

A VEIL OF LIGHT ON AUTISM

Benjamin C. Frick

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When I was asked to choose an issue in diversity to discuss in this paper, Autism was the first word that came to my mind; I had found out I had Autism three years ago, so I was determined to know all I could about this disorder, because it was a part of me. But, I didn't know what type of issues society currently has with Autism, so I decided to consult with my Autism Support Teacher, Mrs. Jamalkowski, for more information. After several minutes of discussion, she told me that, "the general public is not aware that Autism is a spectrum disorder." So she gave me a list of websites, which provided plentiful information about this issue, and I began to investigate this topic.

I soon realized that the public was unaware about what Autism was. The Autism Society of America, a national organization that promotes Autism Awareness and helps families cope with people's Autism, claimed that the public was shocked when they were told that the occurrence of Autism had risen to 1 in every 110 births, and about 1 in every 70 boys (Autism Society of America). When the public realized this increase in Autism prevalence, this led the nation to consider how to help families whom have children with Autism (Autism Society of America). What I got out of this information was that if the public was this shocked when they realized that the prevalence of Autism had increased, they must have not been as aware of what Autism was in previous years. To understand the problem with a lack of Autism Awareness, however, one must know what Autism is.

In my research, I have refined and sharpened my previous understanding of what Autism is. Autism, also known as Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), is a neurological disorder that affects a person's ability to communicate, interact with others, and behave (Autism Society of NC). There are many forms of Autism including Classic Autism, Pervasive Developmental Disorder - Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS), and Asperger's Syndrome (Autism Society of

NC). Since Autism is a spectrum disorder, it has different effects on people and has varying degrees of severity (Autism Society of NC). Autism is commonly found with other disabilities (Autism Society of NC). There is also a lot of information on the demographics of Autism. According to an Autism & Developmental Disabilities Monitoring (ADDM) prevalence report done by the Centers of Disease Control and Prevention in 2009, "the prevalence of Autism had risen to 1 in 110 births in the United States, and almost 1 in 70 boys" (Autism Society of America). There are 1.5 million Americans living with Autism, and another 15 million Americans, many of whom are family members, educators and health care professionals are also affected by people with Autism (Autism Society of NC). The state of North Carolina has about 50,000 people living with Autism (Autism Society of NC). In addition, the occurrence of Autism is generally similar across the globe, but Autism is 4 times more prevalent in boys than girls (Autism Society of NC). This is not uncommon in developmental disabilities for boys to have a higher occurrence rate than girls (Autism.com). Also, the likelihood of someone getting Autism is not affected by family income, lifestyle, and educational levels and has no racial, ethnic, or social boundaries (Autism Society of NC).

To prove that Autism does not affect everyone the same, and affects all types of individuals, I will refer to my experiences at Sanderson High School. Throughout high school, I have visited my Autism Support Teacher, Mrs. Jamalkowski, to help me understand how Autism is affecting me in a particular situation, or to gain information about Autism related topics. While I'm there, I have seen and witnessed the various behaviors and the diversity of students with Autism at Sanderson. There are boys, girls, African Americans, white Americans, Jews and Christians. They come in a variety of intellectual, artistic, athletic levels, and live in various social classes. In addition, some of them are quiet, and some of them are very talkative. Some

of them also appear to have a much more severe case of Autism than others, indicated by their behaviors, which also vary from person to person.

So, one would think with all of this information about autism in place, the general public would know about Autism. But, according to Mrs. Jamalkowski, "the general public is not aware that Autism is a spectrum disorder." And they don't. Some common myths about people with Autism include, but are not limited to: people with Autism can't learn; Autism is a mental illness; individuals with Autism don't speak; Autism can be outgrown; and people with Autism do not want friends (Autism.com). These myths lead to misconceptions about Autism. A girl on a Disney Channel commercial claimed that, "Autism means you can't express yourself." But here I am expressing my views about Autism. I can speak; I have many friends, and wanted to have friends since I was little, and I can obviously learn - I'm a straight "A" student. So why is this lack of awareness a problem?

