

NEW BEGINNINGS IN COMMUNITY LIVING

Newsletter of the Community Living Education Project • Rutgers School of Public Health
Educating individuals, families and professionals about possibilities in community living

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The Evolution of Autism: Understanding Where We Were and Movement into the Future

By Antoinette S. Johnson

April is National Autism Awareness Month! This article focuses on the evolution of autism over the years.

According to the American Psychiatric Association, "autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a complex developmental condition that involves persistent challenges in social interaction, speech and nonverbal communication, and restricted/repetitive behaviors. The effects of ASD and the severity of symptoms are different in each person." Diagnosis often occurs during childhood, and early diagnosis is key to improving the person's quality of life.

The diagnosis of autism spectrum disorders has come a long way since its mention in the early 1900s. "There is a great range of abilities and characteristics of children with autism spectrum disorder. Symptoms can range from mild to severe and often change over time," as mentioned by psychiatry.org.

According to Autism Speaks, "In 2020, the CDC reported that approximately 1 in 54 children in the U.S. is diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Boys are four times more likely to be diagnosed with autism than girls." In 2020, Autism New Jersey reported that 1 in 32 children in New Jersey were diagnosed with autism. When comparing 2020 U.S. data to earlier years, the statistics drastically change. According to the CDC, in

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2007, 1 in 150 children were diagnosed with autism, and in 2009, 1 in 110 children were diagnosed with autism. Research and studies are ongoing in the U.S. regarding the prevalence of autism and why the numbers of people diagnosed with autism are increasing.

Regarding community inclusion, according to Autism Speaks, statistics show that "Nearly half of 25-year-olds with autism never had a paying job." Moreover, "Research demonstrates that job activities that encourage independence reduce autism symptoms and increase daily living skills." Community inclusion through work activities is vital for individuals with autism to gain necessary skills for everyday activities, which is important for all adults.

Through the years people have learned to be more understanding about individuals with autism and developmental disabilities as a whole, and sensitivity is one area that has evolved. In fact, in 2015, Sesame Street created a character named Julia who has autism. Julia is a four-year-old Muppet with big beautiful green eyes, red hair, and an adoring family, which includes her mom, dad, brother, and dog.

The character started as a part of an initiative to bring awareness to autism. Sesame Street has created a website dedicated to autism based on the initiative titled *Sesame Street and Autism See Amazing in All Children*. The website contains videos, information, and fun activities for families and children's participation. Julia was made a regular part of the cast in 2017.

Our knowledge and understanding of autism have changed over the years. Our knowledge will continue to evolve as more research is supported, programs are developed, and people become interested in understanding what ASD is and how we can all work together to see people with autism as people.

For more information on autism or if you suspect your loved one has autism, reach out to your child's doctor for an early diagnosis.

Please join us as we participate in efforts to increase understanding of autism in our community, and share resources that may be of value to families and their loved ones. Also, [click here](#) for the **History of Autism Timeline from 1908 to 2020**.

RESOURCES

- [Autism New Jersey](#)
- [Autism Society's Proud History](#)
- [Autism Society Awareness Month](#)
- [Autism Society History](#)
- [Autism Speaks](#)
- [Autism Speaks Statistics](#)
- [Brain Health Institute](#)
- [Evolution of Autism](#)
- [NJ Autism Center of Excellence at Rutgers](#)
- [Parents Magazine History of Autism](#)
- [Parents Magazine Sesame Street Autism Awareness](#)
- [Psychiatry.org Autism Spectrum Disorder Article](#)
- [Rutgers Center for Adult Autism Services](#)
- [Rutgers Douglas Developmental Disabilities Center](#)
- [Rutgers NJ Medical School Autism Center](#)
- [Rutgers NJ Medical School Pediatrics](#)
- [Sesame Street Muppet Fandom-Julia](#)
- [Sesame Street Puppeteer Stacey Gordon](#)
- [Sesame Street Season 47](#)



Upcoming Webinar

The Community Living Education Project's next webinar topic, *Strategies for Limiting Exposure to Sexual Abuse and Decreasing Inappropriate Sexual Behaviors for People with I/DD*, is scheduled for **April 20, 2021 from 12:00 pm to 1:00 pm**. The presenter is the incomparable Dr. Bobbie Gallagher. To register and for more details about the webinar, please [click here](#). Our previous webinar topics on behavioral support, hygiene, traveling safely, resiliency and supporting loved ones during difficult times, can be found on the [CLEP YouTube Channel](#), or you can go to the [CLEP webinar page](#).



The Family Corner: Fun Activities Available For Your Family!



The company Stages Learning Materials believes that "Every child can learn and thrive." On their website, there is an article titled, *12 Popular Games Adapted for Children with Autism*. The article provides several childhood games for adaptation. Some of the games include Simon Says, Hopscotch, Candy Land, Chutes and Ladders, Old Maid, and Go Fish. For more information on the adapted games, [click here](#) to read the article.

Author Tara Delaney wrote a book that includes games and activities for children with autism. The book titled *101 Games and Activities for Children with Autism, Asperger's, and Sensory Processing Disorders* can be ordered on [Amazon](#).

Pixar's 'Loop' Gives an Autistic Lead Character a Powerful Voice – Disney created this short to shed light on a relationship between a girl and a boy – one who is quiet and on the autism spectrum and the other talks a lot. Through their authentic communication methods, see how they relate to one another in this [short clip](#).

Harkla provides *Ten Therapeutic Activities for Children with Autism* to include sensory items, books, movement, and outdoor activities. Information on the activities can be [found here](#).

