



Autism Social & Mental Health Conference
Caring.Connection.Community.

Friday, February 20, 2026 8am to 3pm

SPIEC: Sharp Prebys Innovation and Education Center

8695 Spectrum Center Blvd, San Diego, CA 92123

Intended Audience: *Parents, caregivers, professionals, paraprofessionals, persons on the spectrum, service providers*

Projected Attendance: *350 in person, 150+ virtual*

Conference Website:

<https://www.autismsocietysandiego.org/autism-social-mental-health-conference>

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The Autism Society San Diego is a local, non-profit serving the San Diego autism community since 1966. We serve as the leading voice and resource for all of San Diego county's residents impacted by autism.

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) currently impacts 1 in 22 individuals in San Diego County. It is a lifelong, developmental disability. Autistic people are at a far higher risk of suicide than the general population. A 2011 study showed parents of children with ASD were shown to experience increases in stress, depression, and anxiety.

On a daily basis, we receive calls and requests for information about how to access behavioral health and social services and support for individuals with ASD from a broad variety of people including parents, caregivers, persons seeking a diagnosis and professionals.

It is our goal with this conference to provide information to help better understand each other and to provide resources for accessing social and mental health services for ASD individuals and their caregivers. The planned speakers include psychiatrists, licensed psychologists, licensed therapists, school counselors and community peer resource specialists.



2026 CONFERENCE AGENDA

8am-9am *Registration and Check In, Resource Fair open*

9am-2pm *Autism Spa is open*

9am-10am **KEYNOTE SPEAKER: DR. AMY VAN HECKE PhD.**

It's Never Too Late:

Autistic Friendships, Mental Health & Brain Development Across the Lifespan

Dr. Amy Vaughan Van Hecke is a developmental psychologist and neuroscientist, a Professor of Psychology at Marquette University, Director of Research of the Next Step Autism and Trauma Clinic, and co-founder of the On Your Marq college autism support program at Marquette. She studies the effects of evidence-based interventions and therapies, for preschoolers, adolescents, and young adults on the autism spectrum, on relationship development, well-being, mental health, and brain development and function. Dr. Van Hecke is also the co-developer of a health ambassador and workforce development program to train medical professionals in autism diagnosis, to improve access to autism assessment and supports for underserved children and families, including families who speak first languages other than English, and families of Native American/Indigenous descent.

10am-10:30am *Networking/Resource Fair*

10:30am-12pm **AM BREAKOUT SESSIONS:**

A. *Grief and Loss in ASD*

Dr. Jill Hinton, PhD.

Jill Hinton, Ph.D. is a Clinical Psychologist with over 30 years of experience working with people with intellectual disabilities, autism spectrum disorders, and mental illness. Her past experience with The Arc of NC, Autism Society of NC, EastersealsUCP, and the NC Council on Developmental Disabilities includes direct clinical work, organizational leadership, clinical consultation, and policy work. She serves on the IDD Sub-Committee for American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry. This presentation will:

1. Describe grief and processes related to grief
2. Discuss grief as a universal, natural response to loss
3. Demonstrate how people with IDD respond to loss
4. Apply concepts of grief to supporting people with IDD

B. *Autism in Women*

Dr. Ruth Millican PhD & Miranda Millican, LMFT Co-Owners Wander Psychotherapy

Autistic women often go overlooked or misdiagnosed due to the unique behavioral patterns and challenges they face. It is common for Autistic women to not receive an official diagnosis until later in adulthood (if at all). There will be a presentation followed by a moderated panel discussion featuring Autistic women.

12pm-1:30pm **Lunch/Networking/Resource Fair/Book signing**
Box lunch and beverages for all attendees included.

1:30pm-3pm

PM BREAKOUT SESSIONS:

C. *How Caretaking Impacts Relationships*

Amanda Griffith-Atkins MS, LMFT

Parent and author Amanda Griffith-Atkins, MS, LMFT will discuss insights from her book ***How to Handle More Than You Can Handle***, offering support for caregivers facing the emotional shifts of parenting a disabled child into adulthood. Amanda is one of millions of people raising a disabled child with high support needs and knows firsthand the difficult emotions and journey. By encouraging caregivers to bring their feelings into the light, she will help attendees move beyond survival mode and find new meaning in the caregiving journey.

D. *Let's Get Social! Social Skills Programs & Opportunities for ASD Individuals*

Dr. Amy Van Hecke PhD.

Individuals with ASD struggle with social connections and friendships. This will be a presentation on evidenced based practices to help improve social skills. There will also be information about local social programs and services currently available.

The Autism Spa Will be open from 10am until 1:30pm offering various “mini” services to conference attendees.

RESOURCE FAIR: 8am-1:30 pm

Comprised of local agencies & companies who provide social & mental health services for autistic children, adults & their families.