

Recommendations for Autism Education in Child and Youth Care (CYC) Postsecondary Education

The following guidelines provide recommendations for autism education in postsecondary settings using the Child and Youth Care (CYC) characteristic of practice: [“do with, not for or to”](#). These recommendations are presented on the premise that lived experience matters and that collaboration with the community being served is important for both equity and optimal outcomes.

With their long-standing advocacy for ‘nothing about us without us’, the fields of disability and autism studies advocate for allied professionals to move forward with education that includes autistic perspectives. In agreement with [Linton \(1998\)](#), we believe it is important to incorporate the tenets of disability studies into CYC curriculum as this “contests the current academic division of labour in which the study of the phenomenon rests in the specialized applied fields...[while] the rest of the academy is largely exempt from meaningful inquiry into the subject of disability” (p. 2). Disability and autism studies must be meaningfully included with considerable thought and care.

It is imperative that professors include autistic organizations and individuals who, until now, have been left out of the conversation. This guide provides helpful hyperlinks, resources, and recommendations to assist professors with this inclusion. The guidelines are suitable for postsecondary courses covering child development, children’s rights, psychoeducational supports, introductions to Child and Youth Care, and other courses where autism may be discussed.

Ethical autism education means valuing the lived experience of autistic people by involving them in the creation of appropriate resources for postsecondary classwork. The work of autistic scholars and the experiences/perspectives of autistic people in the community should inform and enrich the curriculum. It is important to address the social injustices experienced by this population as well. This is particularly important in Ontario where many of the most lauded autism supports, which are based on the principles of Applied Behavioural Analysis (ABA), promote a [“to do”](#) compliance approach that has been found to cause [post-traumatic stress disorder](#). These supports are implemented without the input or consent of autistic young people and include elements that have long been considered [antithetical to CYC practice](#).

The “medical model” versus the “social model” of disability

[Autistic scholars and advocates](#) have pointed out that the traditional views of autism have been based on what’s known as the [“medical model of disability”](#). Within the medical model of disability, a disabled child (in this case, autistic) is seen as sick or broken --and the goal of therapists, teachers and CYCs is then seen as “fixing the child to fit” into a system that wasn’t built for them.

As disability rights movements have shown us, medical models of disability can be harmful and can even cause trauma leading to very negative outcomes. A good example of this is early

efforts by therapists to encourage Deaf or partially-hearing people to read lips *only* and “pass” as though they were hearing, instead of using sign language. Few if any efforts were made by therapists to teach Sign Language to Deaf people’s families or teachers either, putting Deaf people in a “sink or swim” situation for lip reading. We have come to realize now [that this significantly compromised their quality of life and opportunities](#); encouraging and building upon Deaf culture, where sign language is a mainstay, has led to better outcomes and quality of life for Deaf people and their families.

It’s very similar for autistic people -- and this is where the [social model of disability](#) comes in as a better alternative. The older, medical model would force an autistic child to “pass” by pretending to be like a non-autistic person (“change the child to fit a world not made for them”). But since we now know that it is better for quality of life and outcomes when we allow autistic children to be their [authentic \(autistic\) selves](#), we use the social model: *making changes to the environment so that it works for them* (accessibility).

For example, autistic hand-flapping or fidgeting was formerly seen as a [“repetitive stereotypy” to be “extinguished”](#) through intensive behaviour therapy. But now [researchers](#) have recognized that hand-flapping/fidgeting are important ways for autistic people to [regulate sensory input](#), to concentrate and communicate. Thus, many therapists now [work with \(instead of against\) hand-flapping](#). Further, they educate those who work with autistic people about how environments (classroom, workplace) can be adapted to accommodate this difference.

Teaching Current Approaches and Best Practices

While the social model of disability is more well-known within other disability communities, its application in autism is still relatively new. Thus, when teaching about autism in post-secondary settings, it is important for instructors to dispel “medical model” [myths about autistic children](#). Some of these myths are: that autistic children can be “cured” of their autism; that children should primarily receive segregated “care” instead of mainstream classrooms; that autistic children lack empathy; and that autism is a problem to fix, rather than a disability to accommodate.

