



Education
Community
of Practice

Belonging and Improved Educational Outcomes: Enhancing the Inclusive Experiences of Autistic Students

Shane L. Lynch & Valerie Dyck
CASS 2026



Education Community of Practice

We acknowledge the land we are on is located across what we know as the Province of Alberta, which spans the traditional & ancestral territory of the people of Treaty 6, 7 and 8, plus the Metis Settlements and the Six Regions of the Metis Nation of Alberta. We remain committed to building meaningful and reciprocal relations with those whose land we work and reside on & we make this acknowledgement as an act of reconciliation and gratitude.

Who Are We?

Valerie Dyck, M.Ed.

Director of Student Services, Fort McMurray Catholic School

Shane L. Lynch, PhD (Special Education), R. Psych.

Director of Innovation, The Sinneave Family Foundation

Alberta's Autism Alliance: Education Community of Practice



Alberta Professional Practice Standards

This session is relevant to:



Belonging and Improved Educational Outcomes

Participants will have the opportunity to:

- Learn about evidence-based actions that enhance belonging and promote learning for Autistic students
- Explore Autism Alberta's Alliance: Education Community of Practice
- Review a survey to capture students' sense of belonging and strategies to enhance future belonging
- Consider how this data can be used to enhance the Inclusive Education Framework

Why is it Important to Focus on Belonging?

Belonging

- The sense that one is socially connected with others, accepted authentically.

Belonging is Integral for Self-Determination

- Belonging, autonomy, competence.

Self-Determination as Integral for Quality of Life (QoL)

- A sense of connection to others enhances wellbeing and high QoL.



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Core Strategies for Fostering Self-Determination



Quality of Life

“an individual’s perception of their position in life in the context of the culture and value systems in which they live and in relation to their goals, expectations, standards, and concerns”

