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Autism Research Centre Aotearoa New Zealand

We are delighted to share our Winter 2026 Autism Research Centre – Aotearoa NZ (ARC) newsletter. This biannual publication is intended to highlight current and upcoming autism-focused research, showcase the achievements of researchers and students, and celebrate community and media engagement across Aotearoa.

Our Autistic Partnership network continues to grow, with more than 50 Autistic people now involved from across Aotearoa. We welcome Autistic people with an interest in shaping autism research to join us. Anyone interested can learn more or sign up via the Get Involved page on our website, or by contacting the Autistic Partnership of Aotearoa New Zealand Chair directly at ruth.monk@canterbury.ac.nz.

Autistic Partnership Aotearoa New Zealand

Autistic Partnership members have continued to contribute to autism research through the ARC, including providing input into study protocols and postgraduate student projects. These opportunities highlight the value of Autistic expertise in informing guidelines, policy, and research directions . Looking ahead, we hope to share further opportunities to be involved in shaping research design, development, leadership and dissemination.

Research Projects

Research into Digitally-Enabled Care for Autistic People

A research team led by Professor Laurie McLay is inviting Autistic people to take part in co-design wānanga exploring how digital technologies could make community healthcare more accessible.
The project will bring together healthcare users, healthcare professionals, and other stakeholders to co-develop a digitally enabled care framework (DECF) for Aotearoa New Zealand's community healthcare sector. It focuses particularly on communities that often experience barriers to healthcare, including Māori, disabled people, and Autistic people. Autistic researchers are involved throughout the project, and the wānanga will be co-facilitated by Autistic and non-autistic researchers.
Who can participate?
Autistic people who are aged 18 years or older and are formally diagnosed or self-identifying.

Wānanga dates
· Christchurch: 9 September 2026 - in person or via Zoom
· Wellington: 28 October 2026 - in person

Participants will receive a $50 koha in the form of a grocery, petrol, or Mighty Ape voucher. Parking coupons will be provided for the Wellington wānanga.

Research team: Professor Laurie McLay, Associate Professor Elsamari Botha, Associate Professor Cathy Andrew, Dr Ruth Monk, Dr Kylie Short, Professor Ann-Marie Kennedy, Professor Stacy Wood, Professor Kevin Schulman, and Professor Bryan Bollinger.

or click here or click here

For further information, please contact Professor Laurie McLay at laurie.mclay@canterbury.ac.nz or Dr Ruth Monk at ruth.monk@canterbury.ac.nz.

Research Projects

Digital Raupī te Raupō: Online Support for Autistic Children and Their Caregivers

Digital Raupī te Raupō is an online early support programme for Autistic children, children who show differences in social communication, and their caregivers. Many families in Aotearoa New Zealand experience barriers to accessing early support, including cost, delays, limited availability, and a lack of neurodiversity-affirming and culturally responsive services. Digital Raupī te Raupō aims to make support more accessible while strengthening caregiver-child relationships and promoting child, caregiver, and whānau wellbeing.

The programme was co-designed with Autistic, Māori, and Pacific advisory groups. An earlier, in-person version of Raupī te Raupō, developed by Dr Hannah Waddington, Dr Jessica Tupou, Lee Patrick, and Dr Carla Wallace, showed promising early results. This Health Research Council-funded study will be the first large-scale evaluation of the digital version of the programme. It will examine its benefits for children and caregivers and whether it is acceptable, practical, and culturally responsive for families, including Māori and Pacific whānau.

Learn more about opportunities to get involved by contacting Prof. Laurie McLay: laurie.mclay@canterbury.ac.nz

EBPB Study: Co-designing Better Healthcare for Autistic Youth in Aotearoa

A new co-design study will bring together Autistic young adults and healthcare providers to develop an evidence-based policy brief addressing the mental and physical healthcare needs of Autistic youth in Aotearoa.
Through separate online focus groups, participants will examine healthcare utilisation and experiences, identify barriers to accessing and delivering appropriate care, and develop priorities and recommendations for strengthening healthcare provision. By bringing lived experience into dialogue with clinical, service, and policy expertise, the study aims to ensure that the resulting policy brief reflects both the realities of healthcare access and the contexts in which care is delivered.
Participants will contribute to the development and finalisation of the policy brief throughout the project.

The study will be inviting participants who are:

- Autistic young adults aged 18–29; and
- healthcare providers involved in physical or mental healthcare for Autistic youth, autism-related health policy, service design, quality improvement, or related disciplines.

Participation involves three online focus groups of approximately 60–90 minutes each, with a total time commitment of three to four-and-a-half hours.

