



The Rise in Autism Diagnoses



NDI Visual Guide

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Where It All Began



Swiss psychiatrist **Paul Eugen Bleuler** first used the term around 1911 to describe a kind of deep inward focus in **adults with schizophrenia**.

He described it as:

- A detachment from reality
- A retreat into one's inner world
- A state of intense self-focus



The word itself comes from:

autós (Greek for "self") + **-ism** ("a state or condition")

Autism = A State of Self

I know not everyone loves this, but to me, it feels pretty spot on for a neurotype defined by a **rich inner world, deep focus**, and unique ways of **experiencing connection**.



Greydanus, D. E., & Toledo-Pereyra, L. H. (2012). Historical perspectives on autism: its past record of discovery and its present state of solipsism, skepticism, and sorrowful suspicion. *Pediatric Clinics of North America*, 59(1), 1-11, ix.



A Brief History of Autism



***Considered extremely rare, fewer than 5 in 10,000**

A rare condition, still viewed through the lens of schizophrenia

1940-1960s

1980s

“Autistic Disorder” introduced to DSM and separated from schizophrenia (narrow criteria).

Marks beginning of modern “autism research.”

Asperger syndrome included in DSM & ICD

Autistic people without intellectual disabilities now more easily recognized.

1990s

Autism spectrum conditions as umbrella concept introduced to DSM-5 (criteria broadened).

Autism and ADHD can now both be diagnosed.

2013

***1 in 31 children identified as Autistic (2025 CDC data)**



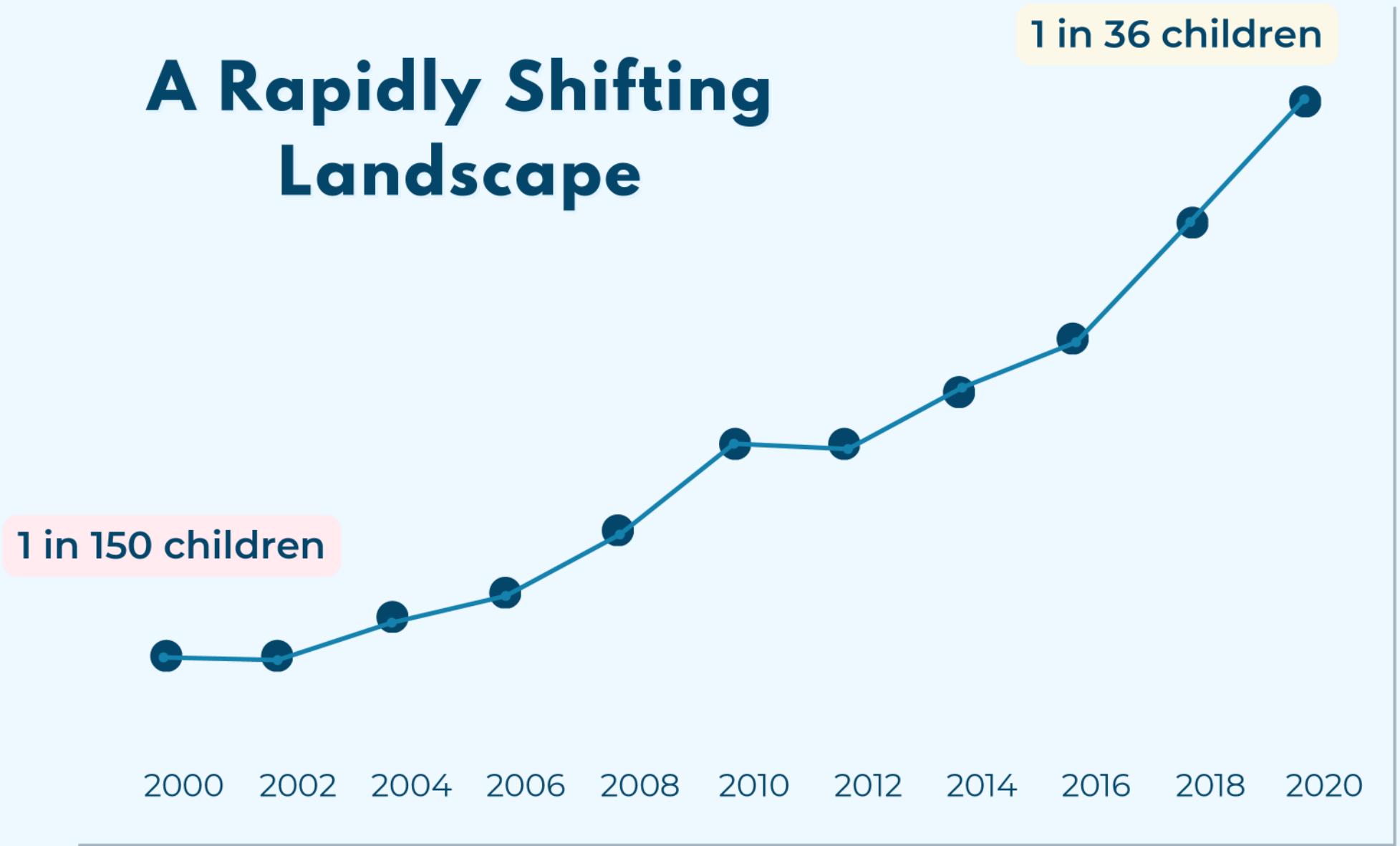
A Little Context



FACT:

There has been a rise in autism diagnosis among children in the states, especially over the last 20 years.