World Health Organization

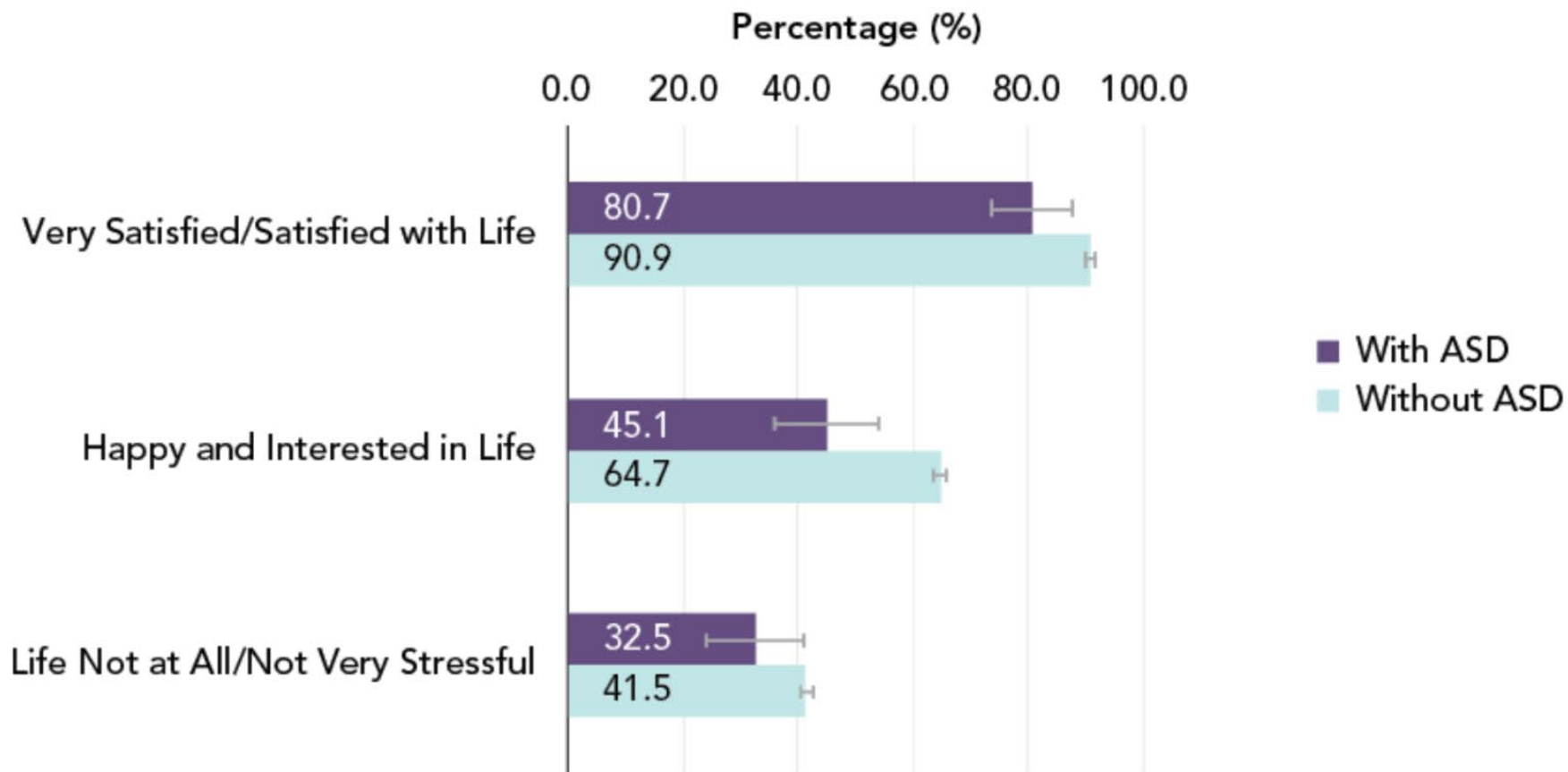
Quality of Life and Autism

Autistic people have consistently demonstrated poorer QoL than non-Autistic people.

This is the result of:

- Teacher and peer relationships are less close.
- Environments that overwhelm the senses.
- Differences in communication styles.
- Stigma
- Mismatch between needs and supports

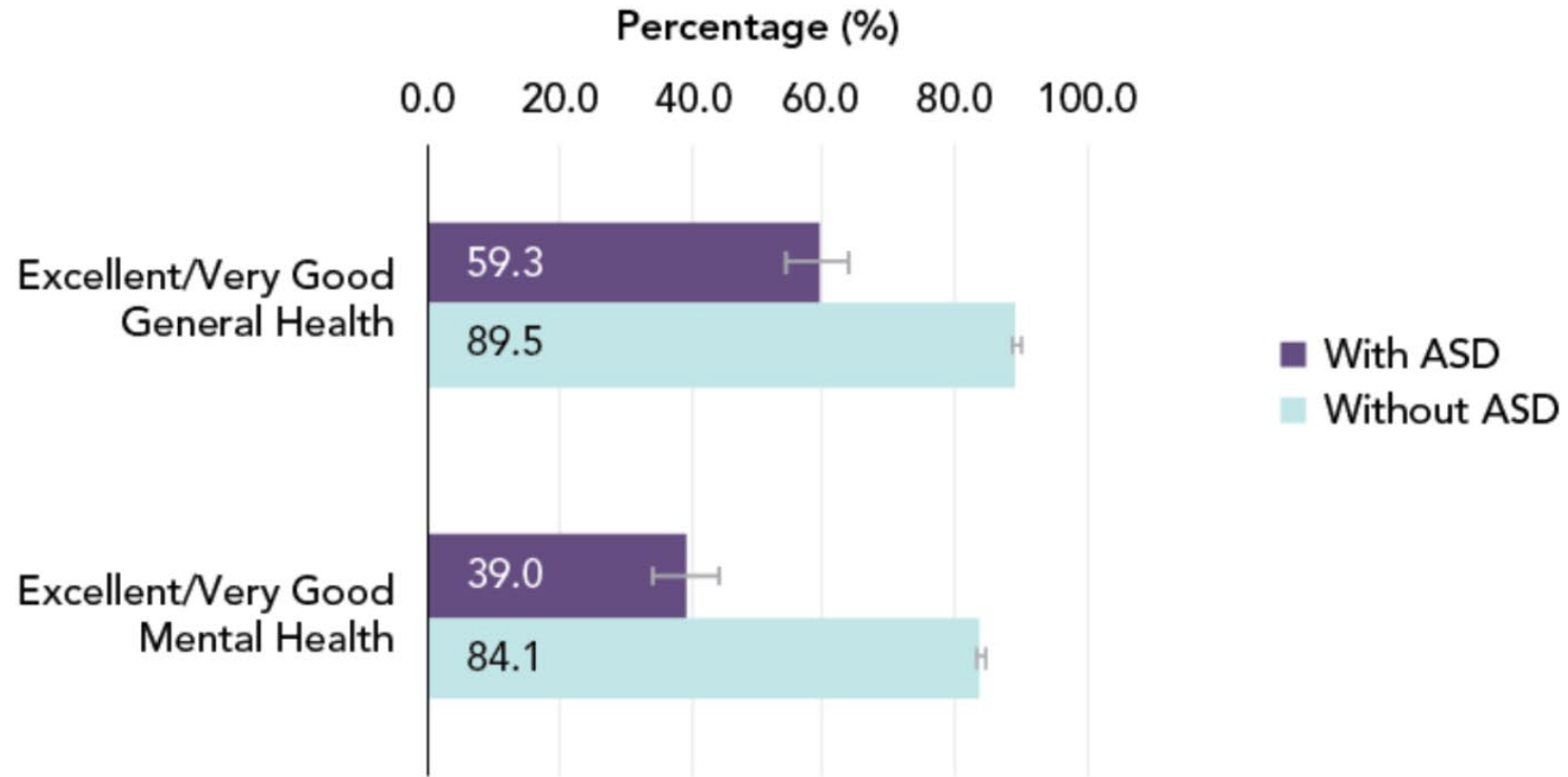
Figure 5: Life satisfaction, happiness and stress in youth aged 12 to 17 years with and without ASD, Canada, 2019