For further information, please contact Prof. Laurie McLay:
laurie.mclay@canterbury.ac.nz

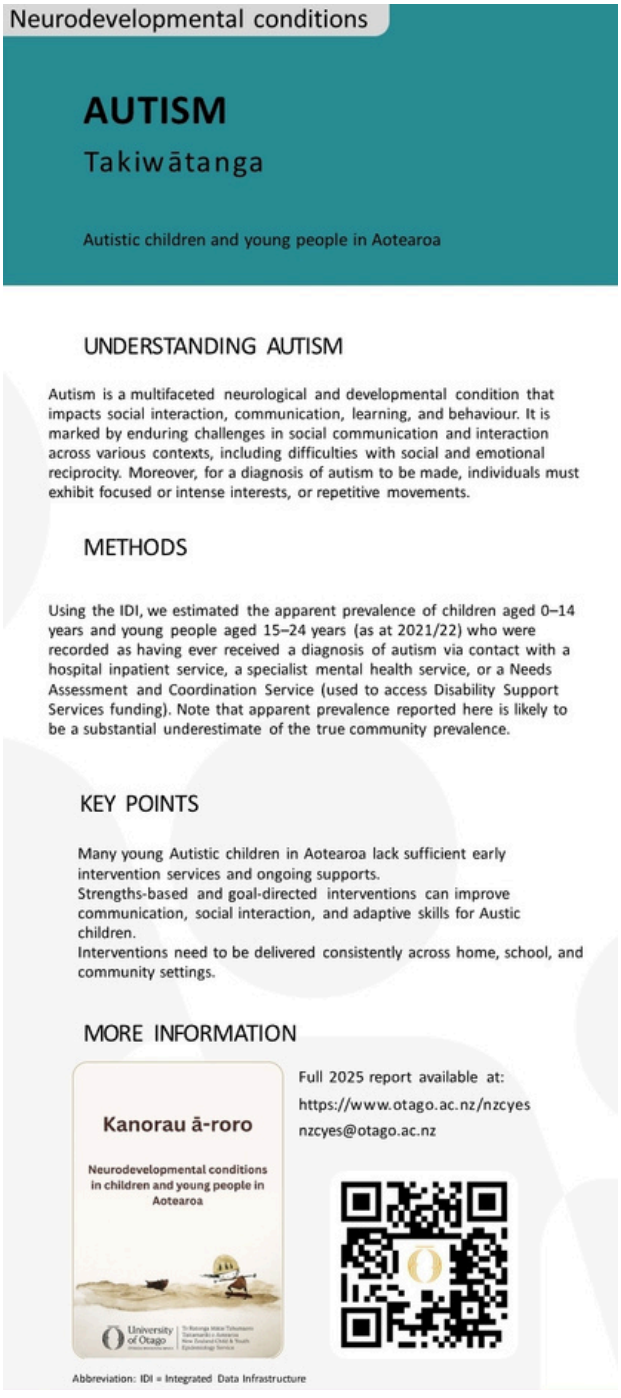
Community Reports and Resources

Kanorau ā-roro: Neurodevelopmental Conditions in Children and Young People in Aotearoa

Tustin, K., Adams, J., Bowden, N., McAnally, H., Wicken, A., Taylor, B., & Turnbull, F. (2025). *Kanorau ā-roro: Neurodevelopmental conditions in children and young people in Aotearoa*. New Zealand Child and Youth Epidemiology Service, University of Otago. https://www.otago.ac.nz/nzcyes

This first-of-its-kind report uses linked administrative and health datasets from the Integrated Data Infrastructure to examine neurodevelopmental conditions among children and young people in Aotearoa. It covers attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder, autism, intellectual disability, foetal alcohol spectrum disorder, communication or language disorders, specific learning disorders, and motor disorders, and reviews evidence for best practice in supporting children and young people with these conditions.

The report identifies increasing recorded rates of neurodevelopmental conditions, driven primarily by rising rates of ADHD and autism. It also identifies inequities in assessment, diagnosis, and access to support across regions, ethnic groups, and levels of socioeconomic deprivation. The report highlights the importance of early identification, whānau-centred support, culturally safe approaches, strengths-based frameworks, and coordinated responses across health, education, and community services.



Community Reports and Resources

Autism Housing Toolkit Aotearoa

A new website, Autism Housing Toolkit Aotearoa, has been launched to help autistic people (tāngata whaitakiwātanga) create homes that better suit their sensory and support needs. Its free toolkits offer practical, evidence-based guidance for modifying an existing home or designing and building a new one.

The website includes ideas for different budgets, living arrangements, ages, and support needs - whether people are renting, own their home, or are building from scratch. Although the resource focuses on autism and takiwātanga, much of its guidance may also be useful for other neurodivergent people, particularly those with sensory challenges.

The resource was developed through an authentically co-led process combining research, technical knowledge, and lived experience. It was designed to reflect the housing context and diverse communities of Aotearoa New Zealand, with guidance from cultural advisor Dr Jessica Tupou (Kāi Tahu, Kāti Māmoe) of Te Herenga Waka -Victoria University of Wellington. Feedback was also provided by members of the autism community, including Altogether Autism, Autism New Zealand, and the Autistic Partnership Aotearoa New Zealand.
The website was developed through the inaugural Access Activator programme of Whaikaha - Ministry of Disabled People, in collaboration with Creative HQ.

Visit the Autism Housing Toolkit Aotearoa website here.

Research Outputs

Members of the ARC have produced a number of interesting research outputs. Many of these are provided below. To read the full text of each article, you can click on the links provided.

Abstracts are provided in the Appendix.

