represent their stressor. These items can be balls, coins, or any other small miscellaneous item.
5. Over time, the student holding the container will visibly be tiring and eventually unable to hold it, and it will fall to the floor.



#### Option 2 (best for older children)

1. Provide each student with a piece of paper.
2. Have each student write a list of the things that stress them out; these can be things that make them sad, angry, worried, or scared.
3. Have each student straighten their arms and hold the paper away from them. This action can represent the pushing away of stressors and trying to avoid them.
4. Over time, the students' arms will tire, and it will be exhausting to continue to hold these stressors up, and their arms will eventually fall.

### Discussion Questions:

- How did it feel to “carry” these stressors over time?
- What were some examples of the students' stressors? Are any of these stressors “invisible” or ones that other students wouldn’t notice?
- Have you ever had a meltdown due to stressors like this?

The Celebrate the Spectrum campaign aims to unite school communities in supporting autistic people and generating excitement in students about raising awareness about and acceptance of autism. This activity is meant to engage your class or your whole school in a fun and creative art project while inviting your students to think about the importance of inclusion and understanding of autism within their school.

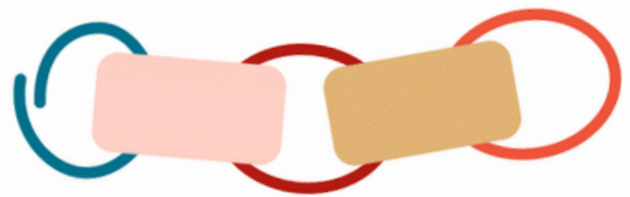
The intention of this activity is to show students that, although each person is uniquely one of a kind, we all have strengths worth celebrating. When placed together, the links can create a beautiful display of the diverse strengths within your classroom or school.

### Activity: Strengths Links

[Watch the video](#)

#### Instructions:

1. Cut strips of coloured construction paper.
2. Distribute strips to all students in your classroom.
3. Have students write or draw a strength they have or something they are proud of on one side of the paper. Assist students who may be unable to write or need help identifying their strengths or interests.
4. Students can then create “links” or “loops” with the paper and link them together.
5. Collect all of the links/loops of paper and connect them to create a long link.
6. Display your links across the ceiling of your classroom or other school space.



This activity has been modified with permission from Understood.org. A detailed explanation of the activity, including a list of strengths and an accompanying YouTube video, can be found [here](#).



# Educator Resources

Autism Ontario has worked with its partners to curate a selection of learning resources designed specifically for educators to further promote autism acceptance. If you'd like to access more information on autism, please visit the [Autism Ontario website](#) to search for learning resources. The site contains easy-to-understand documents and webinars that are relevant to autistic children, youth, adults, and their families.

The documents can be read online or printed and address a variety of topics benefiting English and French-speaking people, including autistic individuals, families, caregivers, service providers, educators, administrators, support staff, and advocates. The webinars are accessible at any time.

Please check out the resources below to help make your classroom and school community a supportive environment for all students with neurodiversities.

## Back to School Webinar Series

This two-part mini webinar series aims to support caregivers in transitioning their child to school by building routines for success and supporting positive communication with their child's school team.

### Part 1: Strategies to Prepare for School Routines

Kristin Gunby (Behaviour Analyst) and Bethany Brewin (Occupational Therapist) discuss simple routines that parents can implement at home to help students of any age make the transition to school a smooth one. Length: 60 minutes.

[autismontario.com/node/896](https://autismontario.com/node/896)

### Part 2: Strategies for Connecting with your School Team

Tracie Lindblad (Speech-Language Pathologist) and Danielle Nolan (Social Worker) discuss strategies for setting students and their teams up for success. They provide background information on the various meetings, documents, and assessments that may involve your students. Length: 60 minutes.

[autismontario.com/node/899](https://autismontario.com/node/899)

## Education Series: Navigating Special Education

In this webinar, a panel of experts provides valuable insights and practical tips to effectively navigate special education, especially for children entering the school system for the first time or who have been recently diagnosed with autism. The panel sheds light on the crucial aspects of communication, relationship building, and child education rights. Length: 60 minutes.

[autismontario.com/node/993](https://autismontario.com/node/993)

### **Addressing Bullying in Youth on the Autism Spectrum: Research and Strategies**

Jonathan Weiss, Ph.D., C.Psych., explores different types and rates of bullying experienced by autistic youth, best practices for counselling youth on the autism spectrum who have been bullied, and strategies for brief and effective consultations with families and schools to address bullying. Length: 60 minutes.

