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Focusing on individuals with autism, intellectual disability, and related disabilities

Teachers' Corner

Bridging Health and Learning: Supporting Students with Autism and Developmental Disabilities and Complex Medical Needs

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Students with autism spectrum disorder and other developmental disabilities (ASD/DD) frequently experience co-occurring chronic health conditions (CHCs), including epilepsy, genetic syndromes, and conditions requiring intensive medical intervention (Muskens et al., 2017; Salehi et al., 2025). Advances in pediatric medicine have improved survival rates for children with complex health needs. Schools, however, have been slower to adapt to what this shift requires in practice, especially at the intersection of health, disability, and learning (Barnett et al., 2023; CDC, 2017). For these students, this gap is not a minor systems issue. Their educational progress often depends on predictability, structured supports, and scaffolded instruction. When illness or hospitalization disrupts those conditions, the effects can be disproportionate. Many evidence-based practices in autism rely on consistency across settings; when that consistency breaks down, so too can access to learning (Wong et al., 2015).

Chronic health conditions are associated with patterns of absenteeism, fatigue, and fluctuating cognitive functioning (Shaw & McCabe, 2008). These are often treated as logistical challenges, which may include missed days and incomplete work—but their impact runs deeper. They shape how, and whether, students can access instruction in the first place, including their ability to engage with evidence-based practices commonly used in autism and special education. Children managing complex medical conditions may also experience executive functioning difficulties, reduced attention, and memory challenges, particularly following major medical interventions (Kaffenberger, 2006). In many cases, these profiles overlap with the learning characteristics already associated with autism. The result is not simply additive. It can intensify existing vulnerabilities and, in turn, increase overall educational risk.

Continuity is often framed as a coordination issue in school reintegration, but that framing can undersell its importance. Research consistently shows that students with chronic illness benefit from support systems that extend across home, hospital, and school settings (Hirschman et al., 2015; Shaw & McCabe, 2008). For students with ASD/DD, however, continuity is more than beneficial. It is foundational to how they access learning. This is particularly evident in how evidence-based practices are implemented. Supports such as visual schedules, explicit instruction, and structured routines are not isolated strategies; they depend on being used consistently across settings to be effective (Wong et al., 2015). When a student returns to school following hospitalization, that continuity is often disrupted. Without deliberate coordination, students may experience not only gaps in instruction but also regression in both academic and behavioral domains.

Reentry to school is a particularly vulnerable period for students managing chronic illness. Kaffenberger (2006) noted that without structured planning, students often encounter difficulties with both academic continuity and social reintegration. For students with ASD/DD, these challenges are typically more pronounced, given known difficulties with transitions and sensitivity to changes in routine. A phased approach to reentry can help mitigate these risks, especially when grounded in principles of systematic instruction. Rather than expecting an immediate return to prior demands, educators can reintroduce expectations gradually while prioritizing stability and access. Maintaining familiar supports—such as visual schedules, structured routines, and clear behavioral expectations—also plays an important role in reducing anxiety and supporting re-engagement (Wong et al., 2015).

Instructionally, the issue is not simply reducing demands but preserving meaningful access. In special education, there is longstanding evidence that students with significant support needs benefit from explicit, systematic instruction that breaks complex skills into manageable components (Browder et al., 2020). That logic still holds for students managing chronic

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health conditions. However, it cannot be applied without adjustment. Variability in stamina and cognitive load changes what students can reasonably sustain across a school day. Fatigue, in particular, is easy to misinterpret. Students may appear disengaged or even noncompliant when underlying physiological limits are driving performance. In practice, this means pacing matters. Building in planned opportunities for rest, and allowing flexible ways for students to demonstrate learning, can help sustain engagement in the context of fluctuating stamina and cognitive load (Shaw & McCabe, 2008).

Technology also plays an important role in maintaining continuity of instruction, particularly when attendance is inconsistent. Research on technology use in special education suggests that digital tools can support access, engagement, and independence (Cagiltay et al., 2019). In practice, this often includes tools such as visual schedules, communication applications, and recorded or asynchronous instruction. These supports can provide structure while also allowing flexibility when students are unable to participate in a full school day. Used this way, technology can help extend key instructional supports beyond the physical classroom.

