



The 2nd Annual Autism Friendly Unconference

*Sharing Neurodivergent Experiences; Life After
High School*

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August 21, 2015



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Sharing Neurodivergent Experiences: Life After High School

The Autism Friendly Unconference (AFU) brings together autistic and neurodivergent advocates with peers, employers, educators, agencies and government to come to a better understanding of the diversity of the autism spectrum. Participants identify meaningful issues, share opinions and listen to the lived experiences of autistic peers. AFU 2015 provided a platform for in depth discussion to identify issues and barriers facing youth entering higher education and a professional career. The event also aims to encourage positive discussion that focuses on developing a plan of action to address the issues and barriers.

Organizing Committee

The organizing committee is a neurodivergent group of people who work with Every1Games in various facilitator roles. The committee met bi-weekly to design a multi-sensory environment while creating policies and processes that will help sustain the growth of this event in the future. In no particular order, the organizing committee included Krystal Twiss, Christine Hughes, Jeremy Lyons, Mark Beaudry, Matthew Pegnam, Jacob Yorke and Tanmay Datta.

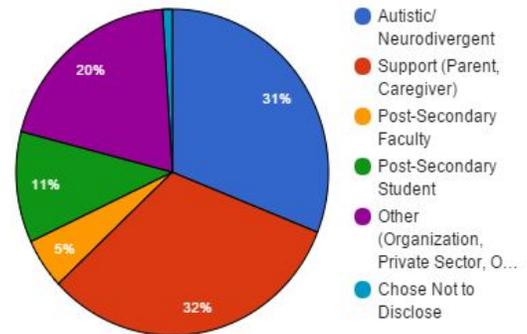
Special Thanks

Thank you to all of the staff and volunteers at Every1Games and George Brown College who worked in the months previous to the event, and on the day of the event. Thank you to everyone at the Autism Ontario Toronto Chapter and Ryerson University, as well as the Ontario Centres of Excellence and Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council for awarding Every1Games the 2014 Social Entrepreneur Fellowship supporting outreach to autistic youth and adults transitioning into higher education. Thank you to Dr. Jason Nolan for his work and support of the Fellowship. Thank you also to family and friends who assisted in many different ways; Ginny Pearce, Crystal Fernandez, Cameron Cubitt, Rocco Briganti, Jordan Saucier, Susan Drew, Brian Drew, Gil Thomas and all who participated in the event to share experiences with one another.

Summary of Participant Demographics

Upon registration for the event participants were asked to choose a description that best describes them. This summary only represents participants who registered through the Eventbrite registration page. Every1Games was pleased to see that **31%** of AFU 2015 participants identified as autistic/ neurodivergent, including 1% who asked not to be disclosed or approached at the event, a 5% increase when compared to last years attendance. The participation of neurodivergent youth and adults is key to success. Other notable demographics include the participation of people in higher education including current postsecondary students and faculty which made up 15% of the participants.

Disclosure: Online Registration



Summary of Key Issues and Barriers

Four key issues and barriers to entering postsecondary school and a professional career were identified; stigma, funding, parent involvement and access to information. The schedule of topics to be discussed at AFU 2015 was based on submissions from participants upon registration. It was unanimous that 15 topics was too broad. Participants asked for more focus narrowing the schedule into nine topics, listed below. As such, information not directly related to higher education has been omitted from this report.

1. Professional Relationships at Work
2. What to expect in postsecondary: If you are currently in postsecondary, please share your experiences with eachother and others preparing to attend school
3. About the Registered Disabilities Savings Plan (\$): If you have experience with RDSP or want to learn more, join this discussion.
4. Sex and Intimacy: Questions? Answers? Experience to Share? This judgement free zone is to discuss sexuality and adult relationships.
5. Autism in the Media
6. Letting Go: How to help your adult children succeed
7. About Organizations and Businesses that Promote Inclusive Hiring: Finding a Job that Specifically for You!
8. Being Autistic in the Video Game Industry
9. Advocating for yourself in the workplace

Stigma

The classifications describing autism is misleading. Low-functioning and high- functioning labels are being challenged and the neurodivergent community is a victim of the stigma that this classification system perpetuates. Students find teachers are quick to make assumptions about their abilities and ignore attempts at self-advocacy. In some cases, postsecondary faculty, including academic advisors, would discourage participation in a program of study rather than attempt accommodation. For example, students looking for work in a field such as Pharmaceuticals, are required to take specific customer service based tests that are designed to satisfy a neurotypical perspective of customer service. A person can be earning exceptional grades on assignments, but are also expected to perform well on this test for placements in work. Attempts at self-advocacy are ignored, falling back on curriculum expectations, policies and guidelines that do not address the issues begging the question does faculty have the tools and resources to assist students appropriately?.