Notes: ASD = autism spectrum disorder. The 95% confidence interval shows an estimated range of values that is likely to include the true prevalence 19 times out of 20.

Source: Public Health Agency of Canada, using data from the 2019 Canadian Health Survey on Children and Youth.

Figure 6: General health and mental health in children and youth aged 1 to 17 years with and without ASD, Canada, 2019



Notes: ASD = autism spectrum disorder. The 95% confidence interval shows an estimated range of values that is likely to include the true prevalence 19 times out of 20.

Source: Public Health Agency of Canada, using data from the 2019 Canadian Health Survey on Children and Youth.

Post School Outcomes for Autistic Students

Post-Secondary Education

- Few pursue PS (70%:40%); even fewer graduate (50%:40%).

Employment

- 70-75% are unemployed/underemployed.

Living Independently

- Living with family members well into adulthood.

Differences in Educational Priorities

Educational Professionals	Autistic Students
<p>Curricular</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Academic skill development <p>Non-Curricular</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Social skills• Communication skills• Behavior regulation	<p>Positive relationships</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Teachers and peers <p>Appropriate supports</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Sensory, communication, accessibility needs <p>General understanding and acceptance of autism</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Autism as a difference, not disorder <p>Positive wellbeing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Self-determination

Small Group Discussion

At your table, share your reflections about:

1. What do your teachers do to promote a sense of belonging for Autistic students?
2. What impact do those actions have on Autistic students' sense of belonging?
 - What data supports your conclusion?