Social reintegration requires similar attention. Extended absences can disrupt peer relationships, and for students with autism, who may already experience challenges in social communication, reestablishing those connections is not always straightforward. Peer-mediated interventions offer one approach to rebuilding these relationships and supporting inclusion (Wong et al., 2015). In addition to increasing social interaction, they create opportunities for participation that are embedded within everyday classroom activities. For example, a trained peer partner may be assigned during group work to help prompt turn-taking, clarify instructions, and support sustained engagement in the activity.

The development of self-advocacy is another important, but sometimes underemphasized, area. Anderson and Bigby (2017) found that opportunities for self-advocacy are associated with more positive identity development and greater social inclusion for individuals with intellectual disability. For students managing chronic health conditions, this advocacy may involve recognizing their own needs, communicating effectively with adults, and participating in decisions about their support. A student independently notifying a teacher when fatigue is increasing and requesting a short break or an alternative way to complete the task is one example. These are not skills that develop incidentally. Many students with ASD/DD require explicit instruction, modeling, and ongoing support (Wong et al., 2015).

The role of the special educator is central in coordinating these efforts. High-leverage practices in special education—particularly collaboration, data-based decision making, and explicit instruction—provide a useful foundation (McLeskey et al., 2017). In this context, however, those practices often extend beyond the classroom. Coordination with families and healthcare providers becomes part of the instructional work,

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Table 1. Common Challenges and Instructional Responses

Challenge	Instructional Implication	Evidence-Based Response
Frequent absences	Interruptions to instruction and risk of skill loss	Instruction benefits from cumulative review and opportunities to revisit prior content; recorded lessons and structured plans for re-engagement can help maintain continuity (Browder et al., 2020; Cagiltay et al., 2019)
Fatigue and reduced stamina	Variable engagement and reduced task persistence across the day	Pacing becomes critical. Planned opportunities for rest, alongside flexibility in workload and timing, can support sustained participation while maintaining focus on priority learning goals (Shaw & McCabe, 2008)
Executive functioning difficulties	Difficulty initiating, organizing, and completing tasks independently	Supports such as visual schedules, checklists, and scaffolded task structures can reduce cognitive load and increase independence over time (Wong et al., 2015)
Transition-related anxiety	Increased dysregulation during changes in routine, particularly at reentry	A gradual return to expectations, supported by predictable routines and visual cues, can ease transitions and reduce behavioral disruption (Kaffenberger, 2006)
Social disconnection	Limited peer interaction and reduced sense of belonging	Peer-mediated approaches can help reestablish social connections while also creating natural opportunities for participation in classroom activities (Wong et al., 2015)
Limited self-advocacy	Needs may go unrecognized; reliance on adults remains high	Development of self-advocacy typically requires explicit teaching, guided practice, and involvement in planning conversations (Anderson & Bigby, 2017)

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not separate from it. This kind of alignment helps ensure that educational planning reflects medical realities while keeping learning and participation in view. Table 1 provides a set of common challenges alongside evidence-based responses intended to support classroom implementation.

Students at the intersection of autism, developmental disabilities, and chronic health conditions require approaches that bridge health and education rather than treating them as separate systems. No single strategy is sufficient. What matters is how supports are combined and carried across settings. Drawing from established evidence-based practices in autism and special education, while also incorporating what is known from the chronic illness literature, allows for a more responsive approach to instruction.

As the number of students with complex medical needs increases, expectations for schools will continue to shift. Framing this solely as a matter of accommodation is too limited. The issue is one of equity, ensuring that students can move between health and learning contexts without losing access to either. That continuity has implications not only for academic progress, but also for inclusion, identity development, and longer-term outcomes. ■

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President's Message

Angi Stone-MacDonald, PhD

Earlier this spring, I talked with one of my preservice teachers working in a school that had recently expanded its inclusive practices. During a classroom observation, she watched a student with complex communication needs sit beside a peer during a shared reading activity. She explained that she looked on as the two leaned toward each other, pointing to words, exchanging looks, and celebrating each small success with a quiet, but unmistakable sense of pride. When my student shared this experience from the classroom, I was reminded of why our work matters so deeply. Inclusion is not an abstract ideal. It is lived in the everyday interactions that shape a person's sense of belonging, competence, and possibility.

