Autism and Other Neurodevelopmental Disabilities: Information and Resources

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July 28, 2026



ASERT
Bringing autism resources together.

PAautism.org

Agenda

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Department of Human Services

Part 1: Understanding Neurodiversity

Part 2: Reconceptualizing Autism

Part 3: Understanding through an Environment and Behavior Lens

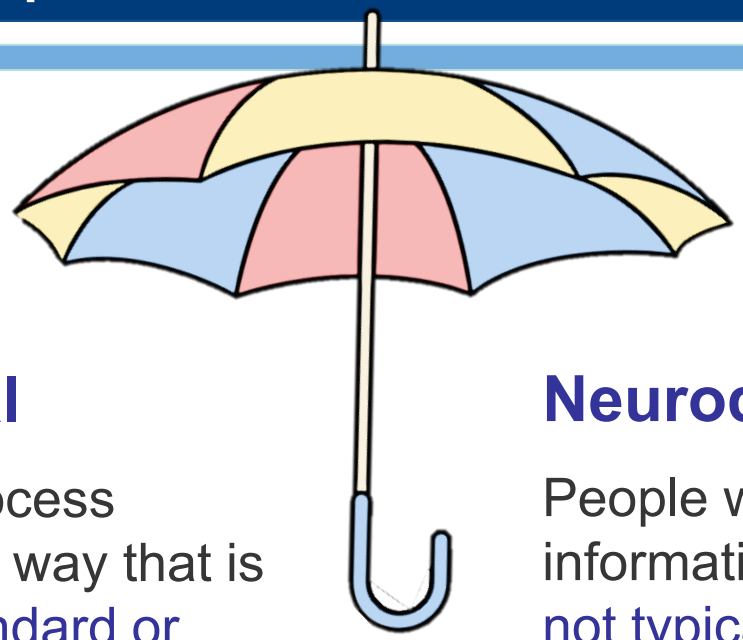
Part 4: ASERT Resources

Part 5: Additional Resources

Understanding Neurodiversity

What is Neurodiversity?

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Neurotypical

People who process information in a way that is considered standard or typical to majority of a population.

(Northwestern Medicine, 2025)

Neurodivergent

People who process information in a way that is not typical of a population.

It means the brain works differently than what is considered typical. It's neither right nor wrong.

(Northwestern Medicine, 2025)

Common Neurodevelopmental Disabilities

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ADHD: Inattention, hyperactivity, impulsivity

Dyslexia: Difficulty with reading and language

Intellectual Disability: Significant cognitive and adaptive delays

Tourette Syndrome: Involuntary tics (motor and vocal)

Autism: Social communication challenges, repetitive behaviors, sensory sensitivities

Dyspraxia: Disruptions to physical coordination and movement planning

OCD: Reoccurring thoughts (obsessions) and repetitive behaviors (compulsions)

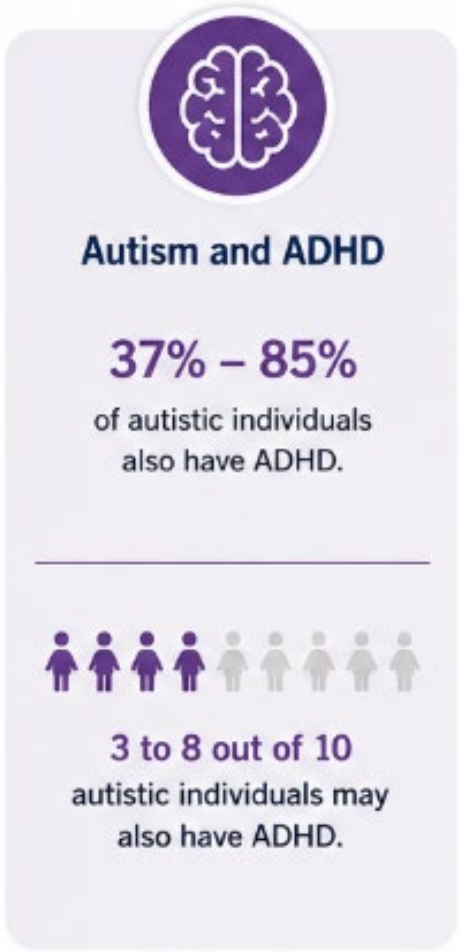
Distinct Differences

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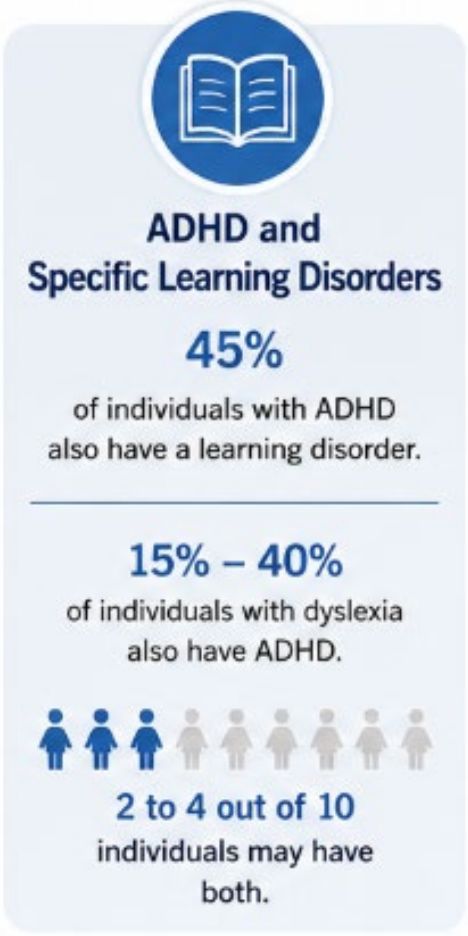
	Autism	ADHD	Dyslexia	ID	Tourette Syndrome	Dyspraxia	OCD
Social/ Communication	Differences in social reciprocity and nonverbal communication	Impulsive responses; interrupting	Communication usually unaffected	Delays in expressive and receptive communication	Communication may be affected by tics	May avoid social situations due to motor difficulties	May ask for reassurance; seeks certainty
Attention Regulation	May hyperfocus on interests	Easily distracted; difficulty sustaining attention	Attention impacted by reading fatigue	Limited sustained attention due to developmental level	Tics or urges may distract from tasks	Focus may be affected by motor planning effort	Intrusive thoughts create difficulty concentrating
Language Processing	Literal language may not understand figurative language	Blurting out; interrupting conversations	Reading and phonological processing difficulty	Delayed language development; limited vocabulary	Vocal tics may interrupt speech	Verbal expression may be affected by motor sequencing difficulties	Repetitive questions; need for exact answers
Learning Style	Visual/ interest- based learning; structure and predictability help	Benefits from movement, novelty, and short breaks	Multisensory instruction; explicit reading strategies help	Concrete, hands-on learning; simplified steps	Learning varies; may need breaks due to ticks	Needs hands-on practice; extra time for motor skill learning	Benefits from routine and step-by-step structure

