



CENTER FOR
DEVELOPMENT
& DISABILITY

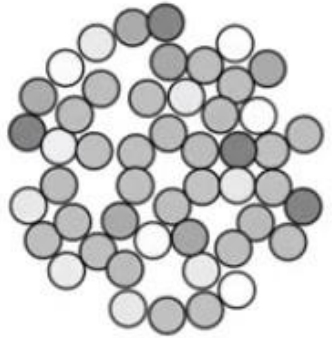
FOSTERING BELONGING AND INCLUSION FOR INDIVIDUALS WITH ASD

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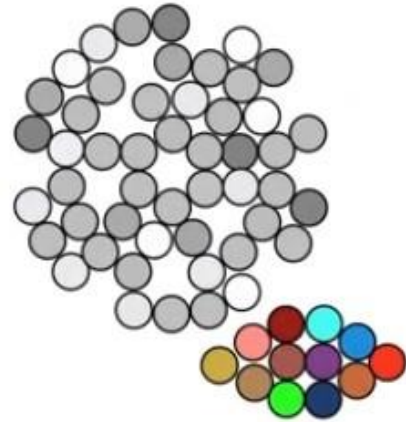
CONTRIBUTIONS FROM LENA ARMSTRONG-STROBER

Objectives

- Define and differentiate belonging, inclusion, and school connectedness, and explain why fostering belonging is especially critical for students with disabilities, including those with ASD.
- Apply an understanding of Autism Spectrum Disorder, using DSM-5-TR criteria, the spectrum nature of ASD, and current prevalence data, to recognize how autistic traits influence participation, relationships, and school belonging.
- Identify and implement inclusive, strength-based strategies at both the classroom and systems level that promote meaningful participation, peer connection, and a genuine sense of belonging for students with ASD.



