

Statement from MacART on World Autism Awareness Day 2020

April 2nd is World Autism Awareness Day – a day to recognize all those individuals around the world who live on the autism spectrum. Here in Canada, 1 in 66 children are currently diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD); globally, more than 70 million people live with autism.

Usually autism-friendly events and activities would be taking place throughout the month with the goal of increasing understanding of autism and inspiring everybody to be kinder and more inclusive. Unfortunately, this year things are going to be different. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, most events are being postponed and cancelled and many people are doing their part to protect public health by staying home.

This is a challenging time for everybody, but especially our families living with autism. With many schools and services closed, this can mean a change to routines and a loss of support. Our message this year is to keep the spirit of World Autism Month alive and strive to provide kindness and support whenever possible.

The McMaster Autism Research Team (MacART; www.macautism.ca) is a partnership between McMaster Children's Hospital, Hamilton Health Sciences, and McMaster University that aims to bridge the research-to-practice gap in ASD. MacART is designed to foster collaboration among the families, researchers, clinicians, educators, and policymakers whose lives and work are touched by ASD.

Over the past year MacART has made exciting progress in moving forward policy at various levels. We have been involved in the push for a National Autism Strategy – which would not only facilitate the development and implementation of the large collaborations needed to advance our understanding of autism, but would help translate research evidence into improved policies and practices for those living with autism. At the provincial level, MacART's Training & Education lead Dr. Mohammad Zubairi served as an expert member of the Ontario Autism Program (OAP) Advisory Panel. *"The recommendations put out by OAP Advisory Panel reflect many important conversations and careful consideration of feedback from families and stakeholders representing different sectors,"* says Dr. Zubairi. *"It lays out a framework that lends itself to a lot of creativity and collective problem-solving to ensure children and youth and their families get the best support that they need."*

In these difficult times it is critical to ensure families receive the support they need, and we hope that our work will have that sort of widespread impact. Some of our projects and collaborations will look a bit different than usual during this time of physical distancing, but our collaborative work towards *advancing autism care through meaningful research* will continue.

MacART is proud to be supported by our partners:

- McMaster Children's Hospital & McMaster Children's Hospital Research Collaborative
- Hamilton Health Sciences & Hamilton Health Sciences Foundation
- McMaster University