

History of Autism

The History of Autism is a complicated and complex thing that centres on principle characters, mostly clinicians and academics, who have helped towards what were considered leaps in understanding of autism. It's always helpful when looking at the history of something to understand the context in which decisions and thoughts were made.

Although the term autism (From the Greek: Autos, meaning 'self') was coined by [Paul Eugen Blueeler](#) in 1911 with regards to Schizophrenia, the history of autism starts in controversy in Nazi-occupied Vienna In the 1930s and 1940s.

Austrian paediatrician, [Hans Asperger](#), maintained a clinic in which he identified what we now know to be autistic children, but what he termed [Autistic Psychopathy](#). Some of the concepts that are in use today such as the 'Autism Spectrum' and the outgoing clinical diagnosis of [Asperger's Syndrome](#) are loosely based on aspects of his work.

Asperger is a controversial character, as there is much debate as to whether he followed Nazi ideology. The debate over him will probably never end.

Around the same time, in the United States, [Leo Kanner](#) was working with children who were also what would now be recognised as autistic.

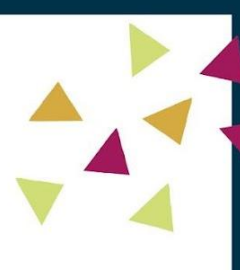
Kanner is also a controversial character and the origins of his idea are confusing. Despite claims that he came up with the concept independently and first, Kanner was working with [George Frankl and Annie Weiss](#), two of Asperger's assistants who had fled Nazi occupation because they were Jewish.

Kanner's concept of autism (Classic or Kanner's Autism) became popularised as Asperger's work was lost in post-war Europe. It became the predominant way of thinking about autism for a very long time and still underpins much of how the world perceives autism and autistic people, and how the diagnostic criteria are written.

[Bruno Bettelheim](#) is another psychologist who became important around this time and has also influenced a lot of thought around autism. He had a notion that parents were to blame for autistic children, Mother's in particular. He is renowned for coining the phrase '[Refrigerator Mom](#)' to imply that autistic children existed because their mother's didn't love them enough.

Much of the thought around autism from that period up until the present day has revolved around autism being a disorder, something that needs to be fixed or cured; with autistic children often put through systems of therapies to 'normalise' them and help them 'fit in'. In the 1960s waves of [therapies based on changing behaviour](#) using aversives (punishments) or rewards were developed and many of them are either still in use today, or have developed into different models still rooted in that ideology.

There have been many theories around autism that have come and gone, or moved on. But sometimes because the world turns slowly and ideas move quickly, some of those theories have become ingrained in our cultural and then professional way of thinking about autism; and even though many of those theories have been discredited or vastly moved forward, the older way of thinking has hung around and created huge myths around things like lack of empathy, eye contact, communication, functioning labels and so on.



These myths in turn have had their own legacies, most notably with the [MMR scandal](#) , which led to an ongoing distrust of vaccinations and led to the recent return of the once eradicated measles disease. It reinforced notions that autism has a 'cause' and can, therefore, be cured, when in actual fact autism is 'caused' by hundreds of different genes working together, is genetic, and becoming more widely accepted as heritable.

More recently the world of research has slowly, and mostly as a result of campaigning by autistic people, started to look at autism through a lens of Neurodiversity. This is a sociological way of looking at humanity as full of people with acceptable neurologies, who work differently to each other. It's about identifying positive difference and highlighting needs.

Due to this new understanding and thinking, there have been many diagnostic labels that have appeared and disappeared under the umbrella of autism over the years: Classic Autism, Kanner's Autism, Low Functioning Autism, High Functioning Autism, Asperger's Syndrome, PDD-NOS (Pervasive Developmental Disorder – Not Otherwise Specified, ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorders), ASC (Autism Spectrum Conditions), but most of these labels have gone, or at least (in terms of Aspergers Syndrome) are going. The reason for this is that as our understanding of autism has grown and changed, so too has our understanding of the many different co-occurring conditions that often accompany autistic neurology, and the relationship between the two.

Again, because of participatory research and the voices of autistic people being listened to, new ideas and concepts - not just how we look at autism in terms of communication and sociability, but also with regard to race, gender and the many other marginalised areas - have started to emerge.

It's changing how we look at the world.

We at the North East Autism Society have had to change the way we think and as a result, the work that we do, with most of this stemming from listening to and working with autistic people, who have been the voices consistently missing from the autism narrative.

Sadly, the professional world, including health and education, the media and wider society at large have a lot of catching up to do. Autistic children, now diagnosed or undiagnosed, are hitting the same barriers that previous generations of autistic people faced. Autistic adults still have huge levels of unemployment, mental health issues and lack support from services which exist only minimally, if at all.

Ironically, recently, the work of [Grunya Sukhareva](#), a Ukranian researcher has been 'rediscovered'. Her research identified autistic children using effectively the diagnostic criteria we use now. Grunya did her research in 1925, which really highlights how little forward progress has actually been made.

The legacy of the history of autism is really one of failure. The world historically has failed to understand autistic people and has failed to listen to them, it's time for that to change.