Bowden, N., Anns, F., Clendon, S., Dacombe, J., Meehan, L., Vu, H., Woodford, E., & McLay, L. (2026). *Enrolment, attendance, and education resourcing and support among 5-12 year old Autistic students in Aotearoa New Zealand: A nationwide cross-sectional study*. International Journal of Population Data Science, 10(2), 3362. https://doi.org/10.23889/ijpds.v10i2.3362

Cleary, D.B., Maybery, M.T., Waddington, H. et al. *Investigating Parental Observations of Early Autism Development in Simplex and Multiplex Families*. J Autism Dev Disord 56, 1688–1695 (2026). https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-024-06262-0

Gardiner, S., Bowden, C., & Waddington, H. (2026). *Teaching responsive communication strategies to mothers of non-speaking autistic children*. International Journal of Developmental Disabilities. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1080/20473869.2026.2679723

Hinten, A. E., Schluter, P., Andrew, C., Donovan, C., Jameson, I., Jordan, P., Kennedy, A.-M., Muralitharan, S., van Deurs, J., van Noorden, L., Payton, J., Rothwell, B., & McLay, L. (2026). *The effect of participation in the Let's Play program on Autistic children's engagement and caregiver well-being: A randomized controlled trial.* Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-026-07396-z

Jiang, T., Wilson, M., Whitehouse, A.J.O. et al. *Child and Family Characteristics as Predictors of the Severity of Self-injurious Behaviours in Autistic Children and Adolescents*. J Autism Dev Disord (2026). https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-025-07207-x

Jordan P, Waddington H, Hammond M, et al. Priorities and Perspectives Regarding Goals and Outcomes of Support for Autistic Children Under 12 Years: A Systematic Review. Autism: the International Journal of Research and Practice. 2026 Jun;30(6):1416-1429. https://doi.org/10.1177/13623613261433132

Research Outputs

Macadré, E., Wilson, E., Vivanti, G. et al. *Parent and Older Sibling Perspectives on Parent-Facilitated Sibling-Mediated Support*. Adv Neurodev Disord 10, 27–35 (2026). https://doi.org/10.1007/s41252-025-00440-6

Minnell, H., Waddington, H., Jordan, P., Noble, B., & Bowden, C. J. (2026). *"I accept them, they accept me, we enjoy our time together": Autistic adults' preferences and perceptions of relationships with other Autistic people*. Autism. https://doi.org/10.1177/13623613261451898

Panther, N. K., Bowden, N., Chu, J., D'Souza, S., Saha, S., Thabrew, H., & McLay, L. K. (2026). *Prevalence and age of diagnosis of neurodevelopmental conditions among Asian populations in Aotearoa New Zealand*. Journal of Neurodevelopmental Disorders, 18, 35. https://doi.org/10.1186/s11689-026-09695-z

Sakata, M., Ostinelli, E. G., Yamamoto, R., Oi, H., Kikuchi, S., Toyomoto, R., Nakajima, S., Ohashi, K., Nogimura, A., Yamada, R., McLay, L., Furukawa, T. A., Nagai, Y., & Yamada, A. (2026). *Comparative efficacy and acceptability of sleep interventions for children and adolescents with autism spectrum disorders: A protocol for a systematic review and network meta-analysis*. Systematic Reviews, 15, 116. https://doi.org/10.1186/s13643-026-03143-8

Scott, T., Whitcombe-Dobbs, S., Kennedy, A.-M., Woodford, E., Hunter, J., & McLay, L. (2026). *Advancing healthcare provision to Autistic clients: A systematic review of autism focused digitally delivered professional education programs (DDPE) for the health workforce*. Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-025-07206-y

Shah, S. M., Madhavan, S. P., Bowden, N., & Nedgungadi, P. (2026). *Caregivers' experiences with autism from pre- to postdiagnosis: Multi-country perspectives using ecological systems theory*. Research in Autism, 132, 202836. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.reia.2026.202836

Tupou, J., Ataera, C., Wallace-Watkin, C., & Waddington, H. (2026). *Educator perspectives on the inclusion of tamariki takiwātanga Māori (Autistic Māori children) in early childhood education*. Early Childhood Education Journal. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-025-02097-1

Research Outputs

Wallace-Watkin, C., & Waddington, H. (2026). *Adapting a support service for lower income New Zealand families with an Autistic child: A research-community partnership approach*. New Zealand Journal of Psychology, 55(1), 37–49. https://doi.org/10.63146/001c.156026

Woodford, E., Smith, J., Ruhe, T., Kokaua, J., Scott, T., Bowden, N., Tupou, J., Monk, R., & McLay, L. (2026). *Prevalence, understandings, and experiences of autism among Pacific Peoples: A scoping review*. Research in Neurodiversity, 2, 100046. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rin.2026.100046

Media Commentary

Supporting Autistic Tamariki

Associate Professor Hannah Waddington (left) and Dr Jessica Tupou (Kāi Tahu, Kāti Māmoe) (right)

Te Herenga Waka – Victoria University of Wellington has profiled Associate Professor Hannah Waddington and Dr Jessica Tupou's work on Raupī te Raupō, an Aotearoa-specific programme that draws on mātauranga Māori to support whānau of young autistic or potentially autistic children.

Co-designed with input from Autistic, Māori, and Pasifika advisory rōpū, the programme supports whānau to understand and respond affirmingly to their children and is now being adapted with Ngāti Toa and developed into a digital version in collaboration with Professor Laurie McLay.

Read the full story here.

Dr Jessica Tupou (front row, second from the right) with colleagues from the the Maskwacis community and the University of Alberta.

Research Student Completions and Highlights

Congratulations to

Amy Taylor

an Autistic midwife and postgraduate researcher, on completing their Master's thesis at Otago Polytechnic!

Amy's research used a qualitative, participatory, and disability affirming methodology, intentionally centring neurodivergent midwives as experts in their own lived and professional experiences.