Co-Occurring Conditions

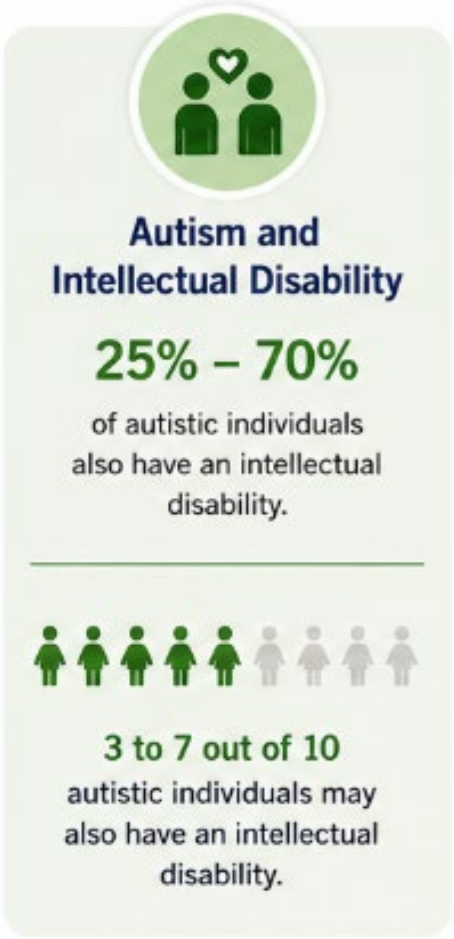
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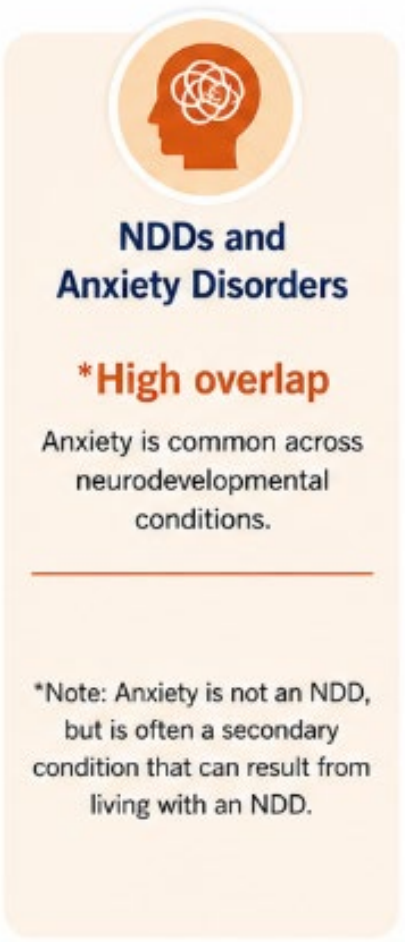
(Mosner et al., 2019; Antshel et al., 2016)



(DuPaul et al., 2013)



(CDC, 2023; Maenner et al., 2023)



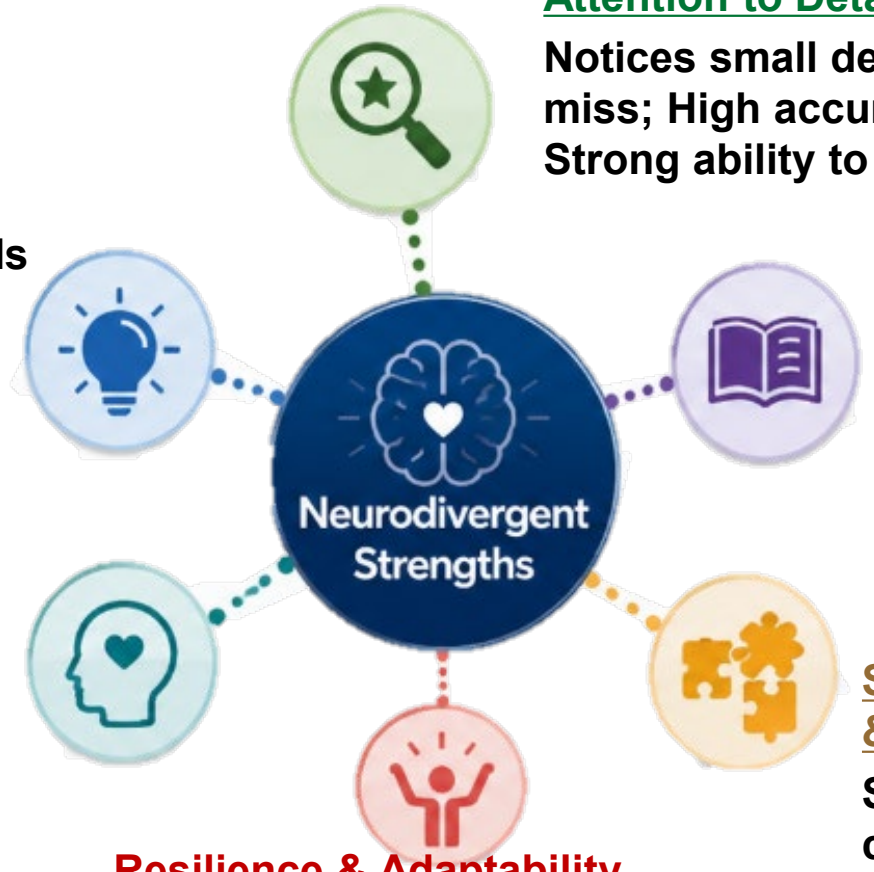
(van Steensel et al., 2011; D'Amore Mental Health, 2025)

Co-occurring conditions are common, not rare.
Supports should consider the whole person rather than focusing on a single diagnosis.

Strengths Across Neurodivergence

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(Armstrong, 2010; Burgess & Gutstein, 2007)



Attention to Detail & Accuracy

Notices small details others may miss; High accuracy in tasks; Strong ability to catch errors

Creative & Innovative Thinking

Thinks outside the box; Finds new solutions to problems; Strong imagination and originality

Deep Focus & Perseverance

Can focus intensely on interests; Highly motivated by passion; Strong follow-through when engaged

Honest & Authenticity

Values fairness and truth; Direct and genuine communication; Strong moral compass and loyalty

Systemizing & Pattern Recognition

Sees patterns and connections; Understands complex systems; Excellent memory for facts and details

