

# Unpacking Priority Area #5 of Canada's Autism Strategy - Tools and Resources

What we heard from the 11th annual Canadian Autism Leadership Summit participants.



This brief was created following the Autism Alliance of Canada's 11th annual Canadian Autism Leadership Summit. It summarizes key ideas and reflections shared by attendees during World Café discussions after a panel presentation on *Tools and Resources*.

## How you can use this brief

### As a Policymaker

This brief offers valuable community perspectives on tools and resources. Whether you're working at the federal or provincial level, these insights can help inform policies and programs that support a more effective and coordinated approach to autism support across Canada.

### As a Researcher

This brief highlights gaps and community-identified needs related to providing evidence-informed tools and resources for Autistic people and their families. It can help spark new research questions and guide studies that support meaningful real-world improvements.

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## As a Community Leader

This brief can help spark local conversations and provide context for national efforts on improving tools and resources for Autistic people and their families - so you can bring your community's experiences and connections into the national conversation.

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## As an Advocate

This brief can support your efforts to engage with policymakers and other advocates in your region. It offers a starting point for conversations about building a more coordinated national approach to tools and resources for Autistic people and their families.

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## Panel and World Café Engagement

Panelists shared federal initiatives and implementation strategies to improve access to tools and resources for Autistic people and their families. They also identified key signs of progress in Canada's support for Autistic people. Attendees then reflected on these ideas during World Café discussions and shared their perspectives. Key themes from those conversations are summarized below along with quotes that capture the spirit of the dialogue.

Panelists: Dr. Fakhri Shafai, Dr. David Nicholas, Whitney Hodgins, Dr. Stephanie Jull

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## What we heard: reflections from attendees

1. **Tools must be designed for real-life usefulness and clarity, especially for those with the greatest needs.** Resources should go beyond dense pamphlets and provide accessible, visual, step-by-step guidance such as maps or decision trees to help families and people navigate services.

*"What you're given when you get a diagnosis is... LOTS of words and paragraphs and pamphlets. A MAP or online MAP - like: am I this? → go here → then here..."*

2. **Partnership and co-design with Autistic people and community voices are essential.** Autistic people must be involved from the start in policy design and resource development, ensuring tools reflect lived experience and practical realities.

3. **Simple, localized tools, such as internal resource directories, should be made publicly available.** Many useful resource lists remain behind institutional walls. Tools like localized directories should be openly shared to support system navigation.

4. **Build and scale grassroots innovations using implementation science.**

Community-developed tools and resources should be evaluated and scaled through research cycles and partnerships with academic champions and implementation experts.

**Box 1. Supporting Evidence from the Canadian Academy of Health Sciences (CAHS) Autism Report, from *Equitable Access to Diagnosis, Supports, and Services* (p. 146)**

“Improving systems design and coordination and providing family-centred navigation supports ensures greater access to and continuity of services for Autistic people across the lifespan.”

*“Grassroots are the best source for interventions, then can be tested, spread, and scaled, success audited as related to the research cycle.”*

5. **Training tools can break down stigma.** Teaching instructors how to apply inclusive practices can highlight the strengths of Autistic people and help change attitudes.

*“Seemingly small connections can lead to big things, e.g., swim instructor training. Jobs with responsibility, authority, leadership (ex lifeguard) start to break down stigma and change expectations.”*

6. **Address inequities in access, especially for rural, low-income, or disconnected communities.** Digital tools must account for users with limited internet or technological literacy, ensuring those most in need are not excluded.

## Taking action on this priority

Attendees shared clear steps that policymakers, service providers, researchers, and community leaders can take.

1. **Support the development and dissemination of neuro-affirming resources led by Autistic people.** Offer seed and publication grants to Autistic resource developers and researchers.
2. **Develop and share implementation toolkits showcasing successful initiatives.** Establish a “casebook” of contextualized examples of effective implementation projects that illustrate each phase of the process - before, during, and after - with particular attention to Francophone communities.
3. **Leverage AI to enhance accessibility of communication tools and service navigation.** Support AI innovation in Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) and create user-friendly, inclusive digital tools to help people better express themselves and navigate services.
4. **Provide service navigation resources in a variety of formats and languages.** Include visual tools (e.g., maps, flowcharts) and ensure resources are accessible to underserved populations, including Indigenous and Francophone communities.
5. **Increase coordination among regions and sectors through shared networks.** Identify regional champions and networks, facilitate matchmaking between people or organizations with shared priorities across provinces and territories.

## Gaps that need attention

During the discussions, participants raised important issues that are often overlooked in policy and practice. By highlighting these gaps, we can include a broader range of voices and better address the diverse needs of our community.

1. **Prioritize co-creation and Autistic leadership in tool development,**

**evaluation.** Autistic people should help design strategies, ensuring authenticity and community relevance.

2. **End fragmented systems and promote intersectoral collaboration.** Reduce siloed efforts by promoting coordinated knowledge-sharing and navigation support across health, education, and community sectors.
3. **Shift focus from pilot projects (innovation) to sustained funding and long-term implementation.** Fund not only the newly created but also the maintenance of effective programs.
4. **Ease system navigation by promoting rights-based support systems.** Address eligibility and administrative barriers, and align with human rights-based frameworks like the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) or the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA).
5. **Invest in practical, frontline applications of research.** Deliver toolkits and training to service providers (e.g., ER staff, educators) to bridge knowledge gaps in real-world contexts.
6. **Increase awareness of accommodations that empower Autistic people and families.** Provide information to both youth and adults on their rights, available supports, and how to self-advocate; equip caregivers with the same information.
7. **Integrate AI into communication and service navigation tools.** Explore ethical uses of AI to improve accessibility, personalization, and efficiency of support tools for Autistic people.

**Box 2. Supporting Evidence from the CAHS Autism Report, from *Social Inclusion through Technology* (p. 129)**

“Technology, such as communication devices, can support social inclusion of speaking and non-speaking Autistic people with diverse processing abilities by providing greater options for making connections and communicating.”

## The National Autism Network: Engaging Community for Impact

Attendees shared ideas on how the new Network can meaningfully involve autistic people, families, and communities to advance this priority through trust, collaboration, and shared action.

1. **Facilitate paid, ongoing co-development processes that include diverse Autistic voices.** Ensure Autistic people, including non-speakers, are meaningfully involved in designing strategies, tools, and their evaluation.

“Engage communities that are not typically engaged.  
Look for the perspectives that are not at the table.”

2. **Build a national directory and regional networks to foster collaboration and reduce duplication.** Promote cross-provincial learning, coordination, and shared initiatives among people and organizations developing new tools and resources.
3. **Host targeted gatherings, forums, and showcases to promote underrepresented perspectives.** Incorporate francophone, Indigenous, intersectional, and other diverse voices before and during tool development.

“Create a forum by and for francophones at annual symposiums... so that the voices, intentions, and aspirations of francophones are truly heard.”

**Box 3. Supporting Evidence from the CAHS Autism Report, from Addressing Stigma and Ensuring Human Rights (p. 97)**

“Autistic people can participate in decisions about their lives and may benefit from formal mechanisms for supported decision-making.”

4. **Support Autistic-led mentorship and leadership.** Create tools and resources that help Autistic people to connect, support, and mentor one another in navigating education and employment.

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