The study was guided by two core research questions:
·What strengths neurodivergent midwives feel they bring to the midwifery profession; and
·What supports and/or accommodations neurodivergent midwives identify as enabling them to thrive in practice.

Using an appreciative inquiry approach, the research foregrounds professional strengths, relational assets, and practical recommendations identified directly by neurodivergent midwives themselves. The findings highlight both the significant contributions neurodivergent midwives make to perinatal care and the structural, cultural, and policy shifts required to better support inclusion, wellbeing, and workforce sustainability across health professions.
While the study focused on midwifery, the findings have clear wider relevance across the health professions, particularly in relation to Autistic and neurodivergent practitioners more broadly. Themes relating to identity affirming practice, sensory and communication environments, flexible workforce structures, strengths based supervision, and systemic barriers are applicable across clinical, allied health, and medical contexts.

Amy's full thesis is publicly available here.

The literature review from Amy's thesis was published as a shorter academic journal article in 2024.

Click here to read.

Events

ARC Symposium

The Autism Research Centre will host its 2026 symposium, Innovative and Impactful Autism Research - Advancing Meaningful Outcomes, on
Friday 16 October, from 9.30 am to 4.30 pm,
at the University of Canterbury.
The event will bring together researchers from across Aotearoa New Zealand to share autism-focused research and consider how this work can contribute to meaningful outcomes for autistic people and their communities.

We are delighted to welcome *Professor Dawn Adams*, Endowed Chair at the Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre at La Trobe University, as our keynote speaker. Her presentation, *Making Autism Research Fit for Purpose: Who is Visible, What Counts as Evidence, and What Happens Next?*, will explore whose experiences are represented in autism research, whether research questions reflect community priorities, and how evidence can be translated into meaningful change.

Presentations will also be provided by a number of ARC members, including Hannah Waddington, Jessica Tupou, Fran Kewene, Lee Patrick, Laurie McLay, Ann-Marie Kennedy, Bronwyn Rideout, Ruth Monk, Monique Clarke and Nicolina Newcombe.

The symposium is open to the public, but places are limited.
Register for the ARC Symposium here.

For questions, please contact Professor Laurie McLay at laurie.mclay@canterbury.ac.nz.

Opportunities for Research Involvement

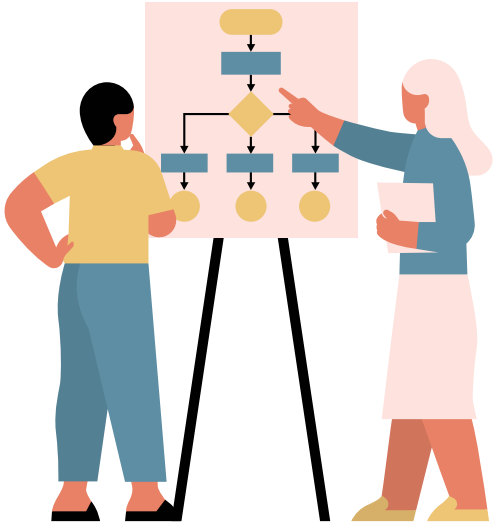
Collaboration Opportunity for Neurodivergent Researchers

Nyika Suttie, a Sociology doctoral candidate at the University of Auckland, is inviting neurodivergent graduate students and early career researchers to collaborate on a collective paper exploring neurodivergence and experiences of time within the neoliberal university.
The opportunity is particularly relevant to people who have worked in some capacity within a New Zealand university. Collaborators will contribute written responses about their experiences of time and time pressures and work together to thematically analyse the collective responses. All collaborators will be included as co-authors, and the completed paper will seek publication.
To express your interest or ask a question, please contact Nyika at nyika.suttie@auckland.ac.nz.

If your team has projects or initiatives that would benefit from Autistic input, co-design, or feedback, we encourage you to connect with us.
The Autistic Partnership can support researchers in shaping study design and ensuring research aligns with Autistic priorities and the values of the ARC.

We also welcome opportunities to circulate calls for research participation in an approved study through our networks.

If you are hosting or attending autism-focused events in the second half of this year , including seminars, workshops, or community forums, please share your event details (name, date, registration link, and contact) with Laurie (laurie.mclay@canterbury.ac.nz).



Thank you

for your continued support and collaboration!

Together, we aim to make autism research in Aotearoa more inclusive, evidence-based, and community-led.

Ngā mihi nui,

Laurie, Ann-Marie, and Ruth and the wider Autism Research Centre team

Appendix

Abstracts of the featured papers are provided below.

· Bowden, N., et al. (2026): *Enrolment, Attendance, and Education Resourcing and Support among 5-12 year old Autistic Students in Aotearoa New Zealand: A Nationwide Cross-sectional Study*

Introduction: Participation in education underpins positive lifelong outcomes, yet Autistic children often encounter barriers to enrolment, attendance, and access to support. Evidence indicates that systemic challenges such as inadequate support, limited autism-specific teacher training, and restricted access to resources ontribute to disparities in educational outcomes. While small sample studies highlight these inequities, population-level evidence is limited.

Objectives: To quantify nationwide differences in school enrolment, attendance, and access to educational resourcing and support services between Autistic and non-Autistic children aged 5-12 years in Aotearoa New Zealand (NZ), and to examine variation by co-occurring intellectual disability (ID).

