

Peer Support for Latine Autistic Youth and Young Adults

A Call for Interdisciplinary, Community-Centered Care

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Background

Approximately [5 million autistic adults](#) live in the U.S. [Autism prevalence is on the rise](#) because of improvements in [diagnostic practices and societal awareness](#) of autism. Recent research suggests that [about 12% of autistic adults enrolled in Medicaid identify as Hispanic or Latine](#). While services and supports have expanded for autistic adults as a whole in recent years, autistic young adults, including those from the Latine community, [continue to be left behind](#).

Evidence-based practices and services have traditionally been designed for and implemented in resourced, [highly controlled settings, such as clinics](#). Interventions and research to support individuals with developmental disabilities has focused mostly on [affluent, well-resourced populations](#) and [young children](#).

Autistic-delivered peer support may be a promising and effective service for helping Latine autistic youth navigate the transition to adulthood and improve health outcomes. Autistic-delivered peer support has the potential to be a culturally responsive, accessible, and tailored support service for this community with unique needs that are not always met by service providers.

What is Autistic-Delivered Peer Support?

[Autistic-delivered peer support](#) is when one autistic person uses their own life experience to help another autistic person. Because they share similar ways of thinking and moving through the world, they can connect as equals. These supporters help with everyday goals like making friends, staying healthy, finding a job, and learning how to speak up for what they need. They also make it easier to find and use the services or help that a person might require.

Main Points

- Like many, **Latine autistic youth** in the U.S. encounter **challenges accessing adult services during the transition to adulthood**.
- **Autistic-delivered peer support** could be a beneficial service for this community because of its ability to serve as **tailored, community support**.
- Service providers must ensure these youth and families have **access to appropriate support, coordinated medical and social programs, and must foster the community integration of youth with autism across the country**.

Language Note: We use the term *Latine* as a neutral way to refer to people with roots in Latin America. Other common terms include *Latino*, *Latina*, *Latinx*, and *Hispanic*. *Latine* is used here for clarity and consistency, while acknowledging that individuals may prefer different terms to describe themselves.

Benefits of Autistic-Delivered Peer Support

Unlike traditional clinical models, peer support offers a dual-benefit framework that has been effective in promoting positive mental health outcomes. Peer support has been shown to [benefit both peer supporters and peer support recipients](#). Previous research has shown that autistic people report feeling [better understood and more comfortable](#) around other autistic people. Recent studies on autistic-delivered peer support have also suggested that participants experience improvements in [communication, social relationships](#), and [quality of life](#). Additionally, individuals who have received autistic-delivered peer support have expressed [high satisfaction](#) with peer support. Peer simultaneously enhances the wellbeing of both the supporter and the recipient, effectively doubling the intervention's impact per funding dollar. This "multiplier effect" ensures a high return on investment (ROI) by fostering community-based resilience and reducing the burden on specialized clinical systems.

Peer support has been proven to address critical needs of [underserved groups](#), such as autistic adults. This type of support may be especially beneficial for autistic Latine youth and young adults given a shared understanding of both being autistic and from a Latine cultural background.

Autistic people that engaged with peer support want more tailored services delivered by people who understand their experiences.

“Maybe they [Community Autism Peer Specialist program] should have an interpreter...and try to use our native language to communicate.”

–Latine Autistic Young Adult 1

“I think that there could be a better understanding of Latino culture [in peer support], like hiring on more Latino peer specialists, for example.”

–Latine Autistic Young Adult 2

The Issues

Latine families in the U.S. often experience [barriers accessing health services](#). One common barrier is [access to affordable health insurance](#). Although uninsured rates for children in the U.S. have [declined](#) over the last decade, children from Hispanic/Latine backgrounds continue to be [uninsured at higher rates](#) than non-Hispanic, white children. Latine individuals also continue to experience [language barriers](#) when seeking health services, especially mental health services. Other cultural and sociopolitical factors, including [stigma](#) around mental health and [perceptions of immigration laws and consequences](#), have played a role in preventing service access and use in the Latine population in the U.S.

Recent [increased immigration enforcement efforts](#) and [societal perceptions of Latine culture](#) may impact how Latine autistic youth and their families engage with support services. Legal changes around deportation have led to Latine individuals [avoiding healthcare visits](#), regardless of their immigration status. These changes, and associated social consequences, may prevent the Latine community from seeking community-based services as well. There is a critical need to meet Latine autistic youth and families where they are and through interdisciplinary collaborations between providers and systems.

Families of transition-age autistic youth often [struggle to access services](#). Specifically, Latine autistic youth are [less likely to receive long-term services and supports](#). Autistic-delivered peer support could be a more accessible and effective service option for these youth that face multi-faceted, complex barriers to care.

Peer Support as a Solution to Bridge Service Gap

Autistic-delivered peer support can help meet the needs of Latine youth and young adults because of its flexibility to tailor to the needs of not only an individual, but a family and community as a whole. Peer support is unique in its ability to meet individuals where they are based on both their physical location within a community and their personal capacity.

Individualized peer support can be provided in a wide range of settings, including [educational](#), [medical](#), and [community](#) settings. This kind of support can also be provided in languages other than English, [including Spanish](#). Peer support allows for easy integration of community into support, including other types of support services. Some examples of other services that individuals can receive alongside peer support include [counseling, transitional services, and supported employment](#).

Benefits of Peer Support

Improved communication

Confidence **Independence**
Better social relationships Comfortability

Community participation

Better quality of life Adaptability
Community support **Shared understanding**

Peer support doesn't interfere with other services. *Here are some other services autistic people receive:*

Mental health counseling

Speech

Transition services

Occupational therapy

Support employment

Medical services

Policy Recommendations

- Educators should be **trained at the intersection of autism, language, and culture** to support a smoother post-secondary transition.
- Service systems must **consider and acknowledge the importance of the individual within the context of a family and family dynamics**, not just individualized support.
- Service leaders and researchers should **explore the overlap and intersection of cultures –autism and latino community–within a peer support framework**.
- **Build capacity and training for bilingual workforce in the health system**, from diagnosticians and peer specialists to primary healthcare workers and other health care touch points.
- **Ensure language access at all system touch points**, including education, healthcare, and other service settings.



The Autism Transitions Research Project (ATRP) is a coalition of researchers and stakeholders who are addressing gaps in autism research that focuses on autistic transition aged youth.

The Center for State Health Policy is an initiative within the Institute for Health, Health Care Policy and Aging Research at Rutgers University that provides impartial policy analysis, research, facilitation, and consultation on pressing state health policy issues.