As we enter the summer of 2026, I find myself returning to that moment often. It captures the heart of what the Division on Autism and Developmental Disabilities (DADD) stands for: a commitment to evidence based practice, a belief in the dignity and potential of every individual, and a recognition that advocacy is woven into every decision we make as educators, researchers, and leaders. We are at a time when our field is navigating both persistent challenges and promising opportunities. Across the country, we see educators striving to implement research supported practices with fidelity, families advocating for equitable access to services, and scholars generating new knowledge that pushes our field forward. In each of these spaces, DADD members are leading with integrity, compassion, and a deep sense of responsibility.

One of the most powerful ways we advance this work is through ongoing professional learning. Our Encore Webinar Series, running now through June, reflects our commitment to ensuring that high quality scholarship remains accessible to practitioners, families, and community partners. These webinars revisit impactful sessions from our annual conference, sessions that explore inclusive instructional design, culturally responsive assessment, behavior support grounded in dignity, and strategies for strengthening family–professional partnerships. What makes the series so meaningful is not only the content itself, but the way it invites us to slow down, revisit ideas, and consider how research translates into practice. Professional learning is a form of advocacy. When we deepen our knowledge, we strengthen our ability to challenge inequities, support families, and ensure that individuals with disabilities receive the high quality education and services they deserve.

As we look ahead to the 2027 DADD Annual Conference in Phoenix, we are reminded that scholarship is also a form of advocacy. The research we conduct, the practices we refine, and the innovations we share all contribute to shaping the future of our field. Attending the conference is an opportunity to elevate work that advances equitable outcomes, promotes inclusion and belonging, and amplifies the voices of individuals and families. Every year I enjoy learning from one another, engaging in thoughtful dialogue, and reconnecting with colleagues who understand the complexities and joys of this work. The strength of our conference lies in the diversity of perspectives represented, and I encourage you to consider how your work and your voice, whether in classrooms, communities, or research settings, might contribute to the national dialogue through your participation in the 2027 DADD Conference.

Much of DADD's work also happens within our committees. These groups bring together members who are passionate about publications, diversity and inclusion, membership, communications, and awards. Committee work is where ideas become initiatives, where research informs action, and where members find a community. Joining a committee offers a meaningful way to contribute to systems level change, shape policy statements and advocacy priorities, develop resources that support equitable practice, and build networks that amplify our collective impact. If you are looking for a way to deepen your involvement in DADD, committee service offers a powerful avenue for leadership and collaboration.

As I reflect on the first half of 2026, I am struck by how deeply interconnected advocacy, scholarship, and narrative truly are. The stories we tell about students learning together, about families navigating complex systems, and about educators striving to create inclusive environments shape the way we understand our work and the urgency with which we pursue it. The research we conduct provides the evidence needed to challenge inequities and inform policy. And the actions we take, both individually and collectively, determine whether our values translate into meaningful change.

The challenges facing our field remain significant. Disparities in access to services persist. Shortages in qualified personnel strain systems already stretched thin. Families continue to navigate complex pathways to secure the supports their children need. Yet we also see tremendous progress: innovative practices grounded in research, stronger family–professional partnerships, increased attention to equity, and a growing recognition of the importance of inclusive, community based supports. DADD members are at the forefront of this work, and your leadership is shaping the future for individuals with autism, intellectual disability, and developmental disabilities.

As we move through the remainder of 2026, I hope you will continue to engage deeply with DADD's initiatives, committees, and activities. Each of these opportunities strengthens our community and amplifies our shared commitment to equity, inclusion, and justice.

