



Concept Note

World Autism Awareness Day 2024 Forum and Art Exhibition

4 April 2024; 10:00 am – 12:00 pm; Conference Room 6 (Forum)
4 April 2024; 6:15 pm – 8:30 pm; Basement 1 Neck (Art Exhibit)

The United Nations General Assembly declared the 2nd of April as the World Autism Awareness Day¹ to highlight the need to promote and protect the rights of persons with autism and to raise public awareness of autism. Recalling the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the UN affirms that persons with autism should enjoy a full and decent life, in conditions which ensure dignity, promote self-reliance and facilitate their active participation in society.

The global prevalence of autism is alarming at 1 in 100 persons in 2022.² In the United States, about 1 in 36 children has been identified with autism spectrum disorder, according to estimates from the Center for Disease Control's Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring (ADDM) Network.

The Forum: Advocates “Call for Action”

The Forum is a platform for young people with autism and their families, the United Nations, government leaders, advocacy groups, civil society organizations and other stakeholders to raise awareness on autism and to advocate for the rights and welfare of persons with autism. It will also feature the importance of the WHO-UNICEF Global Report on Children with Developmental Disabilities which was launched at the sidelines of the UN General Assembly High Level Week in September 2023 under the co-sponsorship of Autism Speaks and Qatar Foundation. The report is a call for action to

¹ (A/Res/62/139)

² Zeidan, 2022 Global Prevalence of Autism

promote inclusion of children and young people with developmental disabilities in efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.

According to the WHO-UNICEF Global Report on Children with Developmental Disabilities, developmental disabilities are prevalent and affect a significant and growing number of children and young people worldwide. Despite this, they have often been overlooked in healthcare planning and policy, leading to stigma, discrimination, and exclusion across various aspects of life. These individuals face barriers in accessing healthcare, resulting in poorer outcomes and increased mortality, particularly during humanitarian crises like the COVID-19 pandemic.

As we approach the deadline outlined in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, it's evident that health inequalities are widening, and progress towards reducing premature mortality and promoting mental health, well-being, and inclusive education is falling short.

The WHO-UNICEF Global Report serves as a call to action, urging global and national efforts to prioritize the inclusion of children and young people with developmental disabilities. It outlines key actions to drive individual, family, community, and societal changes towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Emphasizing the need for increased investment and accountability, the report provides insights into research, policy, programming, and public monitoring, guided by international human rights conventions.

In launching the Global Report, the primary aim is to advocate for heightened prioritization and investment in programming tailored to children and young people with developmental disabilities. Additionally, it seeks to identify and address significant gaps in policy and programming within this sphere. Efforts also include highlighting leading countries and partners engaged in advocacy initiatives. Ultimately, the overarching goal is to provide a platform for amplifying the voices of individuals with lived experience and their families.

The Art Exhibit & Static Fashion Presentation

Children identified with autism are among those that face serious challenges in learning and developing skills. Their ability to function as a self-sufficient adult is seriously jeopardized if no opportunities are given for them to flourish, function independently and achieve full meaningful lives.

An opportunity that has been proven to help individuals with autism is the creative process of making art. It has helped improve and enhance the physical, mental, and emotional well-being of individuals of all ages, including persons with autism of all ages. According to the American Art Therapy Association, art making is based on the belief that the creative process involved in artistic self-expression helps people to resolve conflicts and problems, develop interpersonal skills, manage behavior, reduce stress, increase self-esteem and self-awareness, and achieve insight.

Society is moving past the “doom and gloom” idea that was pervasive in the early 2000s when children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) were labeled without regard for who they were and what their personal likes and wants might have been. Traditionally, a formula of strategies and educational programs to assist children with ASD is applied without considering their personalities and strengths. However, as these children became adults, many have begun to speak for themselves saying conveying the message: “Help me, but please do not erase who I am.” And so, one way to appreciate one’s uniqueness is to help them express themselves through arts, while nurturing their abilities and for many individuals on the spectrum who have difficulties connecting, art can be an integral, valid part of therapy—a tool to express themselves and show others who they are.

Art expression comes through, within, and beyond limitations of the human condition. Art is the common language that cuts across racial, cultural, social, educational, and economic barriers. It is a language that defies impaired neurological, physical, and so-called disabled dimensions. Art is a language that all people speak. Visual arts, dance, movement, music, drama, writing, speaking, or other creative mediums of expression—all the fine arts—are the one historical -e that can define who we are. Art explains what sometimes science cannot; it is the soul of human existence.

For individuals with ASD and for many people with special needs, the arts are not merely enrichment but a staple, a means to develop more than cultural or appreciative values. The arts provide opportunities to develop language, cognition, fine and gross motor skills, social and life skills, self-esteem and self-expression, and the opportunity to define potential career paths. The arts are an avenue to developing an otherwise unheard voice. As a vehicle to expression, the arts have the capacity to bring a voice to every human being, encouraging the inner world to connect to the outer world of concrete reality. Arts facilitate independence and collaboration for individuals who otherwise may have challenges in these areas. Through art, the parents and the child may be able to access personal strengths in meaningful ways, create a bridge to understanding sometimes difficult abstractions, or to create meaningful communication. Arts have become a pathway for social inclusion and community participation of persons with autism.

The Fashion Arts Autism Benefits (FAAB Project) founded by the Autism Hearts Foundation seeks to provide opportunities for persons with autism to reach their highest potentials through making art. Through this program, children and young people with autism have built a portfolio of experiences and have been tapped to share their experiences. Arts have changed their beliefs and confidence in themselves. They have gained much from exposure, recognition and experiences that could help them establish careers. The Art Exhibition is a platform that truly recognizes a person with autism’s special gift and promotes the development of their fullest potential. The fashion arts to be shown in the exhibition were superbly created by young persons with autism, a testament to the beauty, talent, and uniqueness of every artist with autism.