



Embracing Every Mind: Autism & Community Connection

A Family Event for Autism Acceptance Month
Jessie Paige LEND Family Advocate, 2024-25



Project Overview & Goal

Project: Designed and led a school-based autism awareness event featuring sensory activity stations, a family-friendly presentation, and a resource guide to promote inclusion and understanding among students, families, and educators.

➤ Problem Statement:

- Many school community members, including educators and families, lack autism awareness – perpetuating systemic ableism, isolation, shame and significant mental health impacts.

➤ Project Goal:

- To promote autism acceptance and understanding through an interactive family event and a bilingual (English/Spanish) resource guide during Autism Acceptance Month at Isabella Bird Community School, Denver, Colorado.

➤ Mental Health Context:

- 40% of autistic youth meet the criteria for anxiety (van Steensel et al. 2011)
- 28-34% of autistic youth meet the criteria for depression (Ghaziuddin, et al.; Strange et al. 2012)

➤ Audience:

- School families, educators and community members

Methods

How I Developed the Project

- Conducted Interviews with educators, administrators, school psychologists, autism families and community members with no personal connection to autism
 - Explored gaps in knowledge, misconceptions and what types of information each group wanted.
- Collaborated with occupational therapists and community leaders experienced in sensory tools
 - Co-developed sensory station activities based on best practices in sensory integration and accessibility
- Partnered with members of the Spanish-speaking community at the school to co-create bilingual materials.
- Applied feedback from interviews to shape content and tone of both the event and the bilingual resource guide
- Aligned materials with age range needs – from early elementary-aged students through adults

Event Overview

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- Hosted at Isabella Bird Community School on April 27th during Autism Acceptance Month
- Interactive Sensory Stations for participants to explore the 8 senses: sight, hearing, touch, taste, smell, proprioception, vestibular and interoception
- Age-inclusive activities and materials were designed to engage early elementary-aged children through adults, encouraging empathy and understanding across all age groups
- Bilingual education signage and resource material in English and Spanish supported accessibility for families
- Bilingual take-home resource guide – created for an audience ranging from early elementary-aged children through adults - was shared via QR code at the event and emailed to the entire school community to support continued learning at home.
- Collaboration with school senior administration, educators, OTs, PTCA and a local autism sensory store for planning and materials.

Methods

Creating the Resource Guide

- Collaborated with the school's community committee to identify key needs:
 - Books and videos that families could explore together at home.
- Presented curated materials to gather feedback and invited additional content suggestions, which were also reviewed and considered
- Selected final resources included:
 - Books for early/pre-readers, big kids and adults
 - A short, animated film and a documentary film
 - A small sampling of books written by autistic adults
 - Three short videos created by an autistic youth and young adult.
 - Websites for more information and resources
- Wrote the guide in plain and kid-friendly language to support accessibility and shared learning across age groups
- Created both English and Spanish versions, co-developed with Spanish-speaking members of the school community.

Resource Guide

WHAT IS AUTISM, EXACTLY?

April is Autism Acceptance Month! Explore these family-friendly books, films, and websites to learn, connect, and celebrate [neurodiversity](#).

This guide was created by Jessie Paige, a LEND Family Advocate with JFK Partners at the CU Anschutz Medical Campus.

Grown-Ups Need Stories Too!

Books for parents, caregivers, and curious adults who want to learn, reflect, and grow.

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Perfect picks for upper elementary readers who are ready to explore autism, friendship, and what makes us all unique.

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Sweet and simple stories that help young kids understand, accept, and celebrate differences from the very start.

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[My Brother Charlie](#) by Holly Robinson Peete



Do you know why the rainbow infinity symbol is used to celebrate autism?

The rainbow infinity symbol represents [neurodiversity](#). The rainbow shows the wide range of ways people think, feel, and experience the world, and the infinity shape reminds us that there are endless ways to be ourselves. Everyone's brain is different—and that's something to celebrate!

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Want to learn more? Need community resources? These sites are a great start!

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[Autism Society of Colorado](#)
[AUCD](#)
[The Arc of Colorado](#)
[Ask An Autistic](#)