New scholarship and praxis have taken a page from the [neurodiversity movement](#) to provide better models-- and these best practices are a great starting point for discussing the shifting nature of autism services and supports. Neurodiversity is the acknowledgement of the many different types of minds due to genetic and other variations, and the respect for those differences. Neurodiversity scholars and advocates work from the social model of disability to destigmatize autistic differences, so that all autistic people can be treated as worthy of inclusion in the world around them, rather than being segregated and isolated from their communities. This means that schools and other institutions should adopt inclusive design and other accessibility measures for autistic students, just as they do for people with other disabilities.

An example of this praxis is [the NEST program](#) in the New York City Public Schools. Developed in 2003, this program has successfully integrated hundreds of autistic students in elementary and middle school classrooms so that they can learn alongside their neurotypical peers by

making the spaces sensory-friendly with other types of basic flexibility for autistic students. As with other inclusion programs, this kind of initiative [improves the classroom for all students](#), not just the autistic students, creating a win-win situation.

In addition to exploring best practices, it is important to understand current discussions in the autistic community about topics such as education, inclusion, housing, language preferences (i.e., [identity-first vs person-first language](#)¹) and the range of autism interventions (i.e., [trauma-informed therapies vs. behavioural interventions](#)). These topics should include consultations with autistic individuals and organizations, which again falls in line with the CYC characteristic of practice: “do with, not for or to.”

In addition, teachers should be aware of the [double empathy problem](#): the new understanding in the field that misunderstandings in communication between autistic people and neurotypical people are [a matter of communication differences](#) between the two, rather than solely a “deficit” in the autistic person. Talking with autistic individuals can help further CYC understanding (conducive to ‘hanging in’) rather than relying on social skills that are unidirectional.

Recently, presentations that focus on the lived experiences of autistic people have been well-received by faculty and students of Ryerson University’s CYC Program. These include G.A. (co-founder of A4A) and Yvonne Bristow’s (CYC) presentation on The Criticisms of ABA in CYC Psychoeducational Supports (Feb. 5th. 2020); and Falon Wilton (Co-founder of Autistiqueers), Shauna Weinroth (autistic postsecondary student), and Nancy Marshall’s (CYCP) [quest lectures on the value of autistic lived experience](#) in CYC Children’s Rights, and CYC Intro to Child and Youth Care (Fall 2017).

Autistic self-advocacy groups such as [Autistics for Autistics \(A4A\)](#) have been giving presentations to several groups in Ontario including students at the University of Toronto Medical School and health care providers at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH). A4A members are available to present in CYC programs. Your College or University may also have neurodiversity student groups who can present.

We would encourage you to reach out to autistic groups rather than rely on having one autistic individual give a “life story” presentation (which, in the end, only provides the class with one life story). Request that these groups be inclusive of non-speaking autistic people (AAC users) and be ethnically diverse and age diverse in their presentations. When possible, consider inviting more than one group to present in a semester so that a variety of lived experiences and perspectives are represented.

Basic Guidelines:

- [Listen to autistic self-advocates](#): Professors and faculty can approach autistic self-advocacy groups such as A4A Ontario for resources and guest speakers (email: a4aontario@gmail.com or visit a4aontario.com).

¹ Identity-first language is a preference by many autistic individuals to claim their identity as ‘autistic’ rather than as ‘having autism’.