Thank you for the work you do and for the heart you bring to it. I am grateful for your partnership and inspired by your dedication. Together, we can continue to build systems that honor the dignity, potential, and humanity of every individual we serve. ■

Angi Stone-MacDonald, PhD
DADD President

DADD CAN Brief:

Current Special Education Policy & Legislation Update

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DADD CAN Coordinator
CANCoordinator@DADDCEC.org

I am inviting colleagues, families, self-advocates, practitioners, and partners to join me in forming a DADD Advocacy Committee focused on special education policy, implementation integrity, and coordinated action. The proposed DADD Advocacy Committee will serve as a mechanism to translate these federal signals into coordinated action. Committee work will prioritize (1) rapid, plain-language briefs on federal developments; (2) strategic outreach during appropriations and oversight cycles; and (3) dissemination of disability-informed guidance that centers implementation integrity (e.g., evaluation timelines, service delivery, and evidence-based instruction) focused on students with autism and DD. To participate, please email cancoordinator@daddcec.com with your name, state, role (e.g., educator/administrator, related service provider, faculty, family member, self-advocate, student), and your top one to two advocacy priorities.

Washington Happenings:

FY 2027 Education Budget and Disability Services

The FY 2027 U.S. Department of Education Budget Summary includes several major provisions related to special education, students and individuals with disabilities, and the educators who support them. The request prioritizes IDEA Grants to States by proposing $15.4 billion to support special education and related services for approximately 8.3 million children with disabilities ages 3–21, while maintaining IDEA accountability requirements related to FAPE, LRE, IEPs, parent participation, assessment participation, accommodations, and protections for students and families (U.S. Department of Education, 2026). It also proposes $590 million for IDEA Grants for Infants and Families to support early intervention services for infants and toddlers with disabilities, $38 million for the Special Olympics Education Program, continued funding for Transition Programs for Students with Intellectual Disabilities into Higher Education, and maintained support for disability-serving institutions such as the American Printing House for the Blind, the National Technical Institute for the Deaf, and Gallaudet University (U.S. Department of Education, 2026).

At the same time, the budget proposes consolidating several IDEA programs—including Preschool Grants, State Personnel Development, Technical Assistance and Dissemination, Personnel Preparation, Parent Information Centers, and Educational Technology, Media, and Materials—into the broader IDEA Grants to States program rather than funding them as separate line items. The document frames this consolidation as a way to increase State flexibility and reduce administrative burden, including paperwork demands on special educators that may contribute to attrition and reduced instructional time. Other disability-related areas include increased funding for Vocational Rehabilitation State Grants to support employment for individuals with disabilities, maintained funding for Independent Living Services for Older Blind Individuals, increased funding for the Helen Keller National Center for Deaf-Blind Youths and Adults, and reduced or eliminated separate funding for several rehabilitation, advocacy, educator preparation, and special education research programs (U.S. Department of Education, 2026). Don't want to read the entire 2027 Budget Proposal?

I created a video brief which you can view here: 2027 Proposed Budget Overview.

FY 2027 Budget Hearing Raises IDEA Oversight Concerns

During the Senate Labor-H appropriations hearing, Secretary of Education Linda McMahon described the FY 2027 education budget as part of a broader effort to "return education to the states" through consolidations, block grants, and interagency agreements. While the proposal includes a reported increase of more than half a billion dollars for IDEA programs, it would also eliminate separate funding for IDEA Preschool Grants and IDEA National Activities, including personnel preparation, professional development, technical assistance, parent supports, and special education technology. This has raised concerns that increased IDEA formula funding may be offset by reductions in the infrastructure that supports special education implementation, educator capacity, family engagement, and federal oversight. Senator Patty Murray also raised concerns from parents of children with disabilities who fear that moving special education functions outside the Department of Education could weaken the educational focus and rights-based oversight provided by the Office of Special Education Programs (Council for Exceptional Children, 2026; U.S. Department of Education, 2026).