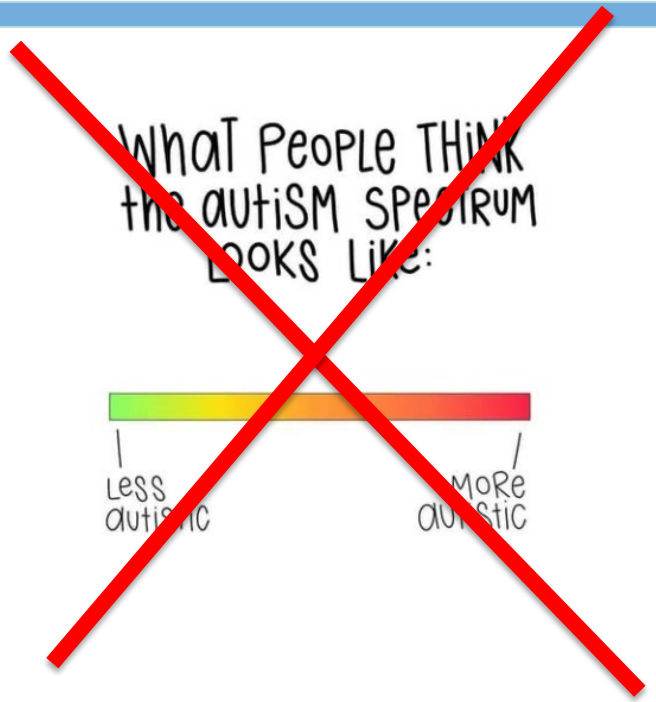
Resilience & Adaptability

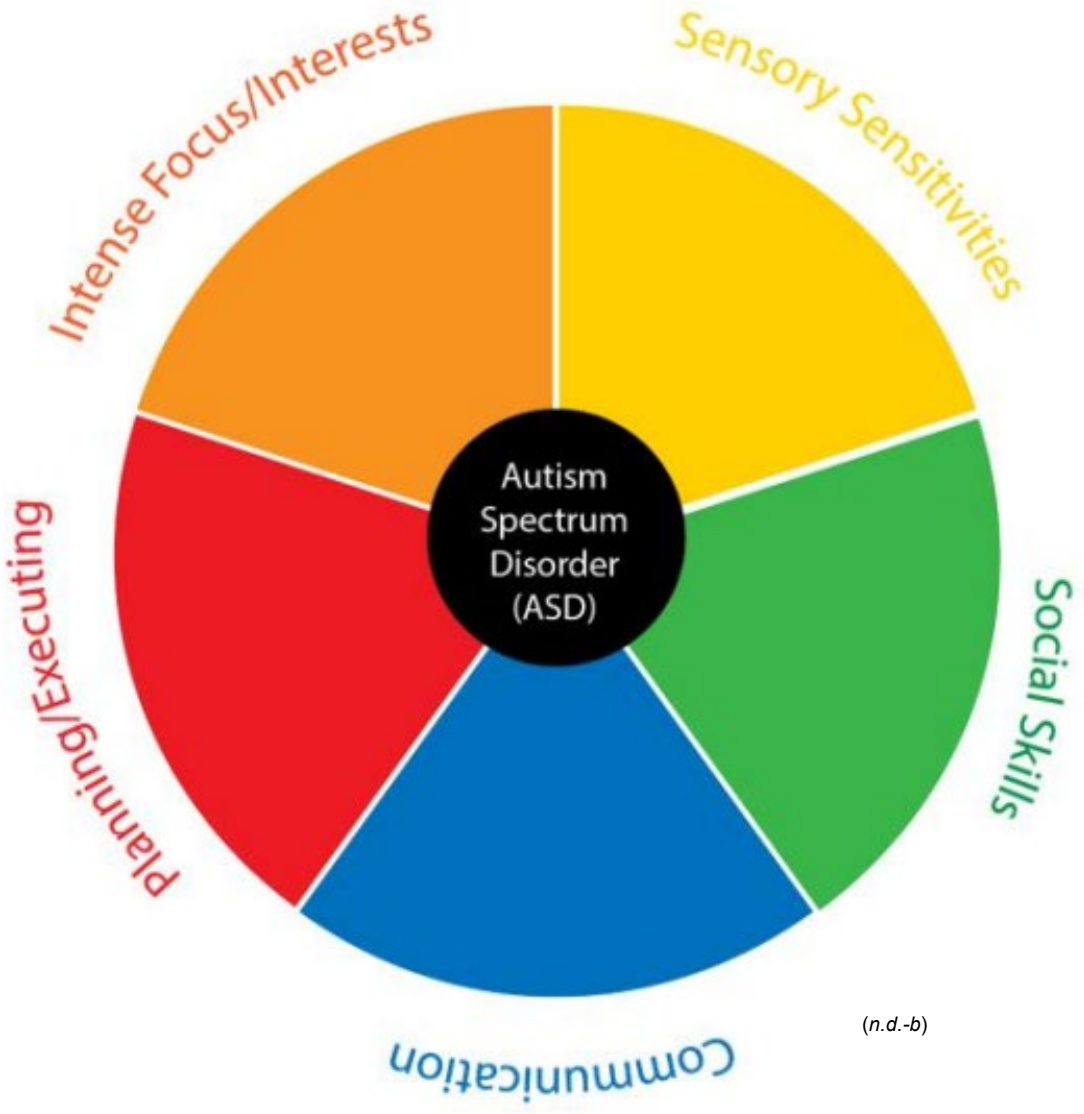
Find ways to adapt and overcome; Strong in routine and reliability; Determined and hard-working