[autismontario.com/node/445](https://autismontario.com/node/445)

### **Back to School Mental Health Workbook**

As children prepare to go back to school, it's normal to feel anxious or worried. This workbook was created as a way for parents and children and youth to learn about and practice some mental health strategies that might be helpful for the school year. It includes sections for reviewing the previous school year and taking steps to plan for a successful school entry.

[bit.ly/3QEgSq3](https://bit.ly/3QEgSq3)

### **Preparing for Your IPRC Webinar Series**

Ed Mahony, parent advocate, and special education resource teacher, provides families with instructions around getting the most out of an Identification, Placement, and Review Committee (IPRC). He also provides lists of resources that help parents navigate this progress. Length: 60 minutes.

[autismontario.com/node/537](https://autismontario.com/node/537)

### **Exploring the Senses Webinar Series**

Bethany Brewin, occupational therapist, focuses on how children process the sensory world. She discusses topics like how the sensory system works, various types of sensory styles, sensory-friendly adaptations, and strategies and sensory tools that parents can incorporate into their daily routines. Length: 40 minutes/session.

[autismontario.com/node/876](https://autismontario.com/node/876)

### **K-12 Education Standards Development Committee Recommendations (Initial Report)**

In 2021, the Ministry of Children, Community, and Social Services published a report that addressed both the practical steps and systemic changes required for equity in education in Ontario. Autism Ontario then responded with this article that addresses all outlined topics including attitudes, behaviours, assumptions, and perceptions.

[autismontario.com/node/785](https://autismontario.com/node/785)



# Community and Family Engagement

In the days leading up to World Autism Day, you can use these activities to get the entire school community thinking about autism and how to celebrate the spectrum.

### Activity: Announcements

Your morning announcements are a great opportunity to promote the principles of World Autism Day and what it means for your school. Here are two different types of announcements that you can try in your school.

#### Option 1- Introduction to World Autism Day

“This year, our school is participating in Autism Ontario’s Celebrate the Spectrum campaign for World Autism Day. World Autism Day is a historic day in Canada for the autism community because it brings to light the struggles and triumphs of people on the autism spectrum and unites families, schools, communities, government, and professionals to make Ontario a more supportive and inclusive place for people on the autism spectrum.”

#### Option 2- Classroom Engagement

“We are working hard to make our school an inclusive and supportive place, not only for students on the autism spectrum but for everyone. Some ways we can do that are to show understanding and be inclusive. Here are some questions we can think about:

- What are some of the ways we can show understanding of one another?
- What are some of the ways we can include one another?

Stay tuned for the submitted answers tomorrow”

Classrooms can be encouraged to collect, record, and submit answers to be presented the following day.

### Activity: Bulletin Boards

Bulletin boards can be an effective communication tool between your school and the larger school community. This can be a bulletin board in a classroom, hallway, or even a digital one on a communication app: wherever is most accessible for your families! Create a bulletin board that is inviting, attractive, and fun.

Things you can include are:

- Facts about autism
- Resources for families
- Information on World Autism Day

For different resources that you might want to include on your bulletin board, check out the [Autism Ontario’s learning resources](#).

### Activity: Host a Fundraiser

Host a fundraising event at your school to raise funds and awareness of Autism Ontario! Some ideas are bake sales, raffles, silent auctions, dress down days, and trivia nights.

For ideas and a helpful fundraiser guide, see the [Autism Ontario Celebrate the Spectrum-Third-party Fundraiser Guide](#).



# Community and Family Engagement

### Activity: Social Media Engagement

The power of social media can be used to share information about World Autism Day and how your school is working to promote inclusion and acceptance. Here are some ideas of content that you might want to post or share.

#### Option 1- Reels or Stories

“How many years do you think Canada has been officially celebrating World Autism Day?”

Answer: 12 years! On April 2, 2012, Canada joined 192 other United Nations members who agreed that World Autism Day would bring autism and neurodiversity to the attention of all. Our school is helping to celebrate the spectrum!”

“Question: Research shows that 1-2% of the population is autistic. Based on this percentage, how many people in your town/city/school/school board are autistic?”

#### Option 2- Posts

“Autism doesn’t go away; autistic children grow up to be autistic adults, so it is important that our schools and communities support the needs of autistic students so they can live productive and meaningful lives.”

“April 2nd is World Autism Day! We are celebrating the spectrum because when we talk about autism, we are working together to make our school community a more understanding, inclusive, and welcoming environment for everyone!”