- [Understand new research](#): When designing course materials and lessons, professors should always consider new research that is based on the lived experiences and perspectives of autistic people-- sometimes called “[participatory research](#)”.
- [Be inclusive of AAC](#): When designing course material, instructors should be inclusive of material about [Augmentative and Alternative Communication \(AAC\)](#), as more than 20% of autistic people use AAC.
- [Address myths about autism](#) that your students may have heard. For example, [myths about vaccines, fake cures and other pseudoscience](#).
- [Use a trauma-informed approach](#): Autism education is a social justice issue as autistic people are an oppressed group; a trauma-informed lens is key to this education.
- It’s important to acknowledge significant differences between the medical and social model as they play out in real life. For example, applied behavioural analysis (ABA) is often considered the “gold standard” for autism support, yet it is based on the medical model and is [opposed by most autistic people](#).
- [Understand that behaviour is communication](#): Some behaviours are a result of trauma from not being understood in normative ways; they are not “symptoms” of autism itself. Autism education must acknowledge that all forms of communication are valid.
- [Protect communication rights](#): CYC practitioners need to be aware that no autistic person should be denied AAC or other communication options at any time, nor forced to communicate in ways that feel oppressive or unrealistic to them (*i.e.*, with eye-contact or verbal speech).
- [Focus on best practices](#): Look to [schools](#) and other community groups, as well as contemporary research, to understand practices that make schools accessible for autistic students.
- [Understand neurodiversity](#): Apply the Social Model of Disability approach.
- [Center human rights](#): The underlying goals of supporting autistic young people should always be based on the goals of self-determination and human rights. Any therapy or approach that infringes on human rights should not be used or endorsed.

Additional Suggested Classroom Resources

Covid-19 Related Resources

Autistics 4 Autistics (A4A) Ontario. We are Heroes: A Plain Language Guide about Covid-19: <https://a4aontario.com/2020/03/20/we-are-heroes-a-plain-language-guide-about/?fbclid=IwAR2o4h4WodZuPUK0fVpOW9oICZA3Sb0-RnxLxCF3va276xO3W7nfv1qn00c>

Autistics 4 Autistics (A4A) Ontario. COVID-19 Resources for Autistic People: https://a4aontario.com/2020/04/07/our-great-big-list-of-covid-19-resources-for-autistic-people/?fbclid=IwAR3TISQeR7w21p5rHEB7pqn6Z_TGTpTj184ghniavMsNLRo0IAhs-BkjLDc

Autistics 4 Autistics (A4A) Ontario. CKUT Interview: COVID, Neurodiversity and Disability Access (1 of 2): <https://a4aontario.com/2020/04/14/ckut-interview-covid-neurodiversity-and->

[disability-access-1-of-2/?fbclid=IwAR1RU1JGbw6AcURT240ertr9LR2ysCZkJnxgNsZQScyUQvq4gqQ5RKPpE7E](https://a4aontario.com/2020/04/22/ckut-interview-aac-covid-19-and-disability-access-2-of-2/?fbclid=IwAR1RU1JGbw6AcURT240ertr9LR2ysCZkJnxgNsZQScyUQvq4gqQ5RKPpE7E)

Autistics 4 Autistics (A4A) Ontario. CKUT Interview: COVID, Neurodiversity and Disability Access (2 of 2):

<https://a4aontario.com/2020/04/22/ckut-interview-aac-covid-19-and-disability-access-2-of-2/?fbclid=IwAR0c9ByiyJnj1BIHFKJW8PKfTqJU9Ey8SwdRcO5vucDYKY90avGrxikDM>

Autistic Art, Memes, and Stories for Class Presentations

Baggs, M. (2007). *In My Language*. A short film retrieved from

<http://www.interactingwithautism.com/section/understanding/media/representations/details/12>

Berkeley News. (2018). *Hari's challenge: Finding a place of comfort*. A story retrieved from

<https://news.berkeley.edu/2018/10/24/haris-challenge-finding-a-place-of-comfort/>

Borden, A. (2019-2020). *Noncompliant- The Podcast*. A variety of episodes retrieved from

<https://noncompliantpodcast.com/>

Burgess, R. (2019). *Understanding the spectrum*: A cartoon retrieved from <https://the-art-of-autism.com/understanding-the-spectrum-a-comic-strip-explanation/>