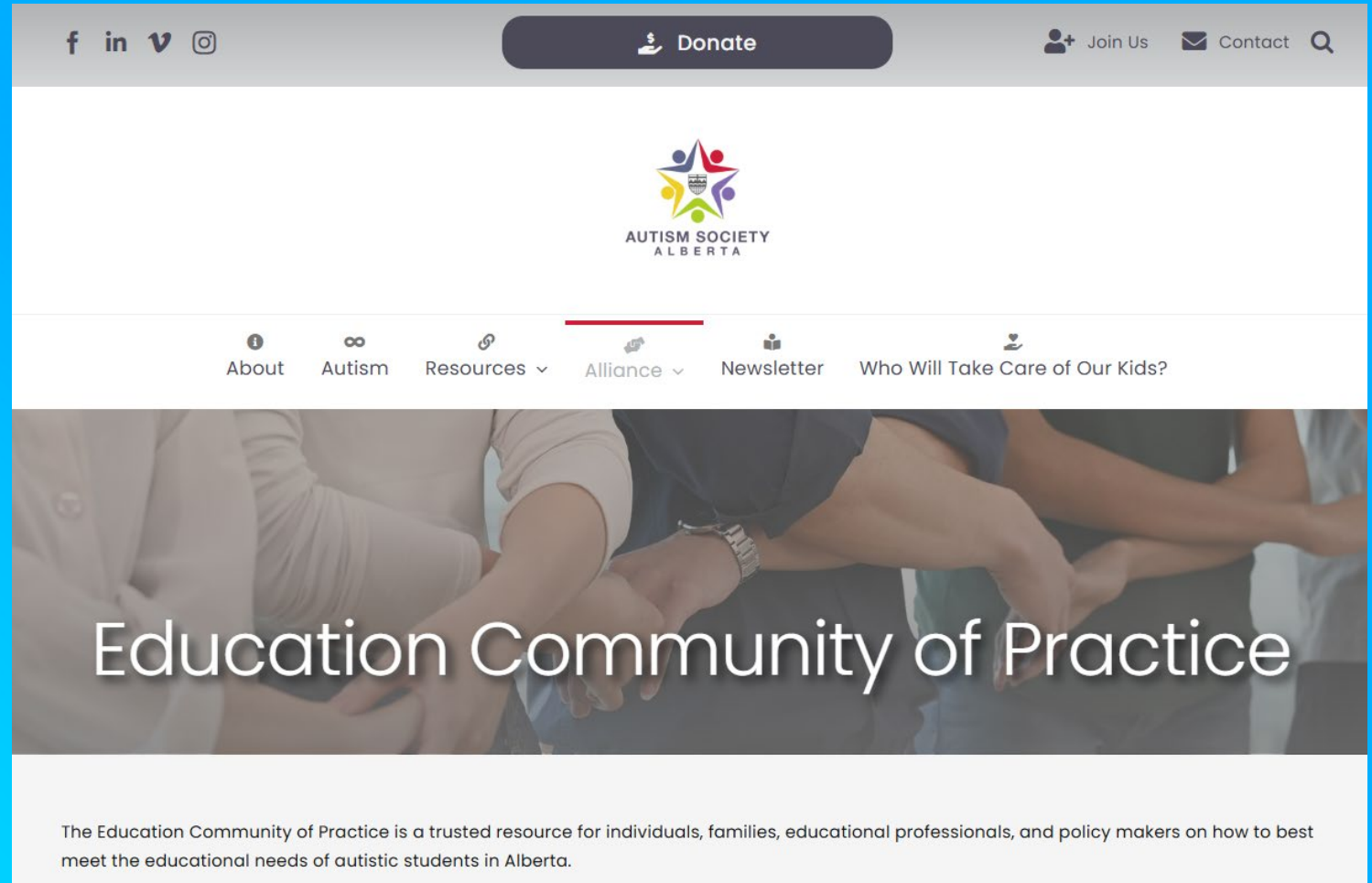


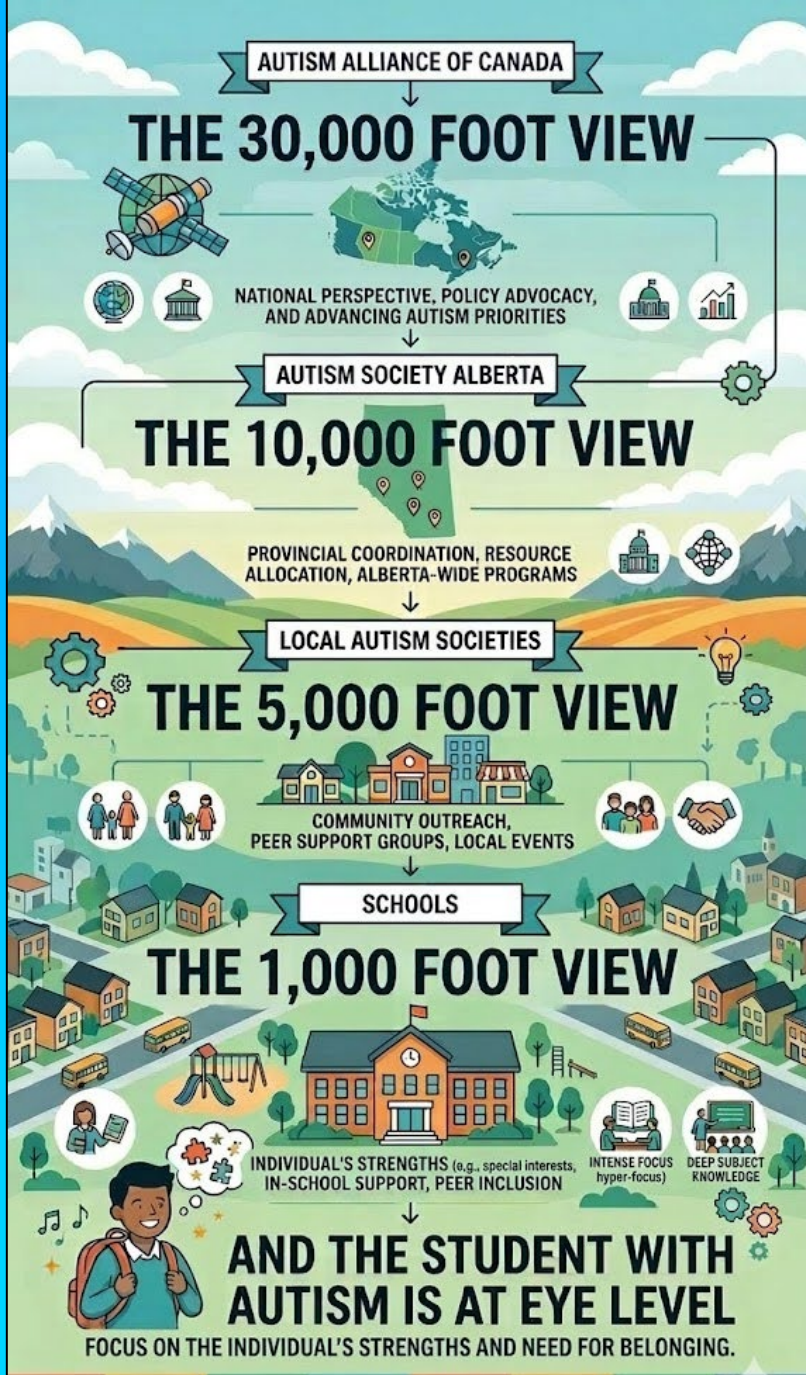
2018: Autism Alberta's Alliance formed

2022: Education Community of Practice

2024: Canada's Autism Strategy

2025-26: Development, pilot project of inclusive experiences survey





A LEVELS-OF-VIEW PERSPECTIVE ON AUTISM SUPPORT

Image generated by Gemini

Framework for Autism in Canada (Public Health Agency of Canada)

3

Data collection, public health surveillance and research

- Advancing inclusive research guidelines.
- Promoting Autistic participation in research.
- Improving coordination across sectors and jurisdictions.
- Developing new data sources to report on indicators beyond prevalence across all age groups and regions, such as:
 - demographics
 - Indigenous health
 - diversity and equity
 - co-occurring conditions



Survey: Promoting the Voice of Autistic Students

Purpose

1. To empower teachers to understand Autistic students' sense of belonging and inclusive experiences.
2. To provide teachers with evidence-based strategies that promote a sense of belonging.
3. To gather province-wide data about Autistic students' experiences.
4. To be used as data-based decision making for the enhancement of the Inclusive Education Framework.

Survey Data and Access

Data

- Survey responses are anonymous (except Grade, school authority).
- Housed with Autism Alberta's Alliance.

Access

- To be shared with all school authorities.
- Responsibility to be transferred to school authorities, ABED, ?

Promoting the Voice of Autistic Students

Question	Response
1. I prefer to share my thoughts in writing/text instead of speaking.	Yes / Sometimes / No
2. I ask for help in class when I need it.	
3. It helps when instructions are given in written form.	
4. My teacher explains things clearly.	
5. My body feels calm because my sensory (sound, smell, sight) needs are met in the classroom.	
6. There are things in the classroom that I find distracting (lights, noise, temperature, etc.).	
7. I can sit where I like to be able to focus and do my work.	
8. I feel safe at school.	
9. There are subjects or topics that I find difficult to understand.	
10. The learning materials used in the classroom are helpful.	