# ABOUT AutismONTARIO

## WHO WE ARE

A charitable organization founded in 1973. We have a history of 50 years supporting, representing, and advocating for all autistic individuals across the province regardless of race, ethnicity, income, religion, gender identity, or sexual orientation.

## WHAT WE DO

We provide information on autism, support autism research, and implement programs and services for the autism community to address the issues that affect Ontarians with autism, their families, and their caregivers.

## OUR MISSION

Creating a supportive and inclusive Ontario for autism

## OUR VISION

Best Life, Better World, Making Autism Matter!

## SERVICES WE OFFER

- Community events
- CommunityConnect Portal
- OAP Provider List
- Provincial newsletter
- Regional newsletters
- Adult programs
- Caregiver support groups
- French Language Services
- Regional supports
- Learning and positive advocacy resources
- Webinars and workshops
- Child and family supports
- March Break funding
- Summer support funding



We are guided by a Board of Directors with 12 diverse members – people on the autism spectrum, parents, caregivers, siblings of autistic people, and professionals.



We are Ontario's #1 source of information and referral on autism and one of the largest collective voices representing the autism community.



7 regions supporting people on the autism spectrum and their families across the province

## OUR CARE VALUES

### COLLABORATION

We believe in the power of working side by side with individuals, families, and communities to make informed choices about autism.

C

### ACCOUNTABILITY

We hold ourselves and others responsible for achieving successful outcomes through high standards of integrity and fiscal responsibility.

A

### RESPECT

We value equity, diversity, and inclusion, and we listen to understand.

R

### EVIDENCE-INFORMED

We use and create knowledge to guide our decisions and work.

E

# About Autism Ontario

Autism Ontario and its regions support people on the autism spectrum and their families across the province. We offer information and resources and support autism research while implementing programs and services for the autism community. Here are some examples of services we offer:

## Family Events

Designed for autistic children, youth, adults, and their families and caregivers, these events provide access to a supportive environment in local communities. From movie mornings to recreational and social programs, they allow time for families to come together and connect in autism-friendly environments within the community.

[autismontario.com/events](https://autismontario.com/events)

## CommunityConnect

CommunityConnect is a centralized community portal, home to our service listings, learning resources, and events. You can search for autism services and Autism Ontario resources and events.

[autismontario.com/communityconnect](https://autismontario.com/communityconnect)

## Webinars

Autism Ontario webinars are designed to be an interactive, easy-to-understand resource for parents/caregivers, professionals, and educators. Webinars are presented in either English or French by subject matter experts in a discussion-based format. Webinars are a convenient way for viewers to stay on top of current research findings; learn about educational advocacy; build resources to support a child on the autism spectrum at school; gain tools to keep children and youth safe; and learn strategies to navigate the lifespan of people on the spectrum and their families.

[autismontario.com/programs-services/webinars](https://autismontario.com/programs-services/webinars)

## Provincial Newsletter

A free online newsletter in English and French to stay connected with Autism Ontario.

[autismontario.com/newsletter](https://autismontario.com/newsletter)

**To learn more about the programs and services offered by our provincial office or our local regions, please visit our website at [autismontario.com](https://autismontario.com).**

# Thank You

Dear Students, Teachers, Administrators, and Support Staff:

On behalf of Autism Ontario and the thousands of autistic people across Ontario, we would like to thank you for participating in this year's Celebrate the Spectrum campaign in celebration of World Autism Day. Without your school's participation and commitment to making Ontario a more supportive and inclusive place for autistic students, World Autism Day would not be such an outstanding success each year.

We hope that this toolkit promotes awareness and increases your understanding of autism, which are critical first steps in creating more supportive environments for autistic people in the classroom and communities across the province. By participating in World Autism Day, we invite you to be a part of a collective conversation about the importance of community, inclusion, and understanding in classrooms across Ontario. Our hope is that this conversation will continue both inside and outside the classroom and throughout your lives.

We also want to thank you for your commitment to fundraising on our behalf. Your dedication to raising funds for Autism Ontario is a testament to your school's investment in the work we do in the community and across the province through awareness campaigns such as World Autism Day. Please feel free to contact [celebratethespectrum@autismontario.com](mailto:celebratethespectrum@autismontario.com) if you have any questions.

Throughout the campaign, we invite you to share your stories and experiences with the World Autism Day campaign. This is the best way that we can spread the word about your school joining our mission and contributing to the impact that we hope to have on communities in Ontario.

Visit [autismontario.com](http://autismontario.com) or connect with us on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, and YouTube to share your experiences and read other inspiring stories about autism in Ontario.

With your support, we are one step closer to creating a more inclusive Ontario.

Sincerely,