CBC News. (March 2, 2018). *Communication is a basic human right': How this man with nonverbal autism found his voice*. An interview with Ido Kedar retrieved from

<https://www.cbc.ca/radio/outintheopen/crossing-divides-1.4538834/communication-is-a-basic-human-right-how-this-man-with-nonverbal-autism-found-his-voice-1.4538883>

Deej. (2017). *Deej the Movie*. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3x7wDqtsE3Y>

The Re-storying Autism Project. (2019). Various short films and art retrieved from

<https://restoryingautism.com/home>

Wilson, B. (2017). *Identity first language*. A doodle retrieved from

<https://doodlebeth.com/identity-first-language/>

Wolfond, A. (2019). *Inter-Views: A Typing-Only Podcast Listening Party*. Retrieved from

<http://www.thinkingautismguide.com/2019/03/inter-views-typing-only-podcast.html>

General Web Resources

Amythest Shaber YouTube channel:

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC9Bk0GbW8xgvTgQlheNG5uw>

Assistiveware (AAC): <https://www.assistiveware.com/blog>

Autism in Adulthood Journal: <https://home.liebertpub.com/publications/autism-in-adulthood/646>

Autism Level UP! <https://www.facebook.com/AutismLevelUP/>

Autistics 4 Autistics (A4A) Ontario, website & blogs: <https://a4aontario.com/>

Autistic Women & Nonbinary Network: <https://awnnetwork.org/>

Autonomy, the Critical Journal of Interdisciplinary Autism Studies: <http://www.larry-arnold.net/Autonomy/index.php/autonomy/index>

Foundations for Divergent Minds: <https://www.divergentminds.org/>

Ido in AutismLand: <http://idoinautismland.com/>

National Autistic Society: <https://www.autism.org.uk/>

The Autistic Self Advocacy Network: <https://autisticadvocacy.org/>

The Neurodiversity Library: <https://neurodiversitylibrary.org/neurodivergent-narwhals/>

Thinking Person's Guide to Autism: <http://www.thinkingautismguide.com/>

Autistic Authors for Class Readings

A4A Ontario. (May 24, 2018). *Why We Oppose ABA in Any Form*. Retrieved from <https://a4aontario.com/2018/05/24/why-we-oppose-aba-in-any-form/>

Borden, A. (January 20, 2020). Noncompliant: A Podcast about Neurodiversity. Episode 10, Anne Borden with Alfie Kohn "*Punishments and rewards can get one thing, under certain conditions – temporary compliance*" <https://podcasts.apple.com/ca/podcast/punishments-rewards-can-get-one-thing-under-certain/id1471283441?i=1000459263677>

Brown, L.X.Z., Ashkenazy, E., & Giwa Onaiwu, M. (Eds). (2017). *All The Weight of Our Dreams: On living racialized autism*. A collection of short stories. Autism Women's Network & DragonBee Press. Lincoln, Nebraska. Available on Amazon.com <https://www.amazon.com/All-Weight-Our-Dreams-Racialized/dp/0997504501>

Dawson, M. (2004). *The misbehaviour of behaviourists*. Retrieved from https://www.sentex.ca/~nexus23/naa_aba.html

Pena, E.V. (Ed.). (2019). *Leaders around me. Autobiographies of autistics who type, point & spell to communicate*. Available on Amazon.com https://www.amazon.com/dp/1791505953/ref=cm_sw_r_cp_api_i_mcl9DbHZ5MGDK?fbclid=IwAR11WIP9dz7fB2Ln538ayefUVi4I_qAtqnpUXxIP0NVC0hxx1dhmZtVyYu4

Singer, J. (2016). *Neurodiversity: The birth of an idea*. [Kindle edition]. Open University Press UK. Available on Amazon.com <https://www.amazon.ca/NeuroDiversity-Birth-Idea-Judy-Singer-ebook/dp/B01HY0QTEE>

Walker, N. (2016). *The Neurodiversity Paradigm*. Retrieved from <https://www.identityfirstautistic.org/the-neurodiversity-paradigm-> .