Reconceptualizing Autism

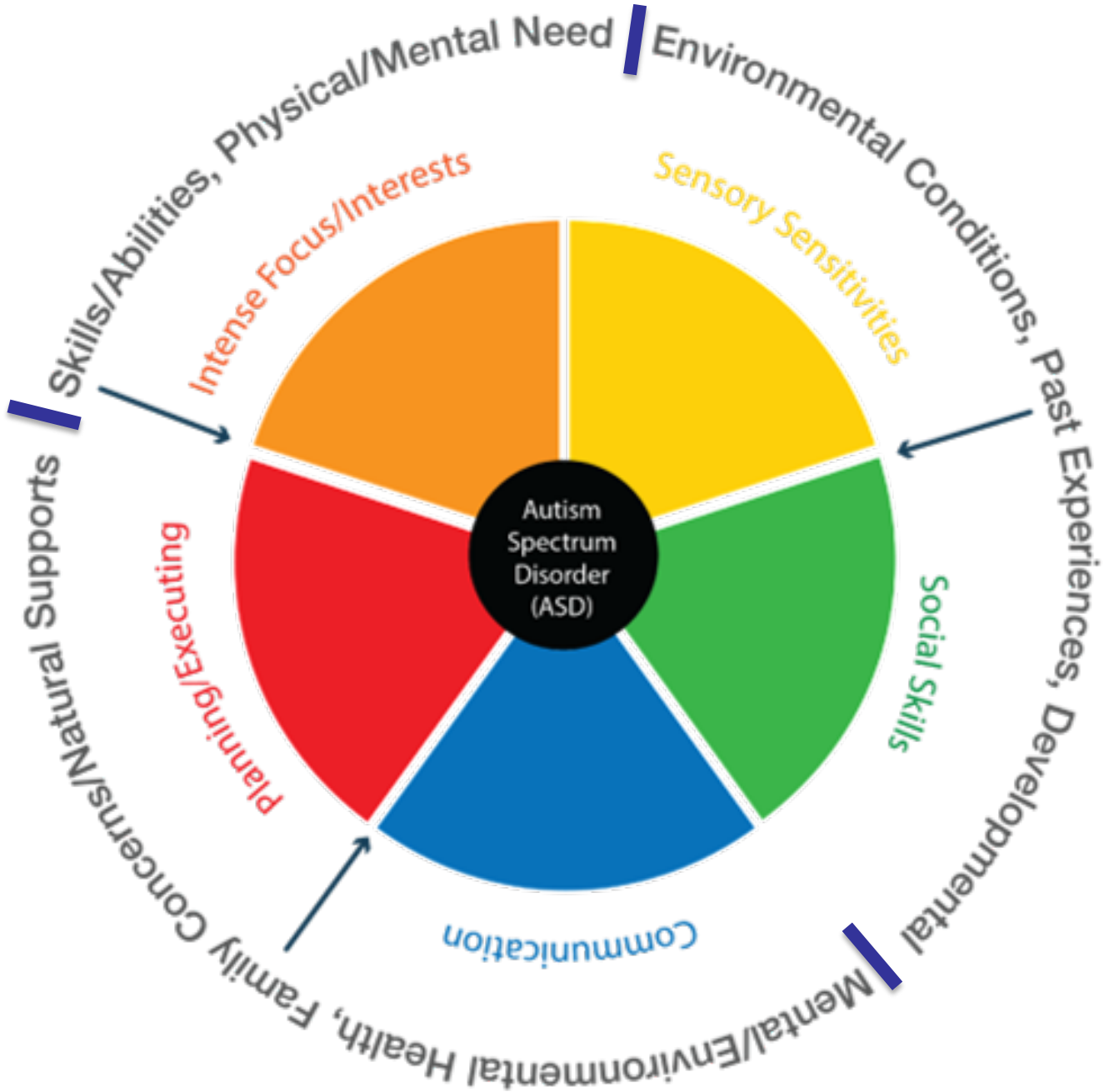
Autism is not linear

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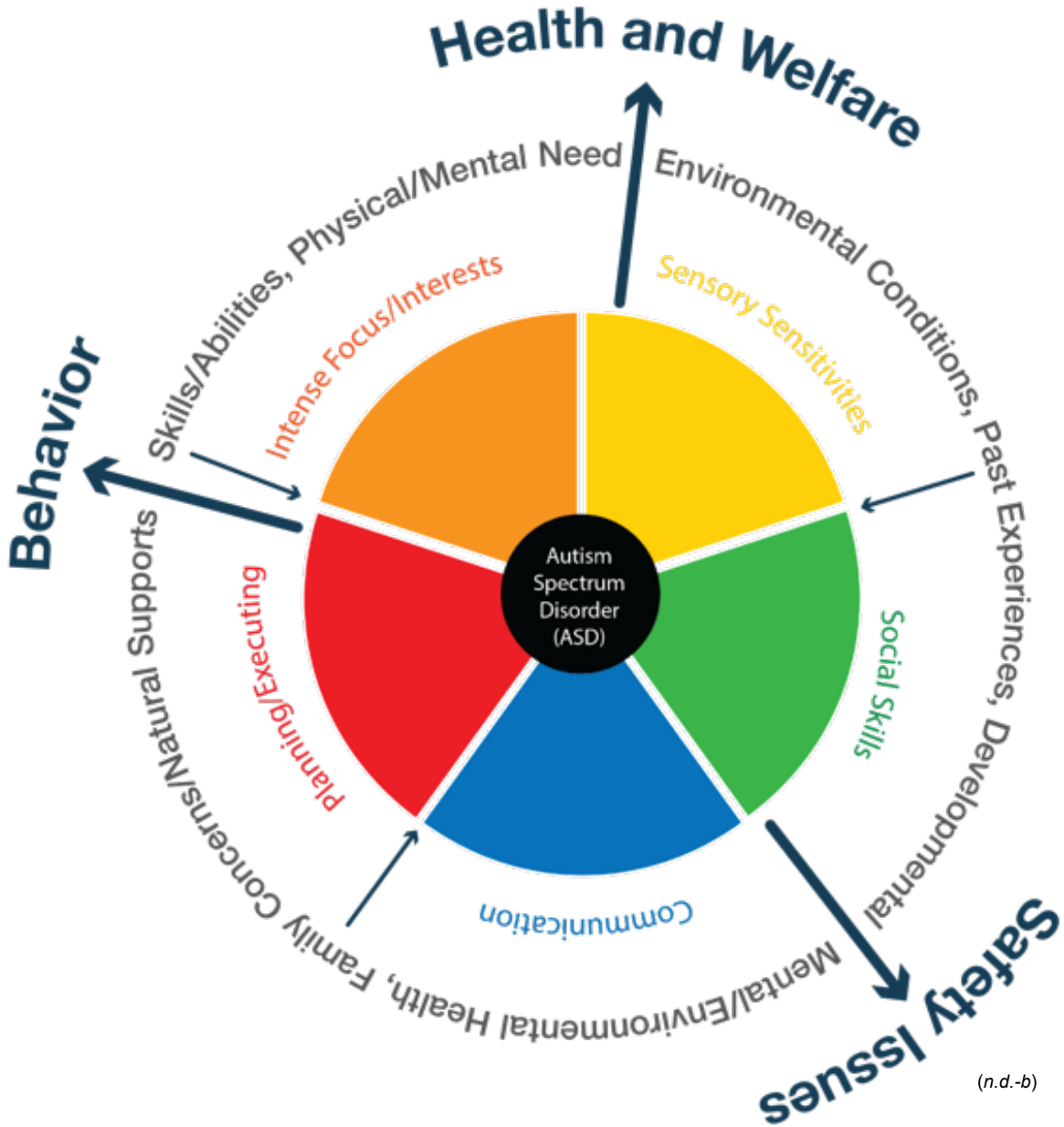




(*n.d.-b*)


Skills/Abilities, Physical/Mental Need
Environmental Conditions, Past Experiences, Developmental
Mental/Environmental Health, Family Concerns/Natural Supports
Intense Focus/Interests
Sensory Sensitivities
Social Skills
Communication
Planning/Executing
Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

(*n.d.-b*)


Health and Welfare
Skills/Abilities, Physical/Mental Need
Environmental Conditions, Past Experiences, Developmental
Behavior
Safety Issues
Intense Focus/Interests
Sensory Sensitivities
Social Skills
Communication
Planning/Executing
Mental/Environmental Health, Family Concerns/Natural Supports
Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

(*n.d.-b*)

Understanding Through an Environment and Behavior Lens

What we see

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What We See

(Henricks, D.R.2010)

- “Noncompliant”
- “Rude”
- “Lazy”
- “Obsessive”
- “Ignoring others”
- “Manipulative”
- “Defiant”



What May Be Happening

(Ambitious about Autism, 2016)

- Overwhelmed
- Literal Interpretation
- Executive functioning difficulty
- Regulation/ safety/ predictability
- Processing overload
- Anxiety, confusion, or attempt to gain predictability
- Difficulty processing information

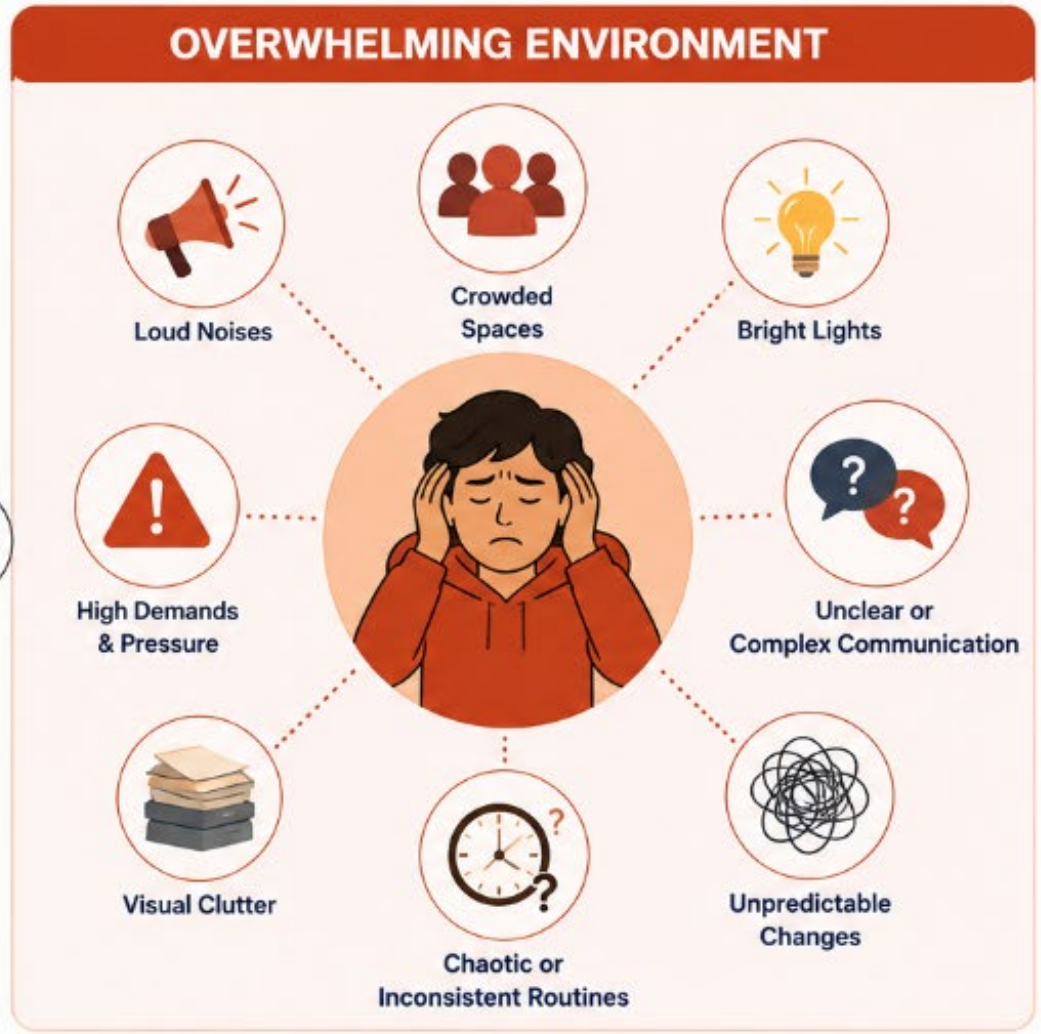
Behavior is communication.
Understanding what’s behind the behavior helps us respond more effectively.

Environmental Impact

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Environment can significantly impact communication, regulation, and behavior.





(Davis, N.O. & Carver, A.S, 2008)

(American Psychiatric Association, 2022)

What might this look like in different settings

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Behavior or characteristic:	This could look like
People previously labeled as “high functioning”	Support needs being underestimated or overlooked
Theory of Mind differences	Appearing dismissive, rude, or lacking empathy
Overstimulation (cognitive processing and/or sensory)	Avoiding eye contact, appearing inattentive, walking away, delayed responses, appearing disrespectful
Overstimulation expressed behaviorally	Escalation, emotional outbursts, threatening language, or unsafe behaviors
Curiosity or lack of understanding of boundaries (sometimes related to sex or relationships)	Inappropriate conversations, boundary violations, or misunderstood intent
Difficulty understanding nuance, sarcasm, complex language, or “gray areas”	Misunderstanding expectations, rigid thinking, avoidance, or false admissions
Difficulty socializing or connecting with others	Isolation, withdrawal, appearing uninterested in relationships, or vulnerability to manipulation

(Hodgdon, H, 2018, Neurodiversity in Corrections Initiative, 2020)

