America on Autism:
A NAAR Public Opinion Poll

Background
This summary highlights the major findings of a comprehensive, nationally repre-sentative telephone study among 500 Americans 18 years of age and older. The poll was conducted by Global Strategy Group in conjunction with Widmeyer Communications for the National Alliance for Autism Research (NAAR). The margin of error for the study is +/- 4.4% at the 95th percent confidence interval level.

This poll represents a detailed portrait of American attitudes toward and knowledge about autism spectrum disorders. The objective was to not only measure the awareness among Americans of this increasingly prevalent disorder, but to identify gaps in knowledge, common misperceptions, and attitudes toward the role of research in helping to develop better methods to diagnose, treat and find a cure for autism spectrum disorders.

For the purposes of this poll, Autism refers to all autism spectrum disorders, including Asperger Syndrome, Autistic Disorder, Childhood Disintegrative Disorder (CDD), Pervasive Developmental Disorder Not Otherwise Specified (PDDNOS) and Rett Syndrome.

Major Findings
The major findings of the poll are as follows:

1. Awareness of Autism is high but Americans generally have a low Autism IQ. Americans have a low level of knowledge about how prevalent Autism is, who it affects and how to identify its warning signs but do recognize that Autism affects people of all backgrounds.

2. Many Americans know that the causes of Autism are unknown but there is a basic awareness that genetics likely plays a role.

3. Americans are anxious to learn more about Autism from a source they can trust. Most have been exposed to Autism through news and entertainment media but do not know where to turn to find credible, reliable and in-depth information about the disorder.

4. Americans are very concerned about Autism and view it as an extremely serious problem that is increasing. Fear of Autism strikes close to home: many Americans worry that their child or a friend’s or relative’s child may have or develop Autism.

5. Americans believe that Autism research should be awarded a much higher priority and want both the government and the private sector to increase research funding to develop better methods to diagnose and treat Autism and to find a cure for the disorder.
1. **Awareness of Autism is high but Americans generally have a low Autism IQ.** Americans have a low level of knowledge about how prevalent Autism is, who it affects and how to identify its warning signs but do recognize that Autism affects people of all backgrounds.

Americans are familiar with Autism but are honest and open about their low level of knowledge about the disorder. High awareness may be a result of the fact that many Americans have a close friend or relative with Autism in their family.

- Three in four (75%) Americans – 70% of men and 78% of women – say they are familiar with Autism but this high level of awareness does not translate into knowledge: more than half of Americans (55%) – 63% of men and 49% of women – say they are not knowledgeable about Autism.

- One in five Americans (20%) say that they have a close friend or relative with Autism in their family. Noteworthy is that women (26%) were nearly twice as likely as men (14%) to say they knew a friend or relative with Autism in their family.

**What Americans Do Not Know About Autism**

Americans lack of knowledge about Autism centers on what kind of medical condition it is, whom it affects and how prevalent it is. Americans also have misperceptions about Autism and perceived intelligence.

- **Most Americans do not know that Autism is a developmental disorder.** When asked directly whether Autism was a developmental disorder, only 41% of Americans say that it is.

- **Most Americans are unaware of the warning signs of Autism and about half do not know when symptoms of Autism first appear.** Three in 10 Americans (30%) – 37% of men and 25% of women – can not identify a single warning sign of Autism and only 1 in 3 (36%) are able to cite poor communications and language skills (the warning sign mentioned by most Americans). Additionally, half of Americans (50%) believe that the biggest problem with diagnosing Autism is that symptoms do not appear until age 5 or older when, in fact, many cases of Autism are diagnosed before the age of 2. Nearly half of Americans (48%) either believe Autism is first diagnosed after the age of 2 (37%) or they simply do not know when warning signs first appear (11%).
Approximately 2 in 3 Americans are either unsure how many children and adults have Autism or significantly underestimate the number of cases. Nearly 2 in 5 Americans (39%) – 30% of men and 50% of women – say they have no idea how many Americans have Autism. An additional 1 in 4 Americans (27%) estimate that less than 500,000 Americans have Autism, a number most experts consider low.

Approximately 2 in 3 Americans do not know that Autism affects boys at a higher rate than girls. Four in ten Americans (40%) – 43% of men and 37% of women – believe that Autism is equally common among both girls and boys and 27% simply do not know that Autism is more common among boys. The prevalence of Autism is four times higher among boys than girls.