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Bristow, Y. (2017). BIDDing and Autism, *CYC-Online*, 222. <https://www.cyc-net.org/cyc-online/aug2017.pdf>

Larcenciel, L. (2020). National Autism Strategy Town hall: A Chance For Autistic Justice & the Likelihood of Disappointment. Retrieved from <https://www.djno.ca/post/national-autism-strategy-town-hall-a-chance-for-autistic-justice-the-likelihood-of-disappointment?fbclid=IwAR2o4h4WodZuPUK0fVpOW9oICZA3Sb0-RnxLxCF3va276xO3W7nvf1qn00c>

Larcenciel, L. (2019). Autistic students lack support. *The Eye Opener*. Retrieved from <https://theeyeopener.com/2019/03/autistic-students-lack-support-when-navigating-campus/>

Marshall, N. (2019). *Why Should We Care? Reflecting on Child and Youth Care Practice for, about, and with Autistic Young People*. CYC Across Sectors. Volume 1, Chapter 8. <https://www.canadianscholars.ca/books/child-and-youth-care-across-sectors-vol-1>

Shields, R. (2020). "I think we all need people in our lives who share our identities": *The Power of Autistic Mentorship*". Retrieved from http://www.thinkingautismguide.com/2020/03/i-think-we-all-need-people-in-our-lives.html?fbclid=IwAR3jsV1OLDEF6p0UIE_vXOjAMqyLV8DA8k0YepXKsOXGEzieqPFxeTtRutE

Spencer, L. (2019). Nonverbal miscommunication. *CYC-Online*, 242. Retrieved from <https://www.cyc-net.org/cyc-online/apr2019.pdf>

Other Important Resources

Bascom, J. (2012). Loud hands: Autistic people speaking. *Autistic Self Advocacy Network*. Available from Amazon.com <https://www.amazon.ca/Loud-Hands-Autistic-People-Speaking/dp/1938800028>

Bottema-Beutel, K., Crowley, S., Sandbank, M., & Woynaroski, T. G. (2020). Research Review: Conflicts of Interest (COIs) in autism early intervention research – a meta-analysis of COI influences on intervention effects. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcpp.13249>

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Kohn, A. (2018). *Punished by rewards*. Available on Amazon.com. <https://www.alfiekohn.org/punished-rewards/>

Laurent, A. C., & Fede, J. (n.d.). Autism Level Up! Retrieved from <https://okautism.org/portals/1244/Assets/documents/Conferences/2019/Leveling%20UP.pdf?ver=2019-11-20-125631-653>

Mottron, L. (2017). Should we change targets and methods of early intervention in autism, in favor of a strengths-based education? *European Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 26(7), 815–825. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00787-017-0955-5>

Prizant, B. (2015). *Uniquely human: A different way of seeing autism*. Childhood Communication Services: New York. Available on Amazon.com. <https://www.amazon.ca/Uniquely-Human-Different-Seeing-Autism/dp/1476776245>

Sandoval-Norton, A. H., & Shkedy, G. (2019). How much compliance is too much compliance: Is long-term ABA therapy abuse? *Cogent Psychology*, 6(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311908.2019.1641258>

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About the CYC authors who collaborated with A4A Ontario on this guide:

Yvonne Bristow has worked as a CYC in Toronto for over ten years. Her work includes supporting neurotypical and neurodivergent youth using a social justice and relational lens.

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Nancy Marshall is a dedicated CYCP who has been supporting autistic young people and their families in schools and in the community for over 10 years.

Raya Shields is an autistic mentor, disability studies scholar, CYCP, and member of A4A Ontario.

Lisa Spencer is a parent and CYCP who advocates for personal autonomy for disabled children in a variety of settings.