When parents are unaware about what Autism is, and find out their child has Autism, they become overwhelmed and stressed (Autism Society of America). Many times, this can hurt the child with Autism the most. Over the past few years of discovering the issues with Autism and families, by asking my parents a plethora of questions about Autism, I have been told about a common and very unfavorable realization. My mother claims that it is not uncommon for parents to argue over how and why their child had Autism instead of seeking help. Unfortunately for these children, according to the Autism Society of America, "treatment must begin as early as possible and be tailored to the child's unique strengths, weaknesses, and needs," and many of these treatments are generally used when the child is around three years old (Autism Society of America). This is because, treatment is most effective when the child is around 0-5

years old, and when the parents decide to help their child, this valuable time for treatment in a child's life is gone, making it even more difficult for their child to cope with their Autism.

As a result, this lack of intervention can make it more difficult for teachers to educate these students. The Autism Society of North Carolina shows that a symptom for someone having Autism is that they have difficulties adapting to a new routine or change (Autism Society of North Carolina). I know this is true, because I still have some difficulties adapting to new or unfamiliar situations. According to my mother, my early intervention helped me learn how to behave and become used to being in a classroom setting, which helped me learn in class. According to the Autism Society of America, "Intervention may help to lessen disruptive behaviors, and education can teach self-help skills that allow for greater independence" (Autism Society of America). But when the children do not receive appropriate treatments, such as early intervention, it becomes harder for them to learn how to behave in a classroom setting, because they have difficulties adapting to new situations. As a result, they may have disruptive behaviors, which can prevent them from learning these self-help skills, which can help them become more independent in learning. And when children misbehave, it becomes harder for teachers to calm them down, in an attempt to get the child to focus on what the teacher tries to teach them. But, what causes the lack of Autism Awareness in the first place?

According to Mrs. Jamalkowski, Autism was discovered in the 20th century, which can explain why the public does not have a strong understanding of Autism; she calls it a "baby disorder," because it was discovered relatively later than other disorders. And in the last generation, people who had Autism were mentally institutionalized, because at the time, even professionals thought Autism was a mental illness (Autism Society of America). And even

though that new research has shed new light on Autism, people may believe Autism is a mental illness, because the behaviors with Autism and mental illnesses are similar (Autism.com).

Also, the fact that Autism is a spectrum disorder can hide information from people. Some people, such as me, have such a mild form of Autism that, if one were to have a conversation with them, they would not suspect they had Autism, or any other kind of disorder. When people are not aware of this, however, they won't know that someone can seem perfectly normal, but still have Autism. If people knew that people, such as me, could still have Autism, but seem perfectly normal, they can understand that Autism is a spectrum disorder, which affects people with different levels of severity.

So what can we do about a lack of Autism awareness? Well, there is only one way to solve this problem: inform the public. But how can we do this?

There are organizations such as the Autism Society of America, which are designed to help families with children with Autism and inform the public about Autism. They promote Autism Awareness at different levels. Some, such as the Autism Society of America, promote Autism Awareness at a federal level. Other organizations, such as the Autism Society of North Carolina, promote Autism Awareness at a state level. At a local level, Autism Support Teachers inform teachers about how to teach children with Autism and help students adapt into the classroom setting, in order to help them learn the presented material.

In addition, research on Autism may be able to shed more light on the biological aspects of Autism, which, in turn, can help people understand how Autism affects a person's ability to communicate, behave, and interact. And, if this information is spread via organizations such as the Autism Society of America, the public will become even more informed about Autism.

When they get this information, they can put it to use in education and treatment programs in order to improve the lives of those who have Autism.

Autism Awareness, therefore, will lend a helping hand to families trying to help their child with Autism and the educators who teach them. When parents learn that early intervention and other treatment programs starting early in the child's life can have a significant impact on a child's life, they will help their child instead of fighting over how and why their child got Autism. Once the child gets help at an early age, they will gradually learn how to cope with unfamiliar situations, allowing them to behave in a classroom setting, which means they can focus on teacher instruction and learn the material. This also means that they can gradually learn to adapt to other unfamiliar situations in life, which, can make their lives a little less stressful. But, when families, educators, and health care professionals gain this knowledge, they must work together in order to make a difference in the lives of children with Autism. As Hillary Clinton once said, "it takes a village to raise a child."

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