A Rapidly Shifting Landscape



 CDC: <https://www.cdc.gov/autism/data-research/index.html>

A Little Context

Some people look at that and think we're living through an "autism epidemic." ***But it's not quite that simple.***

Here are 5 quick pieces of context for why the numbers have risen:

1

Broadening
Diagnostic
Criteria

2

More Screening
=
More Identification

3

Recognizing
Underrepresented
Groups

4

The Internet
Changed
Everything

5

Autistic People
Grow Up (and
Make Children!)

This increase in identification appears to be more about our growing knowledge, increasing awareness, better diagnostic practices, and changes to the DSM.

These shifts have made it possible for more people to be accurately identified as Autistic **rather than a true spike in prevalence rates.**



1

Broadening Diagnostic Criteria

Autism wasn't recognized as its own diagnostic category until the DSM-III in 1980, which was the first to list autism as a distinct neurodevelopmental disorder.

From there, the definitions continued to evolve:

1994

The DSM-IV expanded the criteria to include **Asperger's Syndrome** and **PDD-NOS**, allowing more individuals, *especially people without intellectual disabilities*, to be recognized.

2013

The DSM-5 unified these subtypes under a single umbrella: Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). This marked a shift toward a spectrum model.

The DSM was updated to allow a person to be **diagnosed with both ADHD and autism**. Before this change, clinicians had to choose one or the other.



2

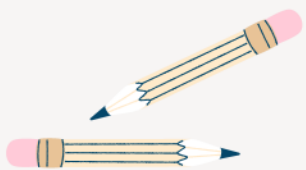
More Screening = More Identification



In 2007, the American Academy of Pediatrics began recommending that **all children be screened for autism** during routine pediatric visits .

Other changes have also driven up diagnosis rates:

Greater access to developmental evaluations and pediatric specialists



School systems increasingly requiring formal diagnoses for IEPs and support services

Increased awareness among parents, educators, and pediatricians



A growing number of families pursuing identification in order to secure educational accommodations

As awareness grew, so did identification. It's not over-diagnosis.

It's **improved detection**. It's more people being seen, named, and, ideally, supported.



3 Getting Better at Recognizing Underrepresented Groups

Early autism research focused heavily on white, cisgender boys.

Today's practices are better at recognizing autism in:

Girls & Women



Girls are often diagnosed later than boys (if at all) and are frequently misdiagnosed with anxiety or depression first.

BIPOC children are less likely to be evaluated, require more medical visits to be identified, and are more often given behavioral-related labels instead.

BIPOC individuals



Verbally fluent or high-IQ individuals



Genderqueer folx



Those with co-occurring ADHD, OCD, trauma, or eating disorders



4

The Internet Changed Everything



For years, autism was defined by stereotypes and clinical checklists.

Online communities where Autistic people, many of us undiagnosed, began sharing our inner worlds in our own words. **We saw ourselves in each other.** For many of us, that recognition was the first time our lives made sense.



This wasn't just an increase in numbers. **It was the rise of a culture.**

So when people look at the data and ask, “Why are more people identifying as Autistic now?” — this too is a big part of the answer:

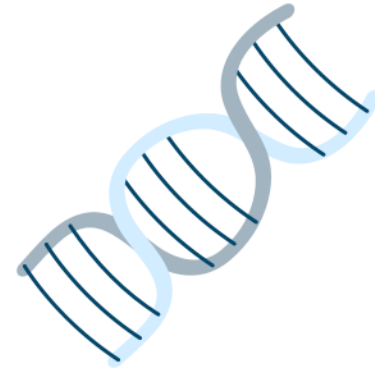
Because we found each other.
Because we saw ourselves.



5

Autistic People Grow Up... (and sometimes make more autistic people)

Autism is highly heritable — passed down not through a single gene, but a constellation of genetic and neurological factors.



The **rise of online communities and dating apps** has made it easier for neurodivergent people to find each other and sometimes they start families.

And perhaps that's contributing to a small, actual rise in prevalence.

The rise in autism is **less an epidemic** than a **recognition**. Autistic adults finding each other, and naming something that was always there, just unnamed.



This guide was adapted from a longer article. To read the full article, please visit:



neurodivergentinsights.com

ABOUT US



Dr. Neff – Info & Resources



Website: neurodivergentinsights.com

A growing library of resources on neurodivergence, mental health, wellness, and neurodivergent identity.



Available at all major book outlets



Community: neurodivergentinsights.com/membership



Instagram: [@neurodivergent_insights](https://www.instagram.com/neurodivergent_insights)

Dr. Megan Anna Neff is a neurodivergent psychologist, author, and educator who founded Neurodivergent Insights after discovering she is Autistic and ADHD. She now creates visual-forward resources that blend research, clinical insight, and lived experience.

Neurodivergent Insights



Born from lived experience and gaps in clinical frameworks, Neurodivergent Insights offers reflection, learning, and care for neurodivergent people and those who support them. We create resources, education, and tools grounded in research and real life to help you make sense of your mind, story, and nervous system.

Whether you're exploring your own neurodivergence, supporting a child, or showing up as a more affirming clinician, we offer resources to help you feel more human, informed, and less alone.