Glossary of Terms and Definitions

Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA)

Applied Behaviour Analysis is a widely popular autism intervention in Canada. It aims to increase 'positive behaviours' and decrease 'negative behaviours'. As mentioned above, it is regularly [critiqued by autistic self-advocates](#) and allies and [is not supported by most autistic people](#), who advocate for other, newer approaches.

Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC)

[Augmentative and alternative communication \(AAC\)](#) encompasses the communication methods used to supplement or replace speech or writing for those who are non-speaking.

Autistic Self-Advocates

People who identify as autistic who communicate their interests and needs based on their lived experience.

Identity-first Language

Identity-first language includes valuing identifying factors about an individual in their introduction. For example someone who prefers to use [identity-first language](#) may introduce themselves as an *autistic person* or a *disabled person*.

Medical Model of Disability

The medical model of disability proposes that disability is a problem that needs to be 'cured' or 'fixed'. It emphasizes that disabled individuals should appear and act 'normal' in order to be respected in society.

Non-speaking Individuals

Someone who is non-speaking could communicate their wants, needs and interests through visuals, typing, Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) or American Sign Language (ASL). They may express or communicate themselves verbally using sounds, but may not typically verbalize words.

Person-first Language

Person-first language is a type of linguistic prescription that puts the person before their disability or neurodivergence. For example, someone who prefers person-first language may introduce themselves as a *person with autism*, or a *person who has a disability*.

Pseudoscience

A system of assumptions, theories and methods falsely regarded as scientific.

Social Model of Disability

The social model of disability proposes that attitudes, stereotypes and systemic factors are the reasons why disabled people are excluded from society. It proposes that ableism is the biggest barrier for disabled people.

The Neurodiversity Paradigm

[Neurodiversity](#) includes how neurological differences such as autism, ADD, ADHD and Dyslexia are a result of natural variations in the human genome. It is a term coined by Judy Singer (2016) and is often a term used as part of a social movement for acceptance. Neurodiversity is an essential form of human diversity.

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Taylor, K. (2017, June 14). *For Children With Autism, No More Being Hushed*. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/14/nyregion/for-children-with-autism-no-more-beinghushed.html>

Appendix

Neurodiversity by Nick Walker

Neurodiversity is the diversity of human brains and minds, the infinite variation in neurocognitive functioning within our species

The **Neurodiversity Paradigm** is an emergent paradigm in which neurodiversity is understood to be a form of human diversity that is subject to the same social dynamics as other forms of diversity (including dynamics of power and oppression)

Principles

- Neurodiversity is an essential form of human diversity. The idea that there is one "normal" or "healthy" type of brain or mind or one "right" style of neurocognitive functioning, is no more valid than the idea that there is one "normal" or "right" gender, race or culture.
- The classification of neurodivergence (e.g. autism, ADHD, dyslexia, bipolarity) as medical/psychiatric pathology has no valid scientific basis, and instead reflects cultural prejudice and oppresses those labeled as such.
- The social dynamics around neurodiversity are similar to the dynamics that manifest around other forms of human diversity. These dynamics include unequal distribution of social power; conversely, when embraced, diversity can act as a source of creative potential.

In Practice

Psychotherapists who integrate the neurodiversity paradigm into their work do so by refusing to label neurodivergence as intrinsically pathological.

Instead of attempting to "cure" autistic or bipolar clients, for instance, these therapists seek to help autistic or bipolar people thrive as autistic or bipolar people, finding ways of living that are more in harmony with their natural neurological dispositions, and helping them to heal from internalized oppression.

Development

The **Neurodiversity Movement** has its origins in the **Autistic Rights Movement** that sprung up in the 1990's

The term **neurodiversity** was coined in 1998 by an autistic Australian sociologist named Judy Singer, and was quickly picked up and expanded upon within the autistic activist community.

The focus of work within the **neurodiversity** paradigm has broadened beyond autism to encompass other forms of **neurodivergence**, while at the same time the paradigm has increasingly gained footholds in various realms of scholarship, literature and praxis.