Continued…

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Behavior or characteristic:	This could look like
Executive functioning difficulties	Missing steps, difficulty following multi-step directions, appearing noncompliant or disorganized
Anxiety related to unpredictability or transitions	Repetitive questioning, resistance to change, increased agitation, or shutdown
Intense interests or hyperfocus	Repeated focus on certain topics, routines, or activities
Communication differences	Literal interpretation, delayed responses, difficulty explaining thoughts clearly
Sensory sensitivities	Difficulty tolerating noise, lights, crowds, touch, or chaotic environments
Difficulty processing information quickly	Delayed compliance, appearing inattentive, or difficulty responding under pressure
Emotional regulation difficulties	Escalation, withdrawal, impulsive reactions, or emotional shutdown

(American Psychiatric Association, 2022, Laiberta Rudman, D. 2013)

Why This Matters

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When Individual Differences are Misunderstood

- Increased escalation during staff interactions
- Difficulty following rapid verbal directions
- Misinterpretation of behavior as defiance or manipulation
- Increased disciplinary incidents
- Communication breakdowns
- Vulnerability to victimization or exploitation by others
- Difficulty adjusting to unpredictable environments or sudden changes
- Increased risk of false confessions or misunderstood statements

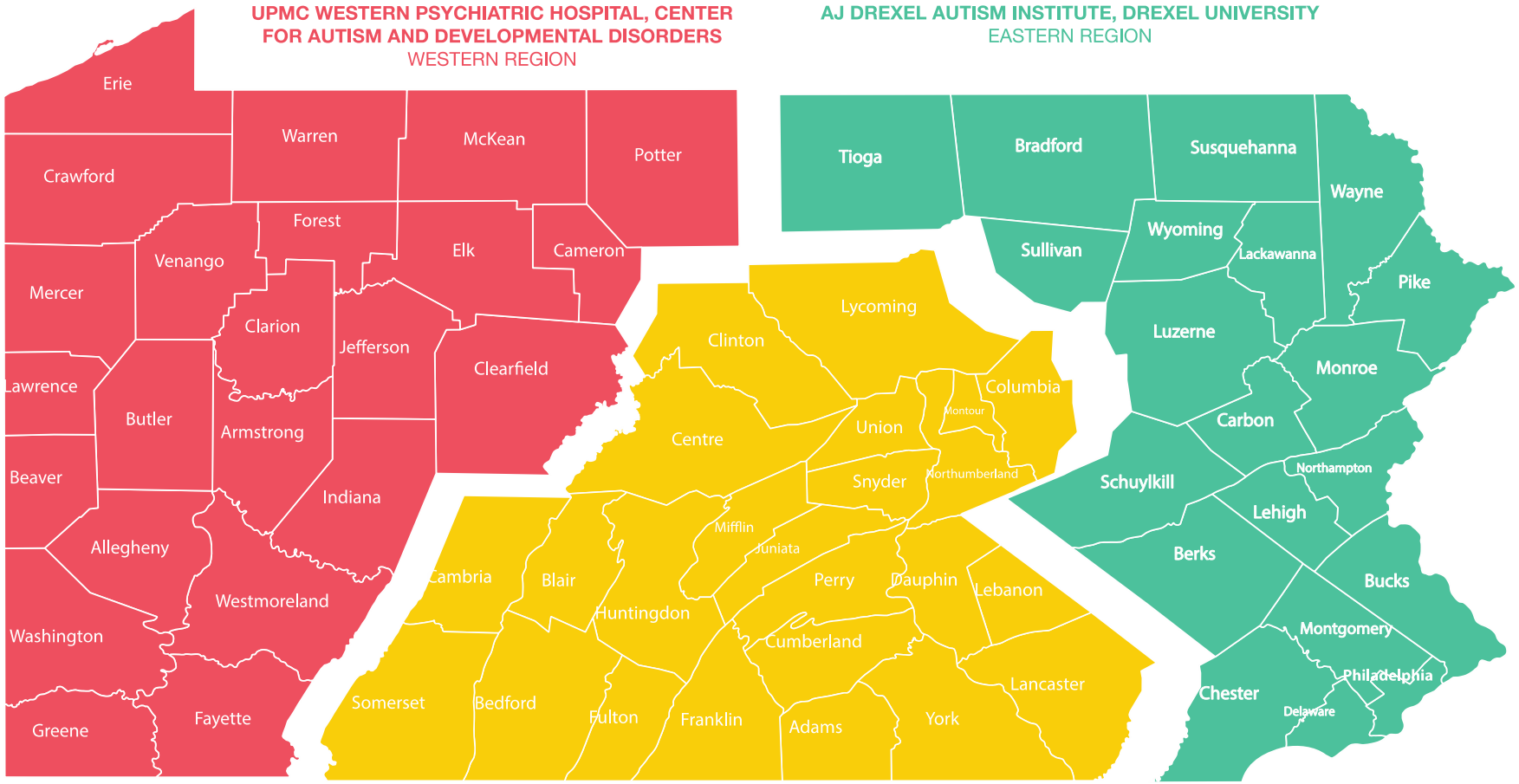
When Individual Differences are Understood

- Improved communication and clearer expectations
- More effective de-escalation opportunities
- Better identification of support and accommodation needs
- Increased safety for incarcerated individuals and staff
- Reduced unnecessary escalation and disciplinary responses
- Improved engagement and compliance through individualized approaches
- Greater understanding of behaviors related to sensory, communication, or executive functioning challenges

(Debbaudt, 2002; King & Murphy, 2014; Helverschou et al., 2015)

ASERT

ASERT: Autism, Services, Education, Resources, and Training



ASERT
Bringing autism resources together.

PAautism.org

What does ASERT do?



EDUCATE

Individuals with autism and their families, professionals, and community members



BUILD

Resources, programs, and innovative projects



SUPPORT & CONNECT

The autism community throughout Pennsylvania to local, regional, and statewide resources



MEASURE

Data, needs, and change

Role and Purpose of ASERT

Bring together local, regional, and statewide resources



Develop innovative projects based on data, community need, and commonwealth priorities