Many people also agreed the secondary school systems in Ontario have not changed much in recent years, despite the active feedback from parents who are relying on the current support model, particularly in the area of IEP (individual Education Plans). Making changes to an IEP is a time consuming process and can be helpful when planning for education, however, when a person's accommodation may change from day to day, or class to class, or even space to space, an IEP is not a helpful resource for this type of accomodation practice.

Funding

“Too much paperwork for funding.” Funding as a barrier to entry does not necessarily mean the cost of education, rather, the processes and policies that govern the access to funding. It was unanimous that funding processes are discouraging. Even with the support of the Disabilities Offices at postsecondary institutions, the process for funding is frustrating. Schools require a payment by specific date, but the disabilities office or funding process does not effectively provide funding by the appropriate date causing anxiety and doubt. The spectrum being so broad makes it difficult for someone to prove their need for funding against other applicants.

Parent Involvement

From the emotional struggle to let your child try and fail, to the legal rights of an autistic adult and all of the differing opinions between, parent involvement needs to be addressed openly. Parents of autistic youth are used to advocating on behalf of their child. The workshop “Letting Go: How to help your adult children succeed” became a space for parents to share what it feels like when their child comes home distraught, angered and discouraged by the hardships of being misunderstood at school and at work. Many parents do not understand the postsecondary system and cannot perceive financial stability from postsecondary. Some doubt their child's ability to succeed having consistently advocated needs to succeed in secondary school. Many parents hold their children back, despite the opinion of their child, making parent involvement an issue that needs to be addressed with care.

Access to Information

Email delays are hugely stressful. Websites lack all the information a person requires and often directs users to a contact number or email. Most people agreed that due to the personal needs someone may be addressing it is reasonable that you would have to contact someone for further information and that electronic communication is often the preferred choice. It is difficult to judge when to send a follow up email, anxiety is caused by not knowing if the person has received the email, or the follow - up email at all. In some cases, the email is never provided a response. Below are other issues that can be subject of discourse.

- Students are told that if you need to record a lecture you need to ask permission, but the rules are unclear and confusing as to why you would not be allowed to record a lecture or workshop, especially as a “paying customer”.
- Most students use an agenda to keep information organized and accomplish tasks on time, but it isn’t always enough.
- “Sometimes, no matter what, you will need to extend a deadline.”

Summary of Action Plan

The Autism Friendly Unconference encourages people to consider solutions to the issues being identified. The day ended with little closure, but many relationships were forged. Continuing to come together as a community is a pillar of the action plan. Every1Games is making changes to policy by considering the suggestions made by the community, not just to better serve, but to demonstrate leadership when encouraging schools and businesses to change the way they engage with the neurodivergent community. Below are suggestions, statements and solutions for consideration addressing stigma, funding, parent involvement, and accessing information.

- Participants agreed to encourage each other, to educate people in their lives about how low-functioning and high- functioning labels are not appropriate, especially when speaking with faculty in schools. Social change and educating the public will encourage more autistics to come forward, meet each other and end stigma.
- It is better to have a choice.
- Instead of funding for all, services are also welcomed, if they are the right ones.
- School and government, including OSAP, needs to be clear that dates for payments do not apply to people who are working with the disabilities department.
- Parents need better counselling and support during this transition.
- Texting, facebook and other social media are an acceptable means of response when unable to provide a full email response.
- “We will be able to respond to this inquiry with 10 days” allows ample time for a person to respond and eases anxiety while avoiding sending many emails to find out.
- Better digital tools and apps can improve communications between students and teachers.

Appendix

AUTISM friendly

This Year's Theme

Neurodivergent Experiences: Life After High School

If you have questions or can offer a perspective on what it means to be autistic or neurodivergent, join us!

Breakfast and Lunch

Multi- Sensory Lounge

Raffle Prizes

AUG 15

230 Richmond St. E

FREE
EVENT

autismfriendly2015.eventbrite.ca