Protecting Public Funds and IDEA Rights

The Keep Public Funds in Public Schools Act, introduced by Senators Mark Kelly and Mazie Hirono with 28 colleagues, seeks to repeal the federal private school voucher provision created through HR 1 by eliminating Section 25F of the Internal Revenue Code. The proposal would end a federal tax credit of up to $1,700 for contributions to scholarship-granting organizations that fund K–12 private school vouchers. The Council for Exceptional Children supports the repeal, noting long-standing concerns that private school voucher programs may divert public funds away from public schools and can result in students with disabilities losing key rights and protections under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA; Council for Exceptional Children, 2026; Kelly, 2026).

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(*DADD CAN Brief,* continued from page 5)

Reduced OCR Enforcement for Students with Disabilities

Senator Bernie Sanders' *Justice Denied* report raises significant concerns about the impact of reduced staffing at the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights on students with disabilities. According to the report, OCR reached nearly 79% fewer disability-related resolution agreements, even though disability complaints make up the largest share of OCR's caseload. The report also notes that no resolutions were reached in pending cases involving restraint and seclusion, discriminatory discipline, harassment, and sexual violence, leaving some students with disabilities and their families without timely answers, enforcement, or promised protections. Overall, the report frames the reduction in OCR capacity as a serious setback for protecting the rights, safety, and dignity of students with disabilities in schools (Sanders, 2026).

Please feel free to reach out with any advocacy questions and thank you for considering joining the DADD Advocacy Committee. ■

TAKE ACTION!

- **Join the DADD Advocacy Committee:** Email cancoordinator@daddcec.com
- **Act now through CEC's Legislative Action Center:** Use the link to send an advocacy message in minutes: Legislative Action Center | Council for Exceptional Children
- **Share this brief:** Forward to one colleague/family network to grow coordinated advocacy.

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DADD Board Nominations

Get ready! Nominations for the 2027 DADD Board will be opening soon, and we're looking for passionate leaders to step into these exciting roles:

- Vice President
- CAN Coordinator
- Communications Chair

Stay tuned and start thinking about who would be a great fit to nominate, or consider applying yourself! ■

A Farewell Reflection from the DEIJ Liaisons (2024–2026):

Learning, Listening, and Leading Together

Guofeng Shen, PhD, BCBA-D

Kayla Malone, PhD

As we conclude our two-year term as Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice (DEIJ) Liaisons for the Division on Autism and Developmental Disabilities, we are grateful for what this role has taught us about leadership, collaboration, and the everyday work of building a more inclusive professional community. Serving in this role has been both an honor and a learning experience. We have had the opportunity to work alongside committed colleagues, learn from DADD members, and think more deeply about how DEIJ can expand the division's ongoing work.

We are especially grateful to Dr. Jamie Pearson, the first Diversity Chair during our term, whose leadership helped shape this work, and to the current DADD Diversity Chair, Dr. Sarah Cox, for her steady leadership, vision, and mentorship. We also thank the DADD Executive Board for their unwavering support and commitment to advancing DEIJ efforts across the division.

Over the past two years, we have worked with committees focused on awards, membership, publications, and communications. These collaborations gave us opportunities to think with others about questions such as: Who is being recognized? Who feels invited into the organization? Whose work and experiences are visible in our publications and communications? How can DADD continue to serve educators, families, researchers, practitioners, and community members with different identities, experiences, and needs?

Our role was often to support, ask questions, offer perspectives, and help connect DEIJ priorities to work already happening across the division. This included thinking about how opportunities are shared, how people are welcomed into the division, and how the work of DADD can better reflect the wide range of communities connected to autism and intellectual and developmental disabilities. We also learned that advocacy requires ongoing reflection. It means asking direct questions, noticing who may be missing from a conversation, and being willing to adjust to existing practices. Our work with the student representative and DADD committees helped us better understand emerging needs in the field. These conversations helped us become more responsive, more relevant, and more accountable to the communities DADD serves.

The highlight of our term was supporting the DADD Diversity Committee Community Chats. These one-hour webinars created space for members to learn about inclusive and culturally responsive practices for supporting autistic individuals and individuals with IDD. The Community Chats brought together presenters and participants with expertise grounded in research, practice, and lived experience. They offered practical strategies, encouraged thoughtful discussion