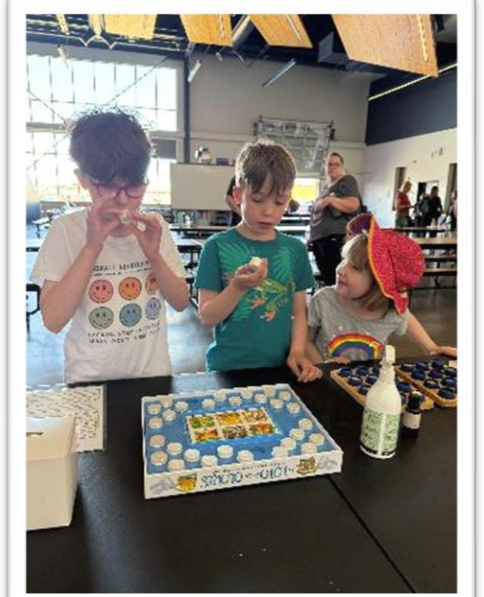
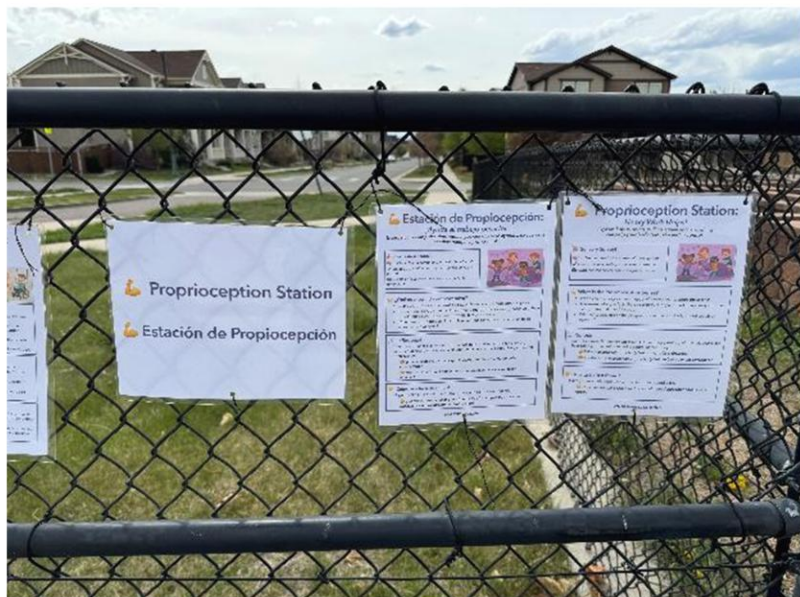
[Neurowonderful](#)
[Rocky Mountain Human Services](#)
[Alliance](#)
[JFK Partners, Dept of Pediatrics, CU School of Medicine](#)
[Colorado Neurodiversity Chamber of Commerce](#)



More from LEND

This project was supported in part by the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) under the Leadership Education in Neurodevelopmental Disabilities (LEND) Grant T32AC11044 and by the Administration on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (AIDD) under the University Center of Excellence in Developmental Disabilities (UCEDD) Grant 90DU00106 of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). This information or content and conclusion are those of the author and should not be construed as the official position or policy of, nor should HRSA, HHS or the U.S. Government infer any endorsement.

Event Day



Outcomes & Reflections

Survey Highlights

➤ **31 Attendees, 26% survey response**

➤ **Knowledge & Confidence Gained**

- 100% said the presentation increased their knowledge.
- 100% felt satisfied with the knowledge and skills
- 88% feel more confident talking about autism (12% neutral, 0% disagreed).

➤ **Accessibility & Sensory Engagement:**

- 88% agreed the materials were accessible and easy to understand.
- 75% strongly agreed the sensory stations supported understanding sensory differences and experiences

Outcomes & Reflections

Survey Highlights

➤ Participant reflections:

- “I loved how open and loving you were with your daughters too. If there’s any kind of parent group at IBCS or just Denver I would love to connect, going through a rough time w ASD over here. Thank you so much!!! I really thought you were amazing to share the way that you did!”
- “The glasses analogy was especially helpful.”
- “Seeing other ASD families made me feel connected and less anxious about my son’s (5yo) behavior.”



Limitations & Future Considerations

The event primarily drew families already connected to the autism community:

- Although the school has a 10% identified autistic student population, we hoped to reach more of the remaining 90%.
- Holding the event alongside two other school activities and offering free lunch boosted attendance but did not broaden the audience as intended
- The cafeteria was a functional space as a 'lunch and learn' event, but it was not ideal for a presentation and guided conversation
- In the future, delegating sensory station design and set up would allow more time to focus on facilitating the presentation and discussion




Dissemination & Next Steps

- Developing proposals to share the product model with Denver Public Schools and other Colorado districts.
- Developing an online training based on the presentation materials, to be hosted through JFK Partners for educators, families and community members
- Exploring opportunities to support schools in hosting similar Autism Acceptance events
- Wrote the guide in plain and kid-friendly language to support accessibility and shared learning across age groups
- Seeking collaboration with educators, families, and disability organizations to refine and grow the reach of this work.



Personal Next Steps

- Enrolling in UC Denver's School of Public Affairs in Fall 2025 to pursue a graduate certificate in Entrepreneurship and Advocacy
 - Continue to build on the skills and knowledge gained through LEND – including participation in the Disability Policy Seminar in Washington, D.C. and serving as a keynote speaker for IDD Awareness Day in Denver
 - Continue to build and strengthen relationships with families, educators, community partners, disability organizations, clinicians and researchers to deepen collaboration and impact
 - Committed to reducing stigma and shame around disability through visibility, education and authentic connection
 - Remaining focused on inclusive, community-driven efforts to support individuals with IDD
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Acknowledgements

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- The faculty and my fellow trainees of LEND and JFK Partners, CU Anschutz
- Principal Rebecca Mercer and School Psychologist Stephanie Patton, ED.S., NCSP of Isabella Bird Community School
- Kelly Etter and Daniela Garcia, Parents and Community Committee Co-Chairs at Isabella Bird Community School
- The PTCA and the volunteers at Isabella Bird Community School
- Shannon Sullivan, owner and founder of Autism Community Store
- My children, Phoebe and Lucy, for inspiring this work and showing me every day what true joy looks like.

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Appendix, continued



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