Most Americans believe that Autism is more prevalent among children or equally prevalent among both children and adults. Nearly 4 in 10 Americans (39%) – 47% of men and 32% of women – say that there are more children in this country with Autism than adults and 38% – 28% of men and 47% of women – say that equal numbers of children and adults have Autism. An additional 17% are unsure whether more children or adults have Autism. Although diagnosed cases of Autism have increased dramatically over the past ten years, there likely are still more adults with Autism than children.

Many Americans believe the myth that Autistic children either excel in math or are more intelligent than other children. More than half of Americans (56%) either believe that most Autistic children excel in math (25%) or are unsure if this is the case (31%). A majority (53%) also either believe that Autistic children are typically smarter than the average child (39%) or do not know if this is the case (14%). While a small percentage of people with Autism display savant-like skills in math or art, most do not demonstrate such abilities.

What Americans Do Know About Autism

There is generally high awareness among Americans, however, that Autism affects people of all backgrounds in the U.S.

More than 3 in 4 Americans (77%) – 73% of men and 80% of women – know that Autism is a condition that affects people in all regions of the country as opposed to being more prevalent in certain geographic areas. However, more than 6 in 10 Americans (61%) either think that Autism is more common in the U.S. (32%), compared to other countries, or are unsure whether this is the case (29%).
• Two in three Americans (65%) – 68% of men and 63% of women – know that Autism affects all races and ethnicities at about the same rate.

• Nearly 3 in 4 Americans (73%) – 80% of men and 66% of women – are aware that Autism affects people of different incomes at about the same rate.

Additionally, most Americans do not believe a number of common misperceptions or stereotypes about autism.

• More than 3 in 4 Americans (76%) know that Autistic children can recognize their parents and approximately 4 in 5 know that Autistic children can show affection (81%) and smile (79%).

• Four in five Americans (80%) know that the statement there are only minor differences between Autistic and retarded children is false and 87% do not believe that because an Autistic child is unable to speak that he or she is mentally retarded.

• Four in five Americans (80%) know that a person cannot “catch” Autism from a virus and 80% know that poor parenting does not cause Autism. Additionally, 72% of Americans – 83% of men and 63% of women – know that Autism is believed to be connected to abnormalities in brain structure.
2. Many Americans know that the causes of Autism are unknown but there is a basic awareness that genetics likely plays a role.

When asked what causes Autism, nearly half of Americans (46%) – 44% of men and 49% of women – say they have no idea and a majority (54%) – 46% of women and 62% of men – say that doctors and scientists do not know what causes Autism either. Americans are correct on this point: currently, the causes of autism are unknown and there are no specific medical treatments or cures for the disorder.

What is noteworthy is that many Americans recognize that genetics likely plays a role in Autism. In fact, more Americans cite genetics than any other possible cause of Autism.

- More than one-third of Americans (36%) – 41% of men and 32% of women – spontaneously cited genes or heredity when asked the question *what do you think causes Autism?* Other causes cited included drugs taken by pregnant women (8%), environmental toxins or pollution (8%), vaccines (5%) and poor parenting.

3. Americans are anxious to learn more about Autism from a source they can trust. Most have been exposed to Autism through news and entertainment media but do not know where to turn to find credible, reliable and in-depth information about the disorder.

It was noted above that most Americans say that they are not knowledgeable about Autism and have a low Autism IQ. A possible reason for this is that Americans’ knowledge base for the disorder is the media, instead of expert sources on Autism.

- More Americans (35%) – 44% of men and 27% of women – say they learned about Autism from a television or cable program than from any other source. Other sources of information included: read something about it in a newspaper or magazine (20%); had a friend of relative with autism (16%); and learned about it in school (14%). Only 3% learned about Autism from interaction with a medical professional.

- Eight in ten Americans (79%) – 83% of men and 76% of women – are not aware of any groups or organizations that are dedicated to or focused on Autism research or educating people about Autism.

Consequently, most Americans have a thirst for more information about Autism and many are unsure where to turn.

- More than 7 in 10 Americans – 74% of men and 68% of women – say they want to learn more about Autism.

- More than 4 in 10 Americans (43%) – 41% of men and 44% of women – say that they do not know where to turn to find reliable information about Autism. In fact, nearly 4 in 10 Americans (39%) say that a MAJOR concern they have about Autism is that many people do not know where to get information about the condition.