Methods: Cross-sectional analysis using NZ's Integrated Data Infrastructure, including all children aged 5-12 in 2019. Autism and ID were identified from hospital, mental health, and disability service use datasets. Outcomes included enrolment, attendance, and access to supports. Propensity score matching (1:10) compared Autistic and non-Autistic students across outcomes, including stratification by ID status

Results: Among 517,872 students aged 5-12 years, 8,169 (1.6%) were Autistic and of those 28.8% had co-occurring ID. Compared to matched peers, Autistic children were less likely to be enrolled in school (94.9% vs. 97.4%; Prevalence ratio [PR]=0.97, 95% confidence interval [C1)=0.97-0.98) but more likely to be enrolled in specialist schools (14.4% vs. 0.2%; PR=70.15, 95% CI=65.73-74.88), Te Kura (2.1% vs. 0.2%; PR=9.65, 95% Cl=8.22-11.34), or home-schooling (2.2% vs. 0.9%; PR=2.45, 95% Cl=2.11-2.84). Regular attendance was lower (49.3% vs. 61.2; PR=0.80, 95% CI=0.79-0.82), with higher rates of chronic absence (7.7% vs. 3.2%; PR=2.45, 95% CI=2.27-2.64). Access to supports was significantly higher for Autistic students across a range of services. Disparities were often more pronounced among Autistic children with ID

Conclusion: This study demonstrates significant differences in enrolment, attendance, and access to educational supports between Autistic and non-Autistic students in NZ, underscoring the urgent need for targeted and sufficiently resourced supports to ensure equitable participation.

· Cleary, D.B., Maybery, M.T., Waddington, H. et al. *Investigating Parental Observations of Early Autism Development in Simplex and Multiplex Families*. J Autism Dev Disord 56, 1688–1695 (2026).

Past research has highlighted the importance of early identification of developmental differences to improve targeted access to early interventions or supports. As such, it is of particular importance in the context of children at elevated likelihood of autism (such as where an older sibling has a diagnosis of autism), to better understand when and which early concerns are important as predictors of which children will benefit from pre-diagnostic supports. This study explored the number and frequency of retrospective parent reported concerns within the first year of life for children diagnosed with autism, both those who had an older sibling diagnosed with autism and those who did not, as well as for undiagnosed siblings. We found that at both 0–6 and 7–12 months, the only factor related to the presence or absence of early parent reported concerns was child diagnostic status, with the presence of reported early concerns more likely for children with a diagnosis of autism. These findings suggest that for children at elevated likelihood of autism, parents' concerns are driven primarily by developmental differences, with child's birth order and sibling diagnostic status not impacting on parent early concerns.

· Gardiner, S., Bowden, C., & Waddington, H. (2026). *Teaching responsive communication strategies to mothers of non-speaking autistic children*. International Journal of Developmental Disabilities. Advance online publication.

Objectives: Minimally speaking autistic children communicate through augmentative and alternative communication (AAC), gestures, speech, and idiosyncratic behaviours. Supporting mothers to recognise and respond to this range of communication is critical for facilitating interaction and development. This study examined the effects of coaching mothers to use responsive communication strategies across modalities.

Methods: A non-concurrent multiple baseline design across three mother-child dyads was employed. An eight-week coaching programme was implemented in home contexts. Child and mother's communication across modalities and mothers' use of responsive strategies were measured during baseline, coaching, and follow-up phases.

Results: All three children demonstrated increased total communication during coaching and follow-up relative to baseline. All children increased their use of gestures, two increased speech or speech approximations, and two increased communication device use. All three mothers demonstrated improved implementation of responsive communication strategies.

Conclusions: Coaching mothers to recognise and respond to diverse communication behaviours, including AAC, gestures, and speech, was associated with positive changes in both maternal responsiveness and mother and child communication. These findings support relational, home-based approaches that strengthen adult responsiveness to children's existing communication repertoires.

· Hinten, A. E., Schluter, P., Andrew, C., Donovan, C., Jameson, I., Jordan, P., Kennedy, A.-M., Muralitharan, S., van Deurs, J., van Noorden, L., Payton, J., Rothwell, B., & McLay, L. (2026). *The effect of participation in the Let's Play program on Autistic children's engagement and caregiver well-being: A randomized controlled trial*. Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders. Advance online publication.

Purpose: In Aotearoa New Zealand (NZ), families face persistent barriers to accessing evidence-based early support for Autistic children. This randomized controlled trial (RCT) evaluated the effectiveness of Let's Play; a bespoke, caregiver-mediated early support program for Autistic children and their caregivers.

Methods: This single-blind (rater) RCT included 91 parent-child dyads, randomly assigned to the Let's Play program (active support; AS [n=45]) or a waitlist control (WLC; n=46). Participants were caregivers of children aged 0 to 5 years with a formal diagnosis or characteristics of autism. Let's Play was delivered over 9 weeks via group workshops and in-home coaching. Primary child and caregiver outcomes, assessed at baseline, post-support, and 6-month follow-up, included parent-child engagement and parental stress, respectively.

Results: Children showed descriptive evidence of improvement in caregiver-child engagement, health-related quality of life and behaviour from baseline to post-support. Improvement in parental stress, depression and anxiety symptoms, and self-perceived parenting competence were also evident, across timepoints. However, there were no significant Group x Ttime effects for caregiver-child engagement, number of utterances or number of different words. A Group x Time effect was evident for all other child and caregiver outcome variables, underscoring the benefits of Let's Play.