Support (not replace) existing community efforts and activities

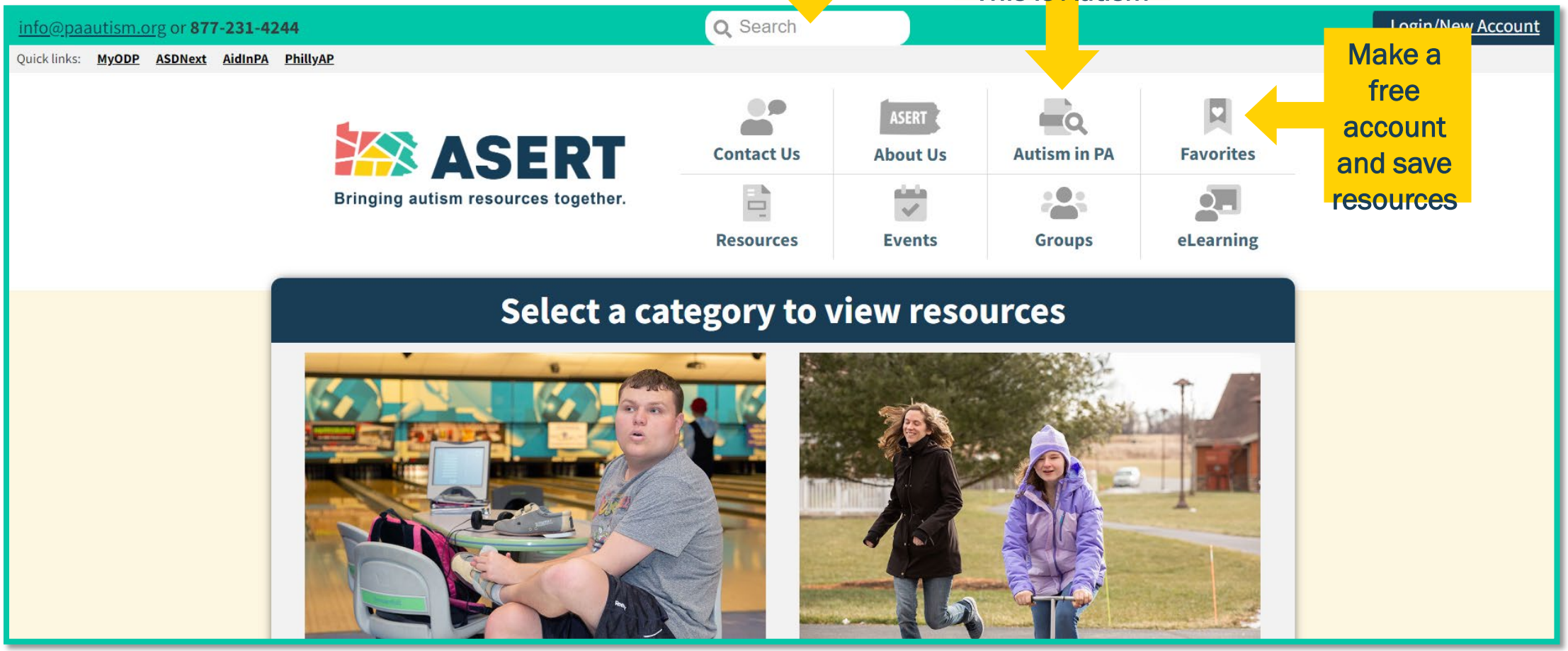


PAautism.org

Search across the entire website, across the tabs

PA Autism Census, PA Autism Needs Assessment, This is Autism

Make a free account and save resources



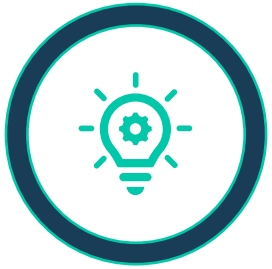
What is ASDNext?

- Website, resource and connection for autistic individuals transitioning to adulthood

- The goal is to make the transition a little easier by:
  - Connecting individuals to others with shared experiences
  - Providing a community of resources information and support



ASDNext Highlights



Resources

- Dating
- Coronavirus
- Transition



Blogs

- 18 bloggers from across the commonwealth
- Variety of experiences and topics
- Themed responses



Community Page

- Discord chats
- Interest surveys
- Events
- Blogs
- Word games

AIDinPA.org

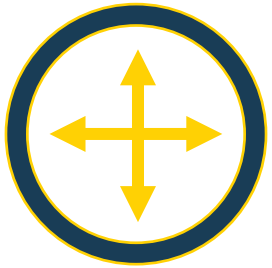
- Dedicated to supporting individuals with autism and intellectual disabilities
- Assists parents, caregivers, professionals, and communities across Pennsylvania
- Collaboration between ASERT, #ASDNext, Philly Autism Project, and the HCQUs, under Pennsylvania's ODP

AID in PA
Autism and Intellectual Disabilities in Pennsylvania

Redefined Focus



Began with real-time resource development in response to the COVID-19 pandemic



Expanded to supporting the broader ID/A population



Redefined focus on health promotion, public health, and the ID/A community

LANTERN

- Courses for:
  - Self-advocates
  - Direct Support Professionals
  - Clinicians
  - Caregivers
  - Community Members
- Print, videos and interactive content
- Topics include mental health overviews and strategies, neurodiversity, resilience, clinical competencies

https://paautism.org/eLearning/



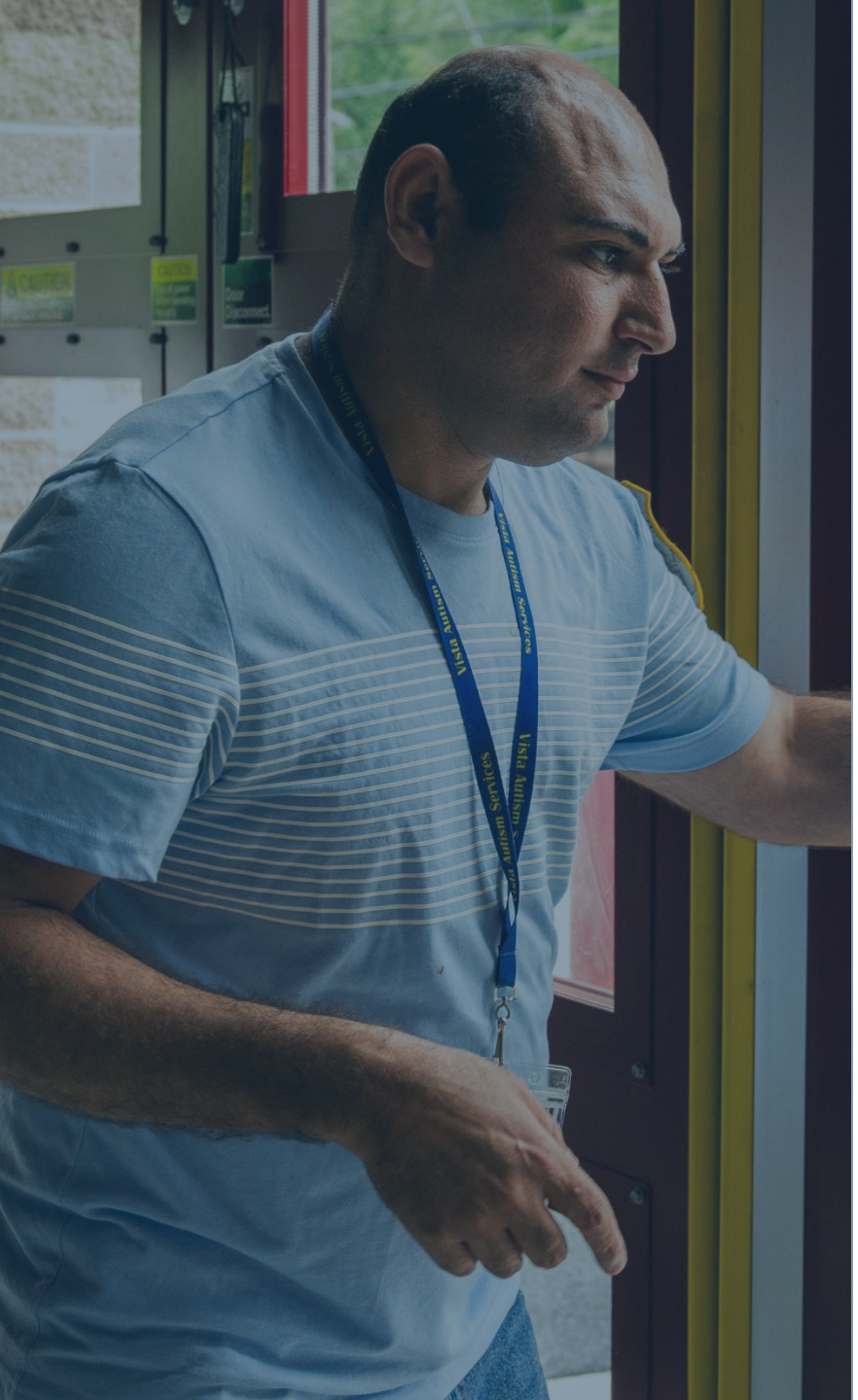
Autism Unmasked Podcast



- Expert interviews and self-advocate discussion
- Share resources, amplify lived experiences and answer everyday questions
- Topics include accommodations, the diagnosis process, navigating relationships, & more!

Available at the link below or on podcast platforms including Spotify, Apple Podcasts, and Audible!

paautism.org/resource/autism-unmasked/



Resource Center Operations and Processes

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IMPORTANT: ASERT is NOT a Crisis Line



ASERT does not offer crisis services through our Resource Center. If you or someone you love is experiencing mental health distress or thoughts of suicide please **call or text 988 for support.**

When to Contact ASERT

When to Call

- To learn about supports and services available in Pennsylvania.
- For resources on emergency preparedness and mental health.
- If you live in Pennsylvania or are moving to Pennsylvania and have questions about autism supports and services.
- For tips and resources on choosing the right provider.
- For recommendations on where to find grants and other funding.
- To promote autism-related events in Pennsylvania that are free or low-cost.
- To request an autism-related training.

When Not to Call

- To enroll in direct supports and services.
- During an emergency or mental health crisis. Call 911 or 988.
- If you live outside of Pennsylvania and have questions about autism supports and services in your area.
- For specific provider recommendations.
- To directly receive grants and other types of funding from ASERT.
- To promote fundraisers, high-cost, or out-of-state events.
- For financial or legal advice.

What Happens After Contact to the Resource Center?



