The following activities are designed to stimulate a current events discussion. Generative in nature, these questions can be a launching point for additional assignments or research projects. Teachers are encouraged to adapt these activities to meet the contextual needs of their classroom.

In some cases, reading the article with students may be appropriate, coupled with reviewing the information sheet to further explore the concepts and contexts being discussed. From here, teachers can select from the questions provided below. The activity is structured to introduce students to the issues, then allow them to explore and apply their learnings. Students are encouraged to further reflect on the issues.

**Core Skill Sets:** These icons identify the most relevant core skills students will develop using this resource. Learn more about the WE Learning Framework at [www.we.org/we-at-school/we-schools/learning-framework/](http://www.we.org/we-at-school/we-schools/learning-framework/).

### BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention in the USA, around 1 in 68 children has been identified with autism spectrum disorder. ([CDC](https://www.cdc.gov/autism/epidemiology.html))

- Autism effects people along all racial, ethnic and socioeconomic groups. ([CDC](https://www.cdc.gov/autism/epidemiology.html))

- Autism is generally grouped with other neurological conditions, including Down Syndrome, epilepsy and bipolar disorder. ([CDC](https://www.cdc.gov/autism/epidemiology.html) and Autism Speaks)

- Autism was first recognized by Dr. Leo Kanner in 1942, but there are historical records indicating that autism existed long before the 20th century. ([Autism Canada](https://www.autism.ca/en/))

- Autism was considered a very rare condition for most of the 20th century, with three or four cases in 10,000, but a broader diagnostic criteria and increased awareness about the spectrum has led to the numbers we’re seeing now, with 1 in 68 children experiencing autism spectrum disorder. ([The Forgotten History of Autism](https://www.autism.com/))

- Understanding of causes of autism have evolved over the years—doctors used to think it was caused by “cold” parenting or that it was some type of childhood schizophrenia. Today, research is focusing on genetics, differences in biological brain function, pre- and post-natal brain development, environmental factors and immune responses and deficiencies. ([Autism Canada](https://www.autism.ca/en/))

- Many people who fall on the autism spectrum are high functioning and live independently while others need full-time care. ([Autism Canada](https://www.autism.ca/en/))

- The neurodiversity movement argues against any search for a “cure,” instead asking for greater respect and inclusion for people with neurological differences, including those living with autism. ([Upworthy](https://theinter先前inus.com/))

- The unemployment rate for people with autism is 80% but there are a growing number of programs to empower people with autism in the workforce, utilizing their unique skills. ([Globe and Mail, CTV](https://www.ctvnews.ca/))

### KEY TERMS

**Autism (or autism spectrum disorder)**—General terms for a group of complex disorders of brain development. These disorders impact individuals very differently, but generally lead to difficulties in social interaction, verbal and non-verbal communication and repetitive behaviours.

**Spectrum**—The range of severity of impairment, highlighting that autism is not one condition but an entire group.

**Neurodiversity**—The idea that differences in peoples’ brains should be recognized and respected as any other human variation. These differences include those labelled with autism, dyslexia, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and others.
THEMES AND COURSE CONNECTIONS

• **Themes:** Education, Local Issues, Health, Community
• **Course Connections:** Language, Social Studies

MATERIALS

• Front board
• Paper and writing utensils

SPECIFIC EXPECTATIONS AND LEARNING GOALS

Students will:

• Explore the ways to create inclusive environments for people with autism
• Understand that every person is unique and has something to offer society
• Create connections between how people interact with each other and with spaces and how these interactions can be made more inclusive to the needs of people with autism

DISCUSS

1. What do you know about autism? (It is ok if your students don’t know a lot about autism or if they are speaking from personal experience, this is a discussion to raise awareness.)

2. The article states that in 1 in 68 children have autism? What does spectrum mean? How does it apply to autism?

3. How does the hub, described in the Global Voices article “Beyond a cure for autism,” serve people with autism as well as their families?

4. What would David Patchell-Evans like people to do? (Focus on services and support and to keep the needs of people with autism in mind.)

5. Who plays a role in supporting people with autism? (Students may use examples from the article or from their prior knowledge.)

DIVE DEEPER

Review inclusive language. If students are not already aware of how to properly refer to someone who has autism discuss how language can be inclusive or how it can leave someone feeling excluded. As with any condition or label, remind students that autism does not define the person who has it, therefore when referring to someone with autism refer to them first, not the autism. For example, do not say “I have an autistic friend,” say “I have a friend who has autism.”

Just like every student in the classroom is unique, every person with autism has unique symptoms and experiences, however there are some common traits many people with autism experience including challenges forming relationships, sensory sensitivity, extremely repetitive behaviour. In many other ways they share many common traits with everyone else.

Reread the following excerpt from the article to the class that explains how the GoodLife Fitness Family Autism Hub addresses some of these common traits: “The hub limits sound and light and serves as an oasis for people with autism and their families—a place where they can visit a doctor, get a haircut, learn new skills in the kitchen or socialize in a specially designed playground to increase interactivity.”

In small groups, ask students to consider how different spaces they use may or may not be inclusive to someone who has autism. Select one or more common trait someone with autism may experience and one or more school spaces such as a classroom, school library, cafeteria, playground, etc. Have students assess the space. Students may need to consider the space differently than they would usually. Encourage students to consider the space with a new perspective. Ask students to answer the following type of questions:

a. What types of sounds or lights exist and occur in the space? Are sounds sudden or loud, do lights flash or are they bright?

b. What are some ways the space can be made more inclusive? (For example, to soften the noise chairs make when they are moved on a hard floor, tennis balls may be cut and attached to the feet of chairs, or padding can be adhered to the feet of chairs.)

c. What would it take to make the space more inclusive for someone who has autism? (For example, writing to the school principal to ask if tennis balls can be added to all the chair feet in classrooms, raising awareness of the purpose and need for tennis balls on chair feet and fundraising for tennis balls.)

Use the information and ideas collected by students to create and implement a plan to make school spaces more inclusive to students with autism.

To extend the learning, have a local expert or someone who works with people with autism visit the class to better help students understand what people with autism may experience and how they can create more inclusive spaces and interactions.

RESOURCES

For more information about how classrooms in particular can be more inclusive spaces, check out how a school in Rocky Mount, Virginia is creating a more inclusive classroom for students with autism [www.thefranklinnewspost.com/news/nest-classroom-supports-students-with-autism/article_f47da938-7076-11e6-bc96-2b64fa585765.html](http://www.thefranklinnewspost.com/news/nest-classroom-supports-students-with-autism/article_f47da938-7076-11e6-bc96-2b64fa585765.html)

WE Schools WE Are One campaign helps focuses on diverse and inclusive spaces, experiences and interactions. Check out classroom resources and lesson plans at [www.WE.org/weareone](http://www.WE.org/weareone)

For more information about the Goodlife Fitness Autism Family Hub check out [pacificautismfamily.com/2014/01/goodlife-fitness-autism-family-hub/](http://pacificautismfamily.com/2014/01/goodlife-fitness-autism-family-hub/)