Exclusion



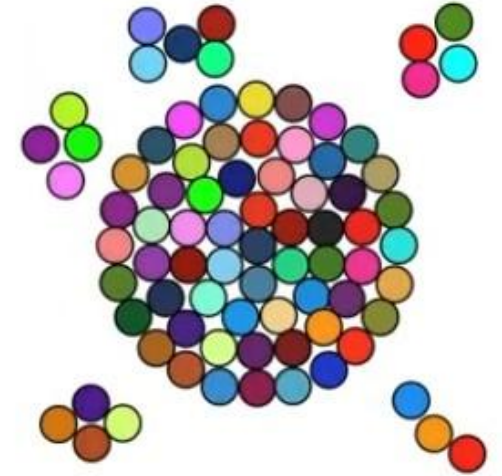
Segregation



Integration



Inclusion



Belonging

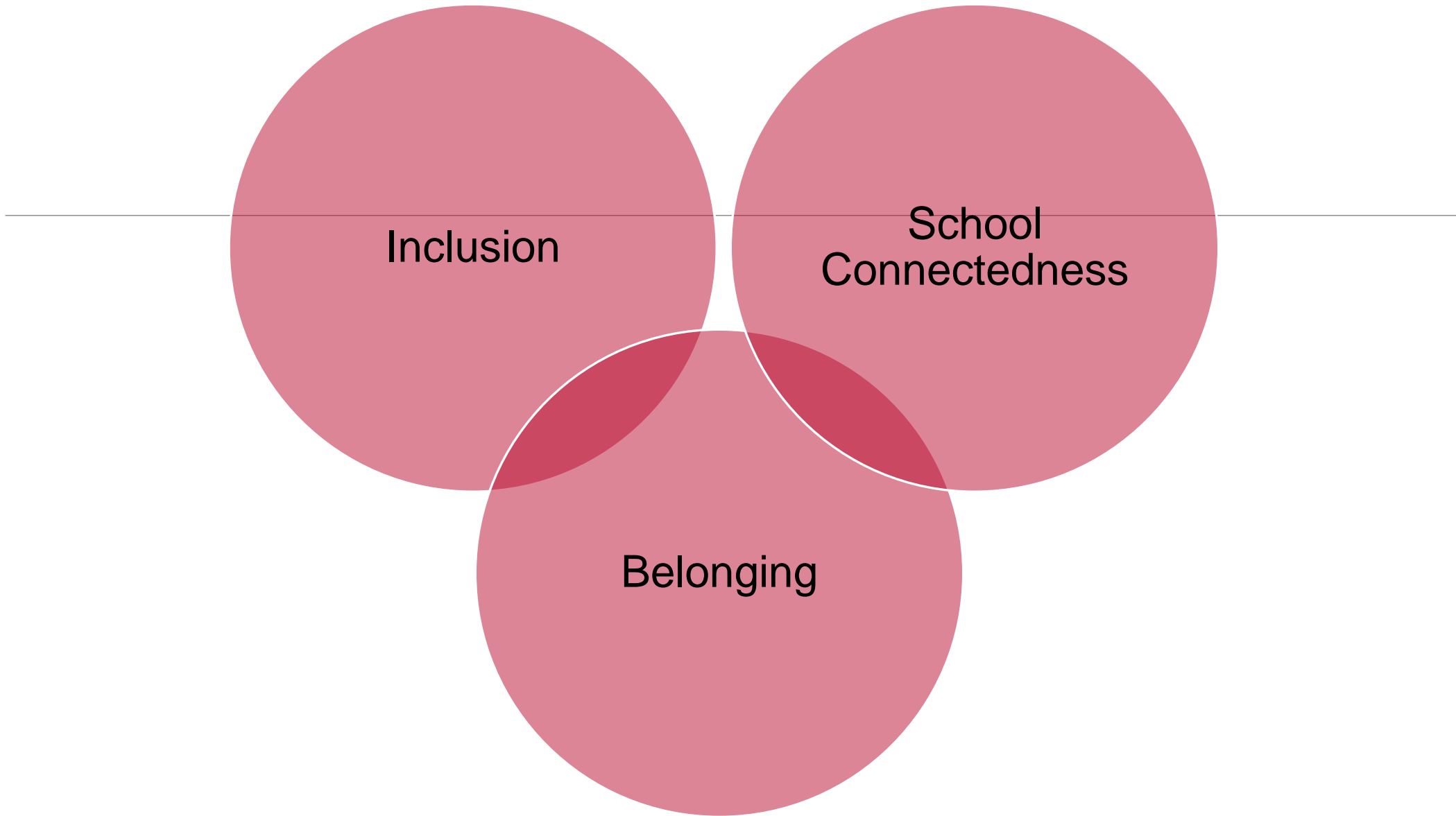
Carter, 2021

Inclusion, School Connectedness, Belonging

Inclusion – the practice of teaching students with disabilities in the same classroom as other students to the fullest extent possible, with appropriate supports (APA, 2023).

School Connectedness – The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) defines school connectedness as students' belief that adults and peers care, value, and support them in school.

School Belonging is “the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment” (Goodenow & Grady, 1993)



Construct	Level	Core Focus	Type of Experience	Example Question	School-Based Example
Inclusion	Structural / Systems Level	Access, Participation, Placement	Observable practices	Is the student included in the classroom?	Visual supports, sensory breaks
Connectedness	Relational / Interaction Level	Relationships, Support, Care	Perceived support	Do adults and peers care about me?	Check in Check out, Teacher or Peer Buddy
Belonging	Internal / Psychological	Acceptance, Identity, Value	Emotional experience	Do I feel like I matter here?	Student feels comfortable in class, peers understand differences and supports

Why Does it Matter?

STUDENTS WHO FEEL A STRONG SENSE OF BELONGING HAVE:

- higher engagement
- Better mental health
- Improved academic motivation and achievement
- Lower absenteeism
- Less with withdrawal
- Social connectedness
- Greater persistence

ALL THREE ARE ASSOCIATED WITH:

- Higher academic achievement
- Higher engagement
- Improved mental health
- Lower risky behaviors
- All are protective factors**

Challenges to Fostering Belonging for Students with Disabilities

- ❑ Belonging goes beyond physical inclusion
 - ❑ Students with disabilities may be present in general education settings yet feel socially isolated, unseen, or undervalued
 - ❑ Inclusion ≠ Belonging
- ❑ Key Challenges:
 - ❑ Social Isolation and Peer Barriers
 - ❑ Stigma, Bullying, and Microaggressions
 - ❑ Limited Authentic Relationships
 - ❑ Structural and Systemic Barriers
 - ❑ Identity and Masking Pressures
- ❑ For children with disabilities, fostering belonging is essential for **equity, access, well-being, and learning**, not just inclusion on paper.