Calls and emails are reviewed for location (if provided) and content and a “ticket” is created before regional distribution

Eastern Region
Eastern region counties, justice inquiries, PA Autism Needs Assessment, PA Autism Census

Central Region
Central region counties, social skills inquiries

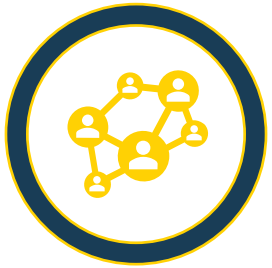
Western Region
Western region counties, unspecified counties, interest list inquiries

How Can We be Reached?



By Phone

- English and Spanish
- “Warm Line”



Social Media

- Facebook
- Twitter
- Instagram
- LinkedIn



Email

- English and Spanish
- info@paautism.org
- paautism.org/contact



Resource Bundles and Spotlights

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Medicaid Waivers for Individuals with Autism

- Waiver overviews
- Support programs
- Services offered
- Registering in Pennsylvania
  - Functional eligibility criteria
  - Applying for services through your county
  - Checklist for registering with your county

paautism.org/resource/waivers/



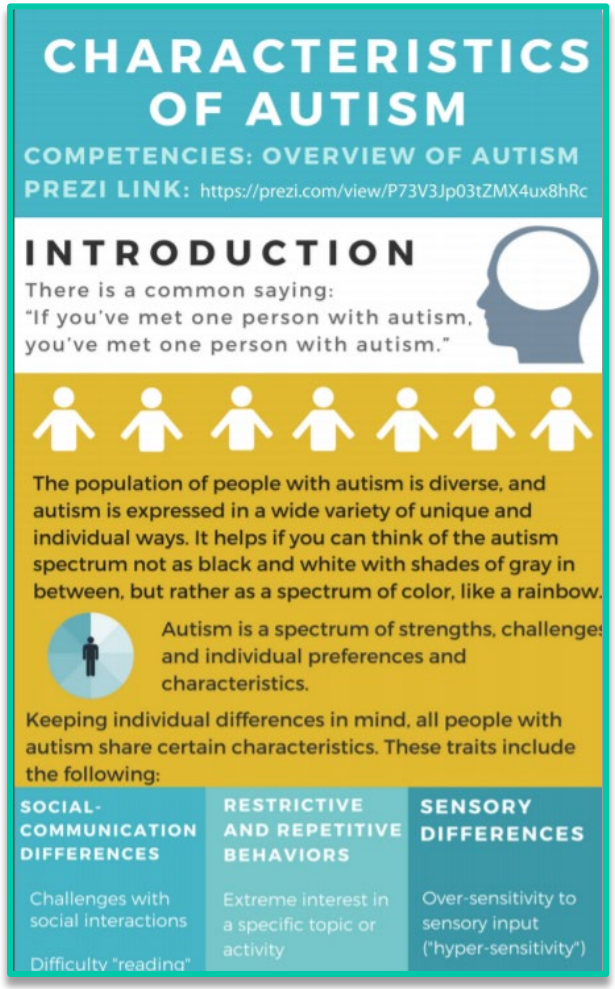
Support Professional Resources

- Information about Autism
- Mental Health
- Social Stories
- Relationships
- Daily Life
- Rapport Building
- Goal Setting
- Safety/Crisis Management
- Professionalism
- Service Navigation



paautism.org/supportprofessionals

Support Professional Resources







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Justice Resource Collection

Are you looking for resources about autism and justice system?

- Background Information
- ASERT Justice Trainings
- Social Stories
- Resources for Professionals

paautism.org/justice

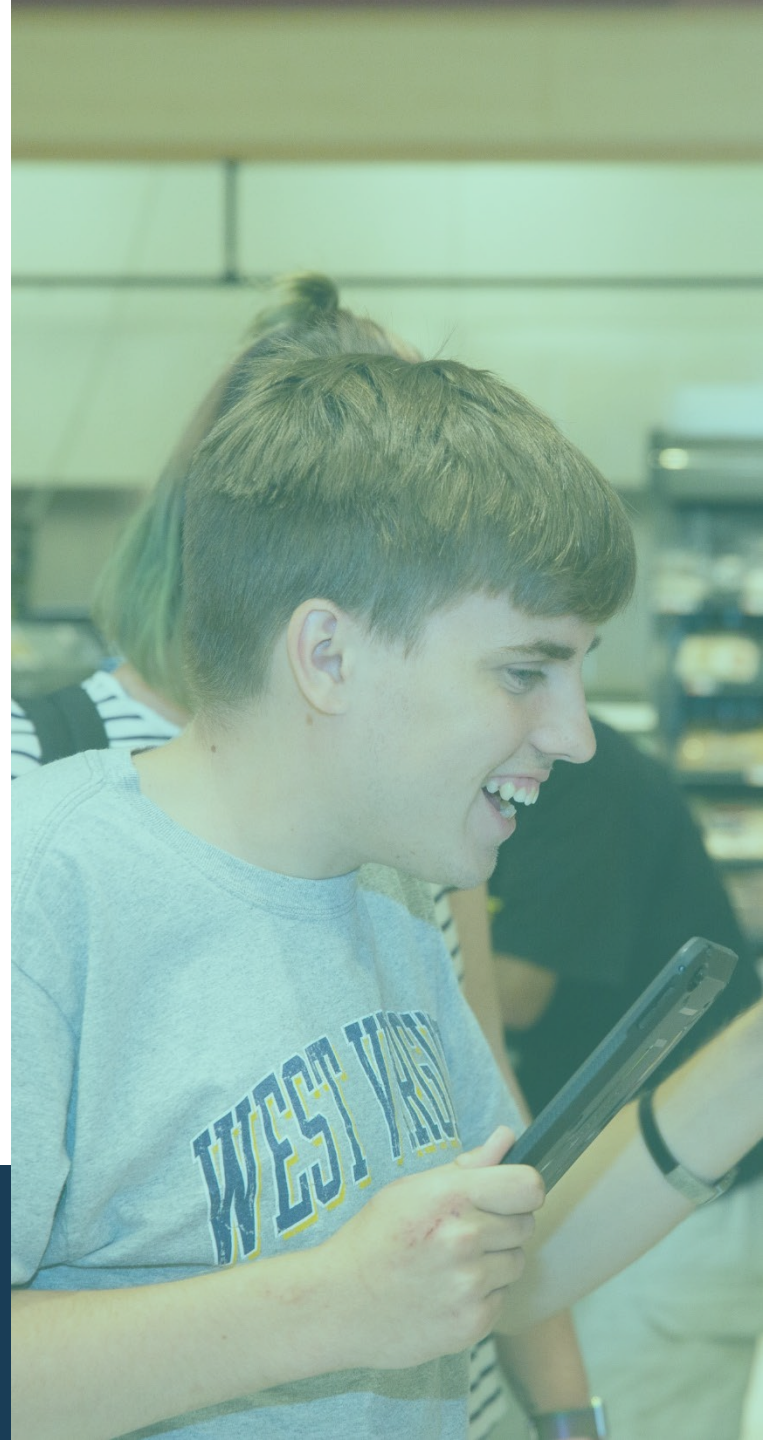


Transition Toolkit Collection

Are you looking for transition resources throughout the lifespan?

- Newly diagnosed
- Ages 0-5
- Ages 5-11
- Ages 11-21
- Ages 18-26
- Older Adults
- Lifespan

paautism.org/transitiontoolkit



Be Safe Resources

Are you looking for resources about victimization?

- Prevention resources
- Intervention resources

Be Safe
Ask. Listen. Respect.

paautism.org/besafe

Be Well, Think Well Resources

Are you looking for resources about mental health?