4. Americans are very concerned about Autism and view it as an extremely serious problem that is increasing. Fear of Autism strikes close to home: many Americans worry that their child or a friend’s or relative’s child may have or develop Autism.

Autism is a disorder that concerns Americans. Autism is viewed as a very serious condition that can potentially affect their families and relatives.
• More than 7 in 10 Americans (71%) – 64% of men and 77% of both women and parents – say they are concerned about Autism.

• Nearly 4 in 5 Americans (87%) – 86% of men and 89% of women – think that Autism is a serious problem. Women (62%) are more likely than men (48%) to think that Autism as a VERY serious problem.

• Nearly 1 in 5 Americans (19%) say that they have been concerned at one point in their lives that either their child or a relative’s child may have autism and 27% of parents say they are concerned that their child or grandchild might develop Autism.

• Americans recognize that diagnosed cases of Autism are increasing (71%), rather than decreasing (4%) compared to 10 years ago. Men (71%) are more likely than women (54%) to recognize that cases of Autism are increasing.
5. Americans believe that Autism research should be awarded a much higher priority and want both the government and the private sector to increase research funding to develop better methods to diagnose and treat Autism and to find a cure for the disorder.

Strong Support for Increased Funding for Autism Research

There is strong support among Americans for increased funding for Autism research because the consensus view is that not nearly enough is being done to diagnose Autism early, identify better treatments for the condition and to eventually find a cure.

- More than 7 in 10 Americans (72%) -- 74% of men and 70% of women -- believe that not enough is being done to find better treatments for Autism or to find a cure.

- Nearly 9 in 10 Americans (89%) -- 86% of men and 91% of women -- support increasing research funding for Autism. A majority of Americans (56%) strongly support it.

- More than 4 in 5 Americans (84%) -- 79% of men and 91% of women -- say that there should be more research funding to find a cure for Autism.

Americans believe that both the government and the private sector must step up their efforts and commit more money on Autism research. This is especially the case when Americans learn about the current funding realities for Autism research.

- A majority of Americans (53%) -- 52% of men and 54% of women -- believe that Autism does not receive enough research funding from the federal government. When informed that autism ranks 50th among the top 60 medical conditions that receive funding from the National Institutes of Health, nearly 2 in 3 Americans (64%) say that there should be more federal funding for Autism research.

- Nearly 6 in 10 Americans (58%) -- 50% of men and 66% of women -- believe that Autism does not receive enough research funding from private corporations. When informed that no pharmaceutical or drug company has an active research program in place for Autism research, the figure jumps to 81%.
Funding for Autism Research Can Lead to Early Diagnosis

One of the principal reasons that Americans so strongly support increased funding for Autism research is because it can lead to the development of a reliable, biological test for Autism. Many Americans understand that for Autism, unlike other medical conditions, there is no blood test or diagnostic scan available to diagnose the disorder.

- Three in four Americans (75%) recognize that Autism is difficult to diagnose and they are concerned about it: nearly 7 in 10 Americans (69%) say that they worry that many cases of Autism go undiagnosed because there is not reliable test for the condition. In fact, 44% of Americans – 41% of men and 46% of women – say they are very concerned that many doctors cannot recognize the warning signs of Autism.

- Four in five Americans (80%) say that the most convincing reason to support increased funding for genetics research for Autism is that it will help doctors develop a test to diagnose Autism at its very early stages which is critical because the earlier treatment starts, the more effective it is. And Americans appreciate the importance of treatment: more than 3 in 4 (77%) – 72% of men and 80% of women – believe that the symptoms of Autism can lessen if a child receives proper treatment.

Strong Support for Increased Funding for Genetics Research for Autism

Americans express excitement and wonder about new developments in genetics research that offer the promise of medical breakthroughs. More than half of Americans (55%) say they are aware that research scientists and doctors believe that heredity and genes play a major role as a cause of Autism and they want the power of genetics research harnessed for Autism.

- More than 4 in 5 Americans (83%) are favorable to genetics research and nearly 9 in 10 (86%) are excited about the promise that genetics research offers for treating and curing diseases.

- More than 4 in 5 Americans (85%) support legislation -- 50% strongly -- that increases funding for genetics research that seeks to find a cure for autism.