What is Autism Spectrum Disorder?

- ❑ Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental condition present from early development
- ❑ Characterized by Differences in:
 - Social Communication and social interaction
 - Patterns of behavior, interests, or activities
 - Sensory processing differences are commonly associated and may impact learning and participation
- ❑ ASD is lifelong, though support needs, and presentation may change over time
- ❑ Autism exists on a spectrum, meaning students demonstrate a wide range of strengths, needs, and support requirements

DSM V TR

Level 1 “Requiring Support”
Level 2 “Requiring Substantial Support”
Level 3 “Requiring Very Substantial Support”

Persistent Differences in Social Communication & Interaction, including:

- Social-emotional reciprocity
- Non-verbal communication (e.g., eye contact, gestures, facial expression)
- Developing and maintaining relationships

Restricted & Repetitive Patterns of Behavior or Interests

- Repetitive movements, speech, or use of objects
- Inflexibility, insistence on sameness, or difficulty with transitions
- Highly focused or fixated interests
- Sensory hyper- or hypo reactivity

Additional Criteria

- Present in early development
- Cause significant functional impact
- Not better explained by intellectual disability alone

Understanding “Spectrum”

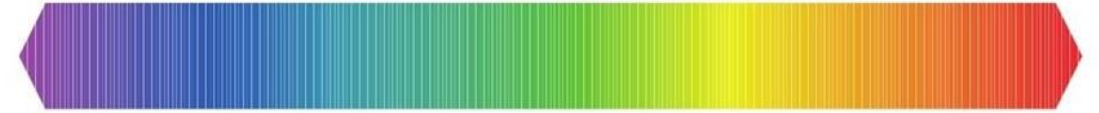
- ❑ Autism is a **spectrum of characteristics**, not a single continuum from “less” to “more” autistic
- ❑ Individuals with autism demonstrate **different profiles of strengths and needs** across multiple areas, including:
 - Social communication
 - Behavior and flexibility
 - Sensory processing
 - Executive functioning
- ❑ Support needs may **vary by context**, environment, and expectations
- ❑ The same student may require **different levels of support** across settings or over time

AUTISM SPECTRUM

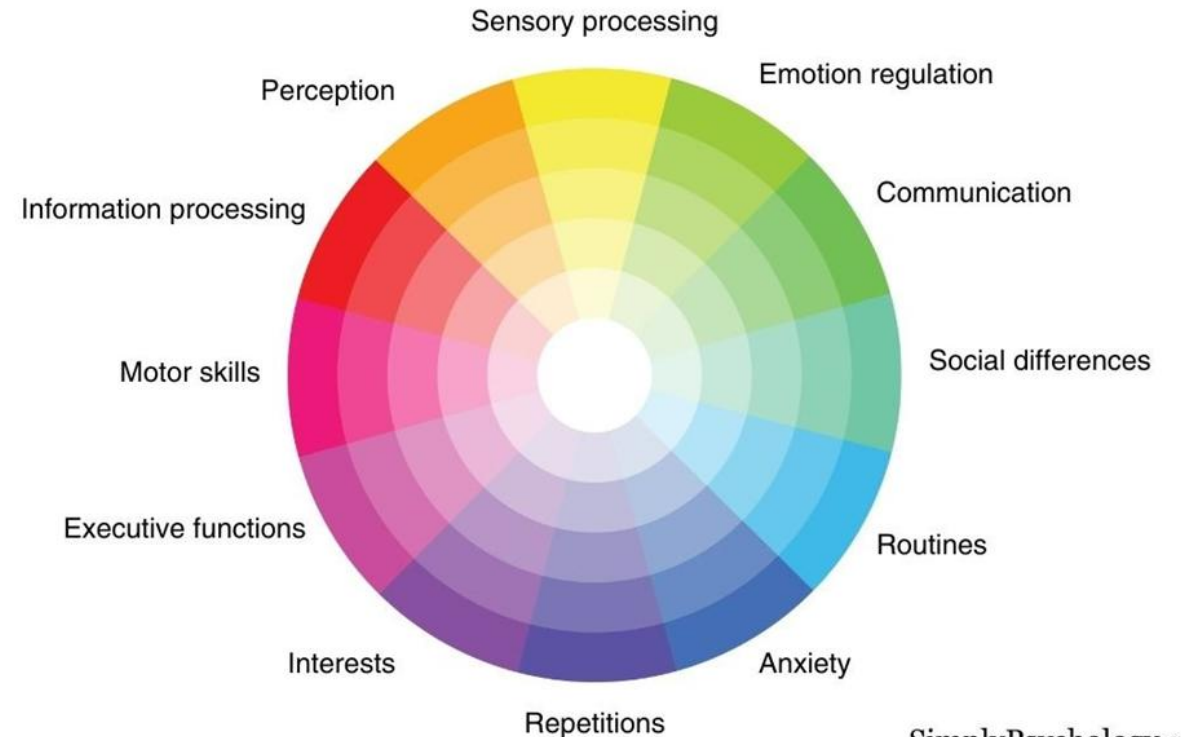
Not like this:

“High functioning” / mild autism

“Low functioning” / severe autism



But, more like this:



SimplyPsychology.org

Autism Prevalence (2022)

- **About 1 in 31 (3.2%)** eight-year-old children were identified with ASD in the United States, based on CDC surveillance data (Shaw et al., 2025).
- This estimate reflects an **increase from earlier years** (e.g., 1 in 36 in 2020, 1 in 44 in 2018).
- Rising prevalence reflects **improved identification, broader criteria, and better screening** — not necessarily a biological “epidemic.”
- ASD occurs in **all racial and ethnic groups** and is approximately **3.4 times more prevalent among boys than girls.**



COMMON AUTISTIC TRAITS

DSM-5-TR Traits

- Difficulty initiating and maintaining conversations
- Differences in gestures, facial expressions, and eye contact
- Intense focus on specific topics or objects

Often interpreted as

- Not interested, not motivated, doesn't care
- Not listening, disrespectful, disengaged
- Off-task, obsessive, socially inappropriate

Student Experience (Impact on Belonging)

- Fewer social bids from peers and adults, less inclusion in discussions, and group work
- Reduced teacher connection, increased correction and monitoring, missed opportunities for participation
- Interests shut down instead of leveraged, missed opportunities for connection, student identity minimized rather than valued



Barriers for School Belonging for Students with ASD

- Social Emotional Challenges
 - Bullying & Victimization
 - Loneliness & Exclusion
 - Poor Teacher Relationships
 - Anxiety

- Academic & Systemic Hurdles
 - Executive Functioning Deficits
 - Transition Difficulties
 - Insufficient Accommodations

Inclusion – Classroom Strategies

Goal: Ensure access and meaningful participation.

Visual supports and structured routines	Flexible Instruction	Embedding Student Strengths	Leveraging student interest into instruction	Offering Sensory Regulation and Supports	Collaborative Pedagogies
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Inclusion – System-Level Strategies

Goal: Build inclusive environments across the school.

School-wide
inclusive
practices and
placement

Professional
Development
in
Neurodiversity

Access to
MTSS

Aligning
discipline
practices with
relational
approaches

Connectedness – Classroom Strategies

Goal: Strengthen relationships and support

Check-ins
with a trusted
adult

Structured
peer support
(peer
buddies,
partners)

Explicit
teaching of
social
pragmatic
skills

Cooperative
learning
opportunities.

Connectedness – System Level Strategies

Goal: Relational practices across the school.

Prioritize relationship-centered structures

School-wide focus on teacher-student relationships

Access to extracurricular (clubs, peer groups)

Emphasis on peer relationships

Belonging – Classroom Level Strategies

Goal: Create emotional safety and acceptance.

Normalize differences and accommodations

Use affirming language

Promote student voice and choice

Create shared experiences and success

Belonging – System Level Strategies

Goal: Build a culture of belonging.

Normalize
differences and
accommodations

Use affirming
language

Promote student
voice and choice

Create shared
experiences and
success

I Belong Campaign

Quick Discussion (Think-Pair-Share)

- Challenges with ASD:** What common challenges do you observe or hear about regarding students with ASD, particularly as they relate to participation, engagement, or belonging?
- Stakeholder Concerns:** What concerns do teachers, specialists, or parents share about supporting students with ASD, and how do these concerns affect inclusion or student connection?
- Promoting Belonging:** In your role, what strategies or practices have you used to intentionally foster a sense of belonging for students with ASD?

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