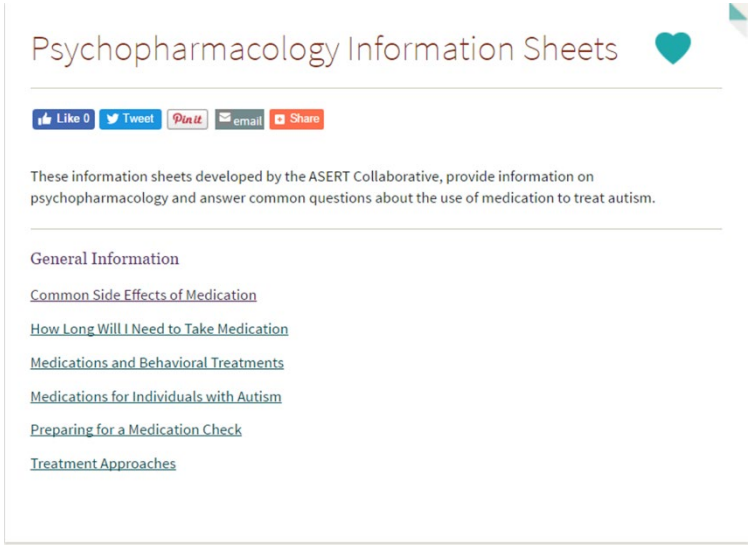
- Mental health resources
- Special topics resources
- Social stories



paautism.org/bewell

Psychopharmacology Information Sheets

Are you looking for information about medications and autism?



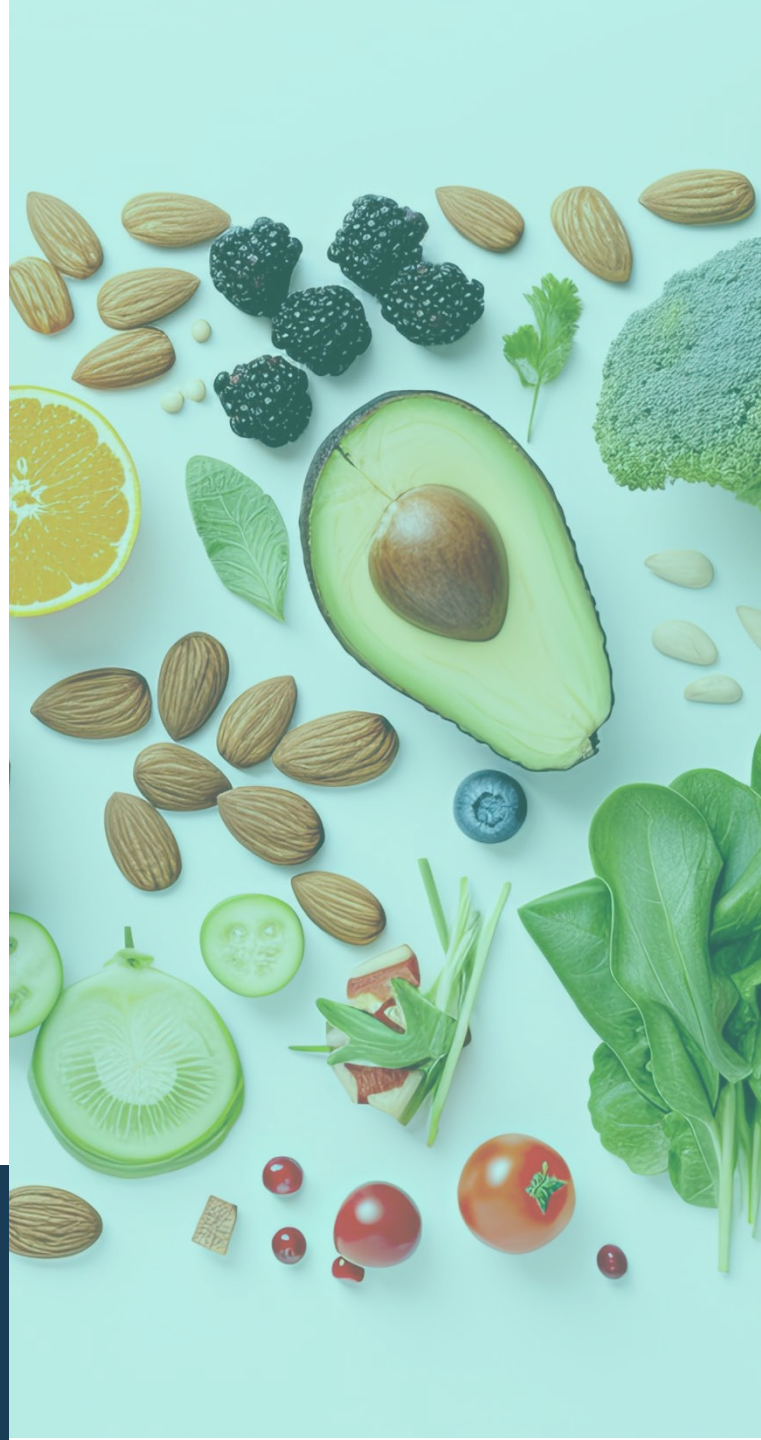


paautism.org/pharminfo

Physical Health Resource Bundle

Are you looking for resources about medical conditions in individuals with autism?

- General Resources
- Resources about Sleep Issues
- Resources about Seizure Disorders
- Resources about GI Issues
- Resources about Obesity-Related Conditions



paautism.org/health

LGBTQI Resource Page

Are you looking for resources and information about the LGBTQI community for participants or families?

- Background Information
- Resources for Parents and Families
- Resources for Individuals
- Resources for Policymakers and Providers

paautism.org/LGBTQI



Visual Schedule Resources

Are you looking for resources about using visual schedules?

- How to Create Visual Schedules
- Other Resources



paautism.org/visual

Social Story Resource Collection

ASERT Social Stories

- How to make your own social story
- Other Social Stories
- Social Stories for Adults



paautism.org/socialstories

Fire Safety Resource Page

Are you looking for information about fire safety and autism?

- Fire and rescue
- Safety signals and tips
- Social stories

paautism.org/firesafety



Connect with ASERT!

ASERT

@ASERTPAautism

@asert_paautism

@ASERT

ASDnext

@ASERT ASDNext

@asert_asdnext

AID in PA

@AIDinPennsylvania

@aid_in_pa

@AID in PA

Scan here to sign up for ASERT's newsletter!

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PAautism.org

Website: www.PAautism.org

Email: info@PAautism.org

Phone: 877-231-4244

ASERT is funded by the Bureau of Supports for Autism and Special Populations, Office of Developmental Programs, PA Department of Human Services

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Additional Resources and Support Information

MyODP

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- **Skill Building Courses-** https://www.myodp.org/course/view.php?id=2588
- **SPeCTRUM-** https://www.myodp.org/course/index.php?categoryid=411
- **Person Centered Behavioral Supports-** https://www.myodp.org/course/view.php?id=1864
- **Functional Behavioral Assessments-** https://www.myodp.org/course/view.php?id=1644
- **Behavioral Supports-** https://www.myodp.org/course/index.php?categoryid=515

HCQUs – Health Care Quality Units

Pennsylvania Department of Human Services

HCQU Region	Organization	Lead County	Partner Counties
Central	https://www.geisinger.org/hcqu	Northumberland	Blair, Centre, Columbia/Montour/Snyder/Union, Huntingdon/ Mifflin/Juniata, Lycoming/Clinton, Schuylkill
Eastern	http://www.easternpa-hcqu.org/	Carbon, Monroe, Pike	Berks, Lehigh, Northamption
Northeast	http://www.nepa-hcqu.org/	Lackawanna, Susquehanna, Wayne	Bradford/Sullivan, Luzerne/Wyoming, Tioga
Northwest	http://milestonepa.org/health-care-quality-units/milestone-hcqu-west	Clearfield, Jefferson	Forest/Warren, Cameron/Elk, McKean, Erie, Potter
South Central	http://www.southcentralpa-hcqu.org/	Cumberland, Perry	Adams/York, Dauphin, Franklin/Fulton, Lancaster, Lebanon
Southeast	http://www.pchc.org/	Philadelphia	Bucks, Chester, Delaware, Montgomery
Southwest	https://hcqu.kepro.com/	Westmoreland	Allegheny, Bedford/Somerset, Cambria, Fayette, Greene, Washington
West	http://milestonepa.org/health-care-quality-units/milestone-hcqu-west	Butler	Armstrong/Indiana, Beaver, Clarion, Venango, Crawford, Mercer, Lawrence

The Link Center – thelinkcenter.org

Pennsylvania
Department of Human Services



Advancing systems of care for people with co-occurring conditions

The Link Center works to improve supports for children and adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD), brain injuries, and other cognitive disabilities who also experience mental health conditions.

References Available Upon Request

THANK YOU!

If you have any questions about the resources within this PowerPoint, you can email me at ra-basprovidersupprt@pa.gov