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Living in the Moment: We Need One Another

By Antoinette S. Johnson

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) are buzz words we hear a lot lately. There is no doubt that we have been living through some tough times. We have a dire need to address many issues that have been plaguing our nation. When thinking about inclusion, what does it mean to be inclusive? One can argue that it means others allowing people to integrate into activities and other spaces where people gather together. Inclusivity is accepting one another for who we are. While I recently viewed a webinar on DEI, resilience and resistance came up. During the webinar, a panelist noted that resilience and resistance are at the foundation of our humanity. Were it not for resilience and resistance, we would not be here, and they are needed to get past our DEI struggles.

If you think about what individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities have accomplished under difficult circumstances, it is mind-blowing. To get through the many challenging situations faced, people must form alliances. Those alliances should

include people from different backgrounds. Understanding each other is critical to moving past issues that go against the meaning of DEI. Do we take the time needed to understand one another, to listen to one another, and to have empathy for each other's struggles? How can we work together if we don't? Trust is a factor in working together and growing as a nation. Once we establish trust, we can work to help address discrimination, systemic injustices, violence, and hate. Our greatness, as a people, has not yet been realized, but it will when we take a genuine interest in understanding one another's plight. We must be willing to make changes, address uncomfortable situations, open our hearts, listen, and educate ourselves about one another. We are all here for a purpose and are better standing together rather than divided. No man is an island. We need each other now more than ever.



An Autism Service Center Provides a Person-Centered Way to Help Adults Succeed

By Antoinette S. Johnson

The Rutgers Center for Adult Autism Services (RCAAS), a center within the Rutgers Graduate School of Applied and Professional Psychology (GSAPP), researches and finds ways to support adults on the autism spectrum by "...providing assistance and support in all aspects of participants' lives," which is achieved through the programs RCAAS has available.

Dr. Christopher Manente, executive director of RCAAS, shared some highlights about the RCAAS, the Center's progress, and future program development. The Center works to identify and share best practices for meeting the needs of individuals who wish to receive support.

Since its inception in 2016, the RCAAS has been diligent in creating training programs for adults with autism. The RCAAS currently runs three programs. The first program is called SCALE, which stands for supporting community access through leisure and employment. According to Dr. Manente, this program "can be scaled up for people who need a lot of support or scaled down for people who need little support." The support provided for adults across the autism spectrum includes "...vocational training, supported employment, behavioral supports, and employment opportunities."

During the pandemic, adults received individual support services in-person and remotely. The program follows true person-centered planning the way person-centeredness was designed which includes understanding the person's personality, their wants, and their needs to name a few. This lifetime program is available for individuals to participate as they desire.

In addition to the SCALE Program, the RCAAS operates the College Support Program. This program currently supports 20 adults on the autism spectrum who are Rutgers University undergraduate students. Each student has two peer mentors to support them in various ways, such as through social meetings and gatherings. The students also meet with program coordinators who provide academic skills coaching by utilizing the available resources at Rutgers. Since the pandemic, the program helps the students navigate through Rutgers University's resources virtually. Peer mentors and program coordinators have found that students are doing well in their courses and are succeeding in the university with this program.

The third program is the RCAAS Psychological Services Clinic overseen by Dr. Vanessa Bal, the Karmazin and Lillard Chair in Adult Autism at the RU GSAPP. Dr. Bal is an expert in adult autism diagnostics and her team provides assessments, clinical therapy for anxiety and depression, and supports individual's other mental health needs.

There is a fourth program that is planned for launch later this year that will be dedicated to serving adults with autism with crisis-level behavioral support needs and their families. The RCAAS Intensive Outpatient Clinic will serve adults on the autism spectrum who have "severe, complex, and challenging behaviors who currently have nowhere to turn for high-quality effective community-based care," said Dr. Manente. The RCAAS is actively working to secure funding to



[RCAAS New Building Illustration Courtesy Rutgers Today](#)

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The Autism Speaks website provides virtual activities to help children keep busy. The website provides learning activities, arts and crafts, and games. [Click here](#) for the activities.

[Waterford.org](#), founded by Dr. Dustin Heuston, is a website that displays various teaching strategies and resources for children with autism. Dr. Heuston is "...a pioneering educator who believed every child is entitled to lifelong learning success." The mission is to seek "...to blend aspects of learning science, mentoring relationships, and innovative technologies to form community, school, and home programs that deliver excellence and equity for all learners."

These activities will undoubtedly be fun for children and adults! We hope you enjoy them!

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open the clinic. The goal is to treat individuals who are experiencing crisis-level behavior and significant skill deficits to avoid the need for long-term placement in more restrictive institutional settings.

Dr. Manente and his staff are committed to providing service, training, and research to support all adults on the autism spectrum who are seeking assistance. Dr. Manente's professional experience includes serving as a member of the board of directors for New Horizons in Autism, which is a provider of day and residential supports for adults on the autism spectrum throughout New Jersey. Dr. Manente is also a contributor to the recently released report titled "A Place in the World," which is about housing options for individuals with neurodifferences. [Click here](#) to access the report. His passion and dedication to truly individualized person-centered planning and helping with the needs of individuals on the autism spectrum include the expansion of residential options for adults with autism throughout NJ.

The RCAAS has built a state-of-the-art building to better serve adults with autism. The new Community Center is located on the Rutgers University Douglass Campus. You can learn more about the RCAAS and its new Community Center at [Rutgers Today!](#)



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