Promoting the Voice of Autistic Students

Question	Response
11. I enjoy activities that allow me to be creative.	Yes / Sometimes / No
12. The pace of lessons is just right for me.	
13. I feel included by my classmates.	
14. I have friends at school.	
15. I feel respected by my teachers.	
16. I am happy with the feedback I receive from my teachers.	
17. I feel confident when working with others.	
18. I am more successful in groups when there are clear roles.	
19. I feel my identity and uniqueness is accepted by my peers.	
20. I feel understood by my peers.	

Survey Questions and Strategies

- ECOP Student Survey_ for CASS 2026
 - Questions
 - Links to strategies

Ethical Review

Government of Canada, Panel on Research Ethics,
Tri-Council Policy Statement 2 (TCPS 2), Article 2.5:

“Quality assurance and quality improvement studies, program evaluation activities, and performance reviews, or testing within normal educational requirements when used exclusively for assessment, management or improvement purposes, do not constitute research for the purposes of this Policy, and do not fall within the scope of Research Ethics Board (REB) review.”

Gallery Walk: Ethical Review

What impact does the Tri-Council Policy have on whether your school authority will be able to administer the survey?

How would the Alliance, as an external partner, impact your school authority's commitment to the survey?

Gallery Walk: Benefits and Risks

Benefits	Risks
It only takes 15-20 minutes, that is manageable.	Time is limited; we cannot give up more.
The data will help to inform future educational supports.	Teachers may fear that they can be punished for a student's response.

Table Talk: Delivering a Great Pitch

Considering the content covered today, how would you personalize a pitch to create interest in the survey by school authorities, principals, and teachers?

Next Steps

- Use this QR code, to gain access to the survey.
- Consider enhancing the sense of belonging as a foundation for educational success.
- Use your pitch to build interest and momentum in the survey.
- Questions?
 - cop@autismalberta.ca



“Inclusion is a feeling,
not a place.”

(Goodall, 2020)

Image generated by Gemini

