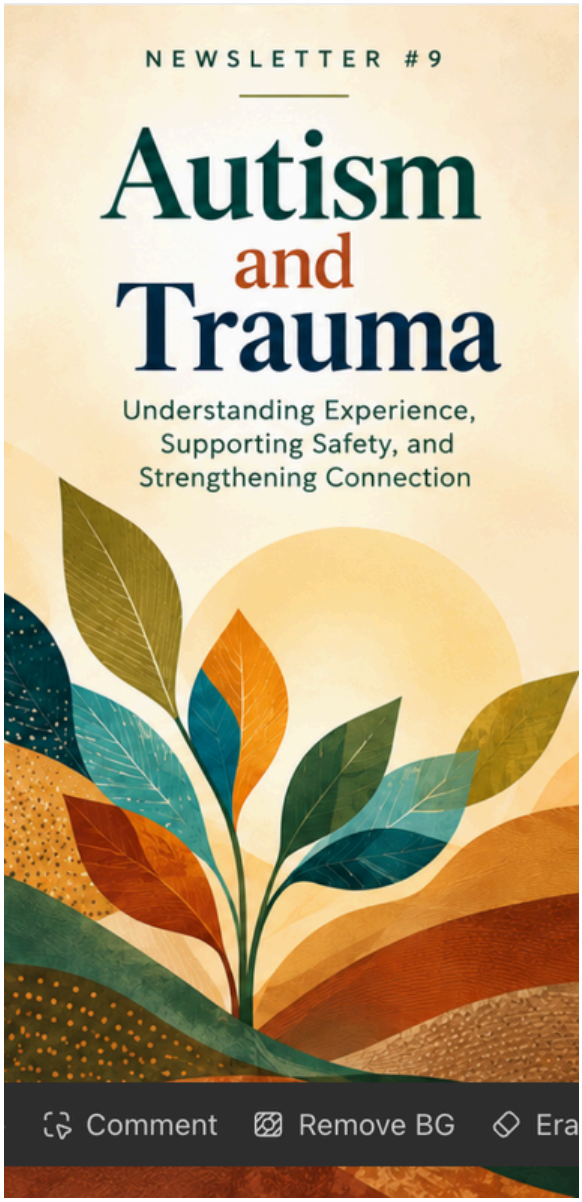
Language & Literacy Practces

Understanding Trauma - Strengthening Communities

September 2026 - Issue 9



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Trauma Responsive Insight

Autism & Trauma

Autistic adults and teens experience significant rates of traumatic events and post-traumatic symptoms. In one study that included 276 participants, autistic adults reported higher rates of "directly experiencing, witnessing, and learning about traumatic events than nonautistic adults" (Adrzejewski et al., 2024, p. 374). The reported traumatic experiences included physical and sexual assault. A little over 20% of the participants reported that sexual assault was their "most distressing" event, whereas 12.4% of nonautistic adults reported this as their "worst" event. Autistic adults also reported more severe post-traumatic stress responses than nonautistic adults. These changes included heightened alertness, mood changes, and shifts in thoughts and perceptions.

In another study about traumatic experiences in autistic teens (Lau-Zhu et al., 2026), the authors report that there are higher levels of PTSD in autistic adolescents (43 – 57%) than in nonautistic adolescents (7 – 32%). This study also found that the characteristics of trauma experienced by autistic teens did not correspond to the diagnostic criteria of the DSM-5, but it did match the experiences of nonautistic teens who experienced trauma.

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The DSM-5 Criterion A states that there must be "exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence" (APA, American Psychiatric Association, 2013). These results suggest the importance of considering a wider range of events as being traumatic, including structural, systemic, or institutional events (e.g., impoverishment, racism, systematic exclusion) and other forms of interpersonal and environmental events (bullying and sensory traumas)



Strengthening Relationships

Two ingredients of strong relationships are trust and reciprocity.

- Build trust through being consistent and predictable. Also, make sure that you do what you say you will do. In other words, follow through with a plan or promise.
- Be a good listener by engaging in reciprocal listening and bi-directional conversations. Autistic people can name their own experiences and realities.
- It's always important to work on connection before correction or making demands



Culture & Context Corner

Culture and context affect everyone and every form of communication. Behaviors and communication might be interpreted differently across settings and communication partners, and experiences of autism and trauma will also be shaped by culture, as well as by race, gender, ability, and language. Based on the topic discussed in this issue of **Understanding Trauma – Strengthening Communities**, take into consideration how ableism, racism, bullying, exclusion, and other systemic experiences can contribute to trauma.



Myth vs. Reality

Myth

Autistic teens and adults are less affected by traumatic experiences because they may express emotions or respond to distress differently than nonautistic people.

Reality

Autistic teens and adults experience trauma and may experience post-traumatic stress more severely than nonautistic teens and adults. However, their responses may not always look the way others expect.



Strength-Based Strategies

When working/supporting autistic individuals:

- Identify strengths, interests, and routines that support their felt safety.
- Identify relationships of importance that support their ability to navigate various contexts.
- Make room in interactions for their voice (preferences) to be expressed and their choices to be honored, supporting autonomy and self-advocacy.

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Transformative Learning Collective

Join us on 21 October 2026 at 6 p.m. Eastern Time for our next book club discussion. We are reading ***Unbound: My Story of Liberation and the Birth of the Me Too Movement*** by Tarana Burke. Here is the registration link:

https://us02web.zoom.us/meeting/register/ceIPcGEWTOSozTir6g0ZUA

Journal Reflections

Journaling is not a substitute for professional support. Please reach out to a professional if you are experiencing or processing trauma.

September 2026 Journaling Prompt:

Think about an autistic adult or teen whom you know or work with. When they respond unexpectedly, what assumptions do you make about that response?

Helpful Resources

- Andrzejewski, T., Gomez Batista, S., Abu-Ramadan, T., Breitenfeldt, K. E., Tassone, A. U., Winch, A., Rozek, D., & McDonnell, C. G. (2024). Examining rates of traumatic events and posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms among autistic adults. Autism in Adulthood, 6(3), 374-387. https://doi.org/10.1089/aut.2023.0022
- Kerns C. M., Newschaffer C. J., Berkowitz S. J. (2015). Traumatic childhood events and autism spectrum disorder. Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, 45(11), 3475–3486. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-015-2392-y
- Kerns, C. (2024, June 5). Autism & Trauma [Webinar]. Autism Research Institute. https://autism.org/webinar/autism-and-trauma/
- Lau-Zhu, A., Quinton, A. M. G., Stacey, J., Roberts-Davis, R., Cooper, M., Chan, C., & Happé, F. (2026). Experiences of trauma and PTSD symptoms in autistic adolescents: Preliminary findings. Attachment and Trauma, 31(2), 614 – 627. https://doi.org/10.1177/1359104526141839

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