



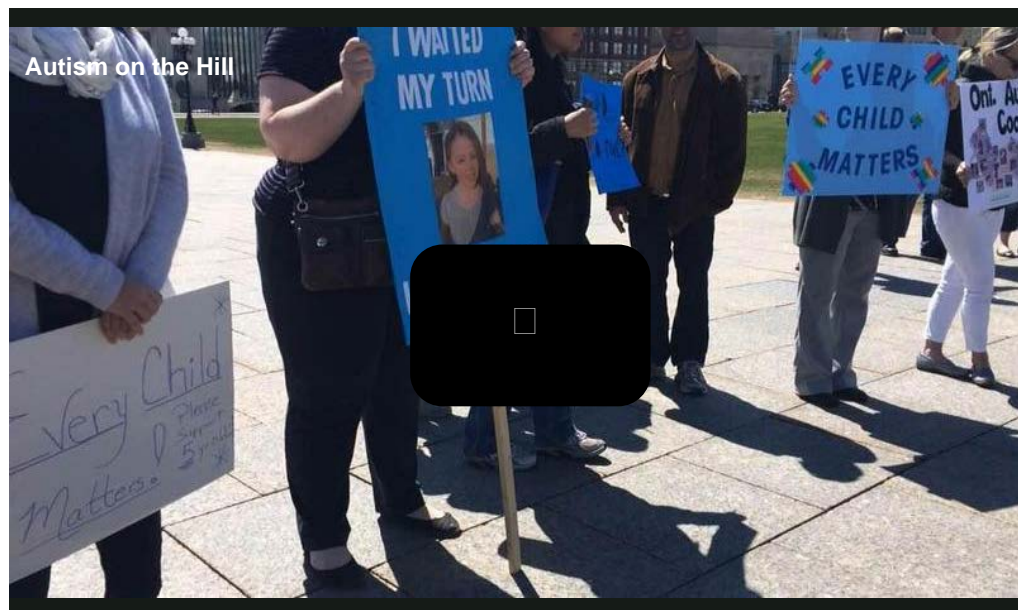
Klar, Douglas and McGuire: Autism strategy masks societal exclusion of autistic Ontarians

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PATTY DOUGLAS
[More from Patty Douglas](#)

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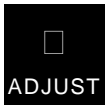


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The Ministry of Children and Youth Services has announced a revamped autism program, promising to cut waitlists for behavioural therapies by limiting access to children under five.

This has ignited a storm of controversy from parents and advocates who are angered that children five and older will no longer be eligible for funded Intensive Behavioural Intervention (IBI).

The Liberal government grounds its new policy in clinical research that claims early intervention is the most effective way of lessening the signs of autism. They argue that it is better to invest in “treating” the youngest of children, than to continue to spread resources, leaving many to languish on waitlists while developmental “windows of opportunity” are rapidly closing.

While opposition parties join forces with upset parents to “sound the alarm,” a voice curiously absent from this heated debate is that of autistic people themselves.

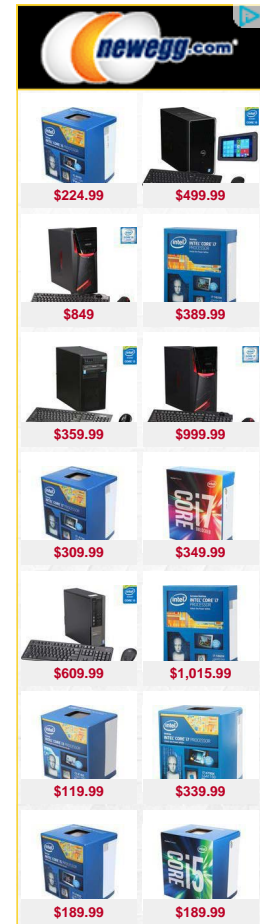
As mothers, researchers, disability activists and scholars, we know first-hand how cruel our society can be for those who do not act, think, look or move in expected ways — studies show 70 per cent of autistic kids are bullied at school and there have been murders of autistic people by caregivers. We are all too familiar with narratives of autism as a tragic disorder threatening children, families and society as a whole. These narratives have harmful, material effects.

In many autistic communities, behavioural therapy is highly contested. Since the early 90s, autistic self-advocates and scholars have raised ethical concerns about behavioural therapies that use neurotypicality — that is, behaviour that’s consistent with dominant standards of “normal” — as the sole measure of human worth and success. Autistic behaviours – flapping hands, averted gaze – are important modes of communication. Interventions that seek to eliminate these behaviours risk doing great harm to the very people they claim to be helping.

It is dangerous to assume the problem is autism rather than society’s failure to recognize autism as a way of being which cannot simply be eliminated. The intense pressure placed on autistic people to not appear autistic is creating a world where those who do not, cannot or choose not to behave like neurotypical people are left increasingly vulnerable to social exclusion or violence.

The political fallout surrounding the new Ontario Autism Program risks the further marginalization of autistic people in Ontario. While the Liberals are defending their program with promises of future generations of near-normal kids, the leaders of the opposition parties are mourning, in the words of NDP leader Andrea Horwath, a “lost generation” of autistic kids.

We’ve been confronted with endless talk of “lost potential,” “sacrificed” lives, “condemned” children and “compromised futures.” The surging rhetoric of hopelessness, tragedy and fear sets up the harmful understanding that an autistic life, in the absence of intervention, is a life without future, a life devoid of potential.



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WEATHER ›

Autistic families need support. But not the kind of support or system that devalues different kinds of bodies and minds. We must challenge the idea that autistic Canadians must behave in neurotypical ways before they can reasonably expect to participate in society, forge meaningful relationships, and occupy valued roles in their communities.