Conclusions: This research provides preliminary evidence of the effectiveness of a low-intensity, community-based, caregiver-mediated early support program for Autistic children's health-related quality of life and behavior and caregiver wellbeing. However, more targeted or sustained approaches to supporting caregiver-child engagement and vocal communication may be needed for improvement to be observed.

· Jiang, T., Wilson, M., Whitehouse, A.J.O. et al. *Child and Family Characteristics as Predictors of the Severity of Self-injurious Behaviours in Autistic Children and Adolescents*. J Autism Dev Disord (2026).

Purpose
Autistic children demonstrate an increased likelihood of self-injurious behaviours (SIB). To support autistic individuals who exhibit SIB and understand the factors that contribute to SIB, we examined several child and family characteristics associated with the severity of SIB.
Method
This study used a sample of 594 autistic children, aged 17 and under from the Australian Autism Biobank. As well as data on reported SIBs, we considered child variables (e.g., adaptive functioning), parental variables (e.g., autism traits and mental health), and sociodemographic variables (e.g., parental education and income). We reported the presence and frequency of different types of SIB within the sample, and performed correlational and hierarchical regression analysis to identify predictors of the severity of SIB.
Results
The significant predictors identified in the final hierarchical regression for SIB were greater sensory avoidance, sleep disturbances, maternal depression, and lower levels of parental education.
Conclusion
These findings highlight the under-researched role of parent and socioeconomic factors in understanding and reducing SIB within the autistic population.

· Jordan P, Waddington H, Hammond M, et al. *Priorities and Perspectives Regarding Goals and Outcomes of Support for Autistic Children Under 12 Years: A Systematic Review*. Autism : the International Journal of Research and Practice. 2026 Jun;30(6):1416-1429.

Autistic individuals, family members, and professionals often hold differing perspectives on the goals and outcomes of supports for autistic children under 12 years. While traditional approaches prioritise the acquisition of neurotypical behaviours, emerging frameworks emphasise autonomy, self-determination, and well-being. This systematic review synthesised findings from 15 studies using qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods designs, which were assessed for methodological quality using the Joanna Briggs Institute checklists. Communication, social inclusion, and child wellbeing emerged as shared priorities. Notable differences were observed; professionals tended to focus on normative developmental goals such as skill acquisition and behavioural compliance, while autistic individuals and family members more often valued flexibility, self-advocacy, and strengths-based approaches. Tensions persist between medicalised and neurodiversity-affirming paradigms. To ensure supports align with what matters to autistic people, future research should prioritise co-design with autistic individuals and families, embrace cultural responsiveness, and develop tools that can flexibly but consistently assess neurodiversity-affirming outcomes. These steps will support more ethical, inclusive, and meaningful goal-setting practices in autism research and support.

· Macadré, E., Wilson, E., Vivanti, G. et al. *Parent and Older Sibling Perspectives on Parent-Facilitated Sibling-Mediated Support*. Adv Neurodev Disord 10, 27–35 (2026).

Objectives
Early support delivered by adults close to the child such as parents and teachers has been shown to enhance the learning and development of young autistic children. There is also emerging evidence that siblings can be meaningfully included in the provision of support. However, little is known about family members' perceptions of the inclusion of siblings in the delivery of support. This exploratory study aimed to examine the perspectives of non-autistic siblings and parents on sibling-mediated support for autistic children.

Method
Semi-structured interviews were conducted with four parents and two older non-autistic siblings regarding their perspectives on a parent-facilitated sibling-mediated program of support based on the Early Start Denver Model.
Results
Thematic analysis resulted in four themes (a) the importance of family bond, (b) sibling learning and increased understanding, (c) parental desire for naturalistic and ongoing support, and (d) acceptability of the support.
Conclusions
Our findings suggest that family members may find sibling-mediated support beneficial as it promotes family and sibling relationships and offers naturalistic home-based support. More research is needed to understand improvements in child and family outcomes following the provision of parent-facilitated sibling-mediated support.

· Minnell, H., Waddington, H., Jordan, P., Noble, B., & Bowden, C. J. (2026). "*I accept them, they accept me, we enjoy our time together": Autistic adults' preferences and perceptions of relationships with other Autistic people*. Autism.
Many autistic people enjoy spending time with other autistic individuals because they feel more comfortable and better understood in these relationships. While some research has explored autistic adults' relationships with other autistic people, less is known about their preferences and perceptions within these relationships. To learn more, we surveyed autistic adults in Australia and New Zealand about a range of relationship types they may have with other autistic people (i.e. friendships, romantic relationships, mentoring/support, employment, and volunteering relationships). We then analysed written responses from 142 participants using a reflexive thematic analysis to identify themes within the data set. Participants valued intersubjectivity, mutual understanding, acceptance, and a sense of belonging and described being able to unmask and be authentic in these relationships. However, they also had to consider and balance their relational capacity. While shared neurotype was important, other factors like shared interests, values, and emotional compatibility also influenced relationship satisfaction. Some participants also described challenges or conflicts due to differences in compatibility. These findings highlight that many autistic adults have meaningful relationships with other autistic people, challenging a deficit-based perspective. At the same time, they show that shared neurotype alone does not guarantee compatibility. Instead, the Double Empathy Problem should be understood as a spectrum influenced by factors such as shared life experience and social understanding, reminding us that, like all relationships, those between autistic people are complex and nuanced.

· Panther, N. K., Bowden, N., Chu, J., D'Souza, S., Saha, S., Thabrew, H., & McLay, L. K. (2026). *Prevalence and age of diagnosis of neurodevelopmental conditions among Asian populations in Aotearoa New Zealand*. Journal of Neurodevelopmental Disorders, 18, 35.
Purpose: Asian populations are among the fastest-growing ethnic groups in Aotearoa New Zealand (NZ), yet little is known about the prevalence of neurodevelopmental conditions (NDCs) within these communities. The study compared the prevalence and age of diagnosis of NDCs (Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder [ADHD], autism, communication and language disabilities [CLDs], intellectual disability [ID], motor disabilities [MDs], and specific learning disabilities [SLDs]) between NZ-born Asian and non-Asian populations, and differences across Asian subgroups.
Methods: A national cross-sectional analysis was conducted using linked administrative microdata from the Integrated Data Infrastructure, covering the 2021/22 estimated resident population aged 0–24 years (N=1,334,247). Following adjustment for socioeconomic factors, standardized NDC rates were calculated for Asian and non-Asian populations and Asian subgroups (Indian, Chinese, Southeast Asian, and Other Asian).

Results: Lower standardized rates of NDCs were identified among Asian (2.85%, 95% CI [2.77, 2.94]) compared to non-Asian (4.52%, 95% CI [4.49, 4.56]) participants. Most notably, rates of ADHD (1.1%, 95% CI [1.05, 1.16] vs. 2.94%, 95% CI [2.91, 2.97]) and ID (0.34%, 95% CI [0.31, 0.38] vs. 0.58%, 95% CI [0.57, 0.60]) were significantly lower among Asian participants. Among Asian sub-groups, rates of NDCs were lowest for Chinese children, with particularly low rates of Autism, MDs and SLDs.
Conclusion: Findings highlight substantial differences in NDC rates between NZ-born Asian and non-Asian ethnicities, suggesting that socioeconomic context, cultural perceptions, and diagnostic pathways may influence identification patterns across and between Asian subgroups. Culturally responsive approaches are critical for equitable NDC identification and support.

· Sakata, M., Ostinelli, E. G., Yamamoto, R., Oi, H., Kikuchi, S., Toyomoto, R., Nakajima, S., Ohashi, K., Nogimura, A., Yamada, R., McLay, L., Furukawa, T. A., Nagai, Y., & Yamada, A. (2026). *Comparative efficacy and acceptability of sleep interventions for children and adolescents with autism spectrum disorders: A protocol for a systematic review and network meta-analysis*. Systematic Reviews, 15, 116.
Background: Children and adolescents with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) frequently experience sleep problems. Although various pharmacological, behavioral, and physical interventions have demonstrated efficacy in improving sleep among children with ASD, the relative effectiveness of these interventions remains unclear.
Methods: We will conduct a systematic literat ure search to identify randomized controlled trials that evaluate the efficacy of pharmacological (e.g., melatonin), psychological (e.g, cognitive behavioral therapy), and physical (e.g., bright light therapy) interventions for sleep problems in children with ASD. We will search PubMed, PsycINFO, Cochrane CENTRAL, major trial registries, and regulatory agency websites. We will assess the Cochrane Risk of Bias 2.0 (RoB 2.0) tool for primary outcome and the Risk Of Bias due to Missing Evidence in Network meta-analysis (ROB-MEN) tool for the bias due to missing network evidence. A network meta-analysis (NMA) will be performed to compare the included interventions. The primary outcome will be sleep onset latency, while secondary outcomes will include other sleep variables, all-cause dropouts, and sleep disturbances assessed using standardized measures. We will assess confidence in NMA(CINeMA),
Discussion: Our NMA aims to provide evidence-based insights into the effectiveness of sleep interventions for clinicians, children with ASD, and their caregivers. This information will help guide treatment decisions and improve the quality of life for children with ASD and their families.

· Scott, T., Whitcombe-Dobbs, S., Kennedy, A.-M., Woodford, E., Hunter, J., & McLay, L. (2026). *Advancing healthcare provision to Autistic clients: A systematic review of autism focused digitally delivered professional education programs (DDPE) for the health workforce*. Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders.
Purpose: Autistic individuals experience substantial inequities in healthcare access and outcomes, partly due to limited autism knowledge and training among healthcare professionals (HCPs). This systematic review aims to identify and critically analyze empirical evaluations of autism focused digitally delivered professional education (DDPE) programs for HCPs
Methods: A literature search yielded 1,068 unique articles, of which 80 were assessed for eligibility via full text review. Twenty-three studies (including ten identified through a forward-citation search of eligible articles) met inclusion criteria.
Results: Curricula and methods of program delivery varied considerably across studies.

