



## **Iowa City Autism Community's Statement on Robert F. Kennedy's Mission to Cure Autism**

While Neurodiversity is a fact and autism is not new, the way we identify and diagnose autism is an invention of the modern era and one that has evolved greatly over time.

Autism was not even a diagnostic category until the publication of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM)-III in 1980 where it appeared as "Infantile Autism". Prior to this, under the DSM-II, children with "autistic" (and other) characteristics were diagnosed under "Schizophrenia, Childhood Type."

The DSM-III criteria were stringent and little attention was paid to the question of diagnosing autistic adults.

Eventually, the DSM-III was revised (importantly it shifted language from "Infantile Autism" to "Autism Disorder") and ultimately replaced by the DSM-IV, which further refined the diagnostic criteria. Significantly, other related, yet discrete, diagnostic categories were included in the DSM-IV, including Asperger's Syndrome and Pervasive Developmental Disorder- Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS).

It wasn't until the DSM-V revisions that these three diagnostic categories were subsumed under the umbrella of "Autism Spectrum Disorders."

Our awareness, understanding of, and ability to diagnose autism has changed radically since first described by Leo Kanner in 1943 (albeit described in a very limited and narrow way). The idea that one can draw a line between 1943 and 2025 and conclude that autism is some kind of "exploding" epidemic is preposterous.

Multiple studies have suggested that the majority of the increase in reported prevalence is tied to 1) broadening diagnostic criteria, 2) swapping diagnoses with "mental retardation" and "learning disabilities," 3) the widespread early identification processes, and finally, 4) the de-stigmatization of the autism diagnosis. While autism has only been a diagnostic category since 1980, it has always been a part of our neurological diversity. Unfortunately, as a result, in part, of alarmist rhetoric, funding has flowed in primarily one direction- towards looking for "causes and cures", taking our scientific energy and focus with it.

For decades before Robert F. Kennedy joined the Trump administration, the scientific community has explored and suggested dozens of “causes” of autism (sucking millions and millions of research funding), including:

maternal depression; maternal SSRI use; pollution; maternal infection; inter-parental age difference; obesity; pre-term delivery; PCOS; closely spaced pregnancy; membership in migrant community; immigrating; summer birth; winter conception; low socioeconomic status; father in accounting, science, or medicine; Celiac disease; mothers in highly technical occupations; diabetes; pesticides; maternal age, parental age, acetaminophen, and, finally, hundreds of different genes implicated in either de novo mutations or in the heritability of autism and, of course, the MMR vaccine.

As one critic wryly noted: “This just in: Being alive linked to autism!”

Robert F. Kennedy’s comments about autistic people “destroying families”, never being able to “pay taxes” or “have jobs” or “go on dates” are cruel and a lie. That this is plainly and shamefully untrue should be so patently obvious to anyone with any sense at all that we won’t waste our efforts, time or space engaging. However, his comments also belie something even more insidious and dangerous- that people who can’t “pay taxes” or “have jobs” are throwaways. That their lives don’t have meaning and don’t have value.

***We categorically reject this dark, dehumanizing, eugenicist rhetoric and pretty much everything else that comes out of Kennedy’s mouth.***

Here’s what autistic people and their families are concerned about:

- Autistic children thriving in school
- Autistic children being understood and celebrated by their peers
- Autistic people of all ages having access to all the services and supports they need to live their lives to the fullest
- Autistic people experiencing less social isolation, depression and suicide
- Increased employment opportunities for autistic people

In the face of this incredibly harmful and caustic rhetoric, we call on our community to visibly and vocally demonstrate their support for their autistic neighbors, co-workers, students, and family members. Learn about autism from autistic people. Learn how to make your businesses and your places of worship more hospitable to autistic people. Employ them. Work to understand them and remember that empathy and social skills are a two way street and the neurotypical among us have a lot of work to do.

*The Iowa City Autism Community*  
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