Normalcy should never be a pre-requisite for "having a future." We need to disrupt the narratives of tragedy and better prioritize access and accommodation for all autistic people.

Autistic people's future depends on how well we treat them and on how we welcome autistic difference. Inclusion, understanding, support and access to education and community are essential to the fulfillment of all lives. Redirecting funds to inclusive, smaller classrooms for all students with accommodations, communication devices and supports to enable participation is a way forward.

Above all, however, we urge government officials to seek meaningful input from autistic Ontarians, and prioritize their needs.

Estée Klar is a doctoral researcher finishing her PhD at York University. She is founder of The Autism Acceptance Project. Her son is a non-speaking autistic teenager who types to communicate and has spoken out about his experiences with IBI therapy.

Patty Douglas is a postdoctoral research fellow at the University of Guelph studying alternative meanings of autism, education and care. She is a mother of two sons, one of whom is autistic.

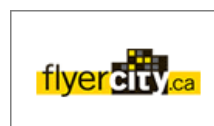
Anne McGuire is an assistant professor in the Equity Studies Program at University of Toronto. Her book, War on Autism: On the Cultural Logic of Normative Violence comes out in May.

Ottawa, ON

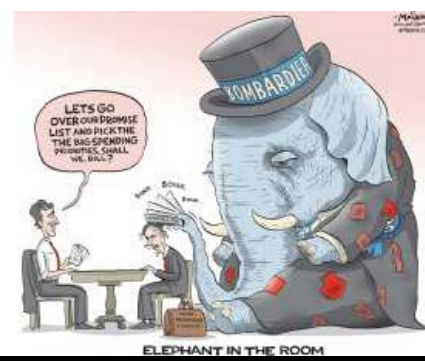
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Amy Sequenzia

I responded to a comment a hwile ago and then it disappeared. I was addressing the "demand" that person-frst language be used in articles.

No. Autism is our identity and the authors are simply respecting our preference. Non-autistic people should respect us and use the language the majority of us prefers. Only people who see autism as something negative demand use of PFL. Maybe becasue they see it as so bad they need a reminder that we are people? An Autistic person who prefers PFL should be respected but this article mentions Autistic Activists, the authors know that we prefer Identity First Language and they actually listen to us.

Like · Reply · 7 · Apr 20, 2016 1:20pm



Heather Anne Bourdon · Ottawa, Ontario

So, I am supposed to be welcoming when my autistic child becomes violent? Damages property? Hurts themselves? Mmm... Not all autistics are 'Asperger' types. Many have other forms of disability. What's wrong with using IBI to teach them communication or potty training? Not all children are motivated to learn through social praise or by imitation...

Like · Reply · 5 · Apr 20, 2016 3:34pm



John Buckmaster

I was that child. But amazingly enough, switching to clothes that didn't make me itchy as hell, playing music to cover up the overwhelming noise of the fridge, the stove and the high-pitched whine the TV made, and other simple things fixed that. Too bad it took until I was near 30 to gain enough knowledge on my own to fix it...again on my own, because society and people like you already decided what I was, even without a proper diagnosis.

If your autistic child is becoming violent, there's always, always a reason. 9/10 of the time, it's because there are no other options available to them. You can prevent it, if you open your mind and pay attention.

Or, you can label your child and give up on paying attention to root causes. You can keep doing the same things and expecting behaviour that overwhelm your child and drives them to meltdown. Just don't expect any sympathy. Because I know what it's like living through that as the child.

Like · Reply · 5 · Apr 26, 2016 1:47pm



Lesley Rose Wigram

John Buckmaster I was the same I got dreadful meltdowns because I didn't know why I was different and was trying to ask my mum for answers and she kept hitting me and saying I was evil and should be dead which made it worse- if she'd treated me as a human being with needs I wouldn't have got them to the extent I did.

Like · Reply · 4 · Apr 26, 2016 2:54pm



Kaelin Barichello

Also, this implies that autistic people need to undergo compliance training or they can't communicate - this is FALSE. Many "autistic behaviours" ARE communication. ABA, IBI, and similar types of "therapy" label these as "probem behaviours" for elimination, which does not foster understanding or facilitate communication. Neurotypicals train autistic people NOT to communicate in ways that are natural to them, and force communication in ways seen as "valid" by neurotypicals which can be painful, exhausting, or downright impossible to effectively use (for example, just because an autistic person ... [See More](#)

Like · Reply · Apr 29, 2016 8:18pm



Mandy Klein

Thanks for writing this. Yes, our autistic voices are absent. It is hard when one struggles to communicate in the first place to really put oneself out there to say how awful it is to listen to what parents are saying about their children and how they want IBI to make their children 'normal'. Imagine what those children are thinking about themselves or what they will think about themselves when they read or hear those things later. We are constantly silenced. I like being autistic, as does my daughter. We struggle but most of our struggles come from not being accepted in a non-autistic society. What we need is funding directly to each autistic person (any age) for supports to help us in areas of our choosing. We don't need to learn how to be fake non-autistic people. That just leads to serious problems as we get older. We need to provide access to alternative communication for those who need it. This is so important.

Like · Reply · 4 · Apr 20, 2016 12:14pm



Selene DePackh · Writer, Illustrator, Book Designer at Asp in the Garden

Thank you for writing this article. I wrote a similar one for the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette three years ago, and if anything, things have gotten more hostile and exclusionary since then.

Like · Reply · May 6, 2016 2:17pm



Rumaisa S Janjua

The article describes it well. To add, if the government ceases to advocate for autistic children

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