Despite this heterogeneity, DDPE programs generally enhanced autism knowledge and self-efficacy among HCPs and were perceived as acceptable and feasible. Findings concerning practice behavior change were mixed but suggested that DDPE may increase autism screening rates and enhance HCPs' abilities toreliably administer autism diagnostic evaluations
Conclusion: Whilst DDPE may represent an effective and socially valid means of delivering autism focused training to the health workforce, more research is needed to determine which program characteristics (e.g., delivery modality, dose, learning features) influence these outcomes. This would be strengthened via employing experimental designs and validated outcome measures. Additionally, there is a need to develop and evaluate DDPE programs which relate to promoting health among Autistic adolescents and adults (including ethnic minorities) and aim to upskill HCPs working in specialist (i.e., psychiatry, acute care) settings. Partnering with Autistic individuals to co-produce DDPE curricula may enhance program relevance, and thereby effectiveness in promoting equitable healthcare access and outcomes among this underserved group.

· Shah, S. M., Madhavan, S. P., Bowden, N., & Nedgungadi, P. (2026). *Caregivers' experiences with autism from pre- to postdiagnosis: Multi-country perspectives using ecological systems theory*. Research in Autism, 132, 202836.
An autism diagnosis for a child is a pivotal event for caregivers, influencing both their psychological wellbeing and quality of life. While prior research has examined parental experiences, the interplay between individual, systemic, and policy-level factors remains underexplored. Through the lens of ecological systems theory, this qualitative study examined 13 caregivers' experiences in nine countries across five continents. Thematic coding was clustered within three ecological levels: micro, meso, and macro. At the micro level, caregivers universally grappled with guilt and strained family relationships. At the community level, high-resource economies offered more extensive support services than low-resource economies, resulting in better caregiver-provider interactions, while delayed diagnosis or misdiagnosis persisted across all contexts. At the macro level, certain countries implemented autism-specific policies, but gaps between policy and practice were widespread, particularly in low-resource settings and rural regions in high-income economies. The findings highlight how diagnostic delays, stigma, and uneven service provision affect parental and child wellbeing. Policies influence access to services and diagnosis, financial security, mental health, and education and employment opportunities. The findings underscore the importance of tailoring policies to regional socioeconomic contexts, the need for policy enforcement, context-specific professional training, and whole-family support.

· Tupou, J., Ataera, C., Wallace-Watkin, C., & Waddington, H. (2026). *Educator perspectives on the inclusion of tamariki takiwātanga Māori (Autistic Māori children) in early childhood education*. Early Childhood Education Journal.
Early childhood education in Aotearoa New Zealand should be inclusive of all tamariki (children). However, tamariki takiwātanga Māori (autistic Māori children) who attend early childhood settings often do not experience truly inclusive education where both their Māori and autistic identities are nurtured. The extent to which tamariki takiwātanga Māori experience inclusive education is largely influenced by the attitudes and practices of the educators who support them, yet there is a paucity of research on this topic. The current study forms part of a larger project exploring the experiences of educators supporting tamariki takiwātanga Māori. Twelve educators took part in semi-structured interviews which were later transcribed and analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. Māori research principles were drawn on to support a strengths-based approach where mātauranga Māori

(Māori knowledge) was valued and privileged. Two themes and three subthemes were constructed from the data: (a) accessing services, supports and funding, and (b) whanaungatanga (relationships) and kotahitanga (working together). Overall, results indicate that educators require a range of extra supports to effectively include tamariki takiwātanga Māori in early childhood settings. However, there are many challenges associated with accessing support, particularly culturally responsive support. Findings emphasise the importance of future Māori-centred research and the need for more Māori-centred autism support for educators.

· Wallace-Watkin, C., & Waddington, H. (2026). *Adapting a support service for lower income New Zealand families with an Autistic child: A research-community partnership approach*. New Zealand Journal of Psychology, 55(1), 37–49.
Research indicates that lower-income families encounter barriers to early support services for their autistic children. However, limited research has explored parent suggestions to reduce such barriers. Through a research-community partnership, this study used semi-structured interviews to explore lower-income parents' experiences of an early support service their child had participated in. Interviews were analysed using template analysis with themes located including navigating service pathways, child centred, service flexibility, and increased understanding. An overarching theme, differing needs and priorities, highlighted a necessity for greater flexibility within early support services. Collectively, suggestions from parents and research-community partners informed the development of potential adaptations aimed at enhancing support service accessibility. Implications and future research directions are discussed.

· Woodford, E., Smith, J., Ruhe, T., Kokaua, J., Scott, T., Bowden, N., Tupou, J., Monk, R., & McLay, L. (2026). *Prevalence, understandings, and experiences of autism among Pacific Peoples: A scoping review*. Research in Neurodiversity, 2, 100046.
Culture plays a significant role in shaping how autism is understood and services are utilized. However, despite growing Pacific populations and increasing autism diagnoses, little is known about Pacific Peoples' understandings of autism, prevalence patterns, and experiences of diagnostic and support services. Moreover, current conceptualizations of autism are predominantly underpinned by a Western worldview, contributing to inequitable outcomes. This scoping review explored autism prevalence, understandings, and experiences among Pacific Peoples. A search of peer-reviewed and grey literature was undertaken. Six electronic databases, relevant organizational websites, and ancestry searches were used to identify publications examining autism among Pacific Peoples. A total of 24 publications met the inclusion criteria. Findings revealed a growing focus on autism among Pacific Peoples, with a shift from traditional views to more inclusive perspectives, particularly in New Zealand. While diagnosis rates are rising for Pacific Peoples, they remain lower than for non-Pacific populations, suggesting barriers to accessing and utilizing services. This review highlights the need for culturally tailored support, community outreach, and equitable resource allocation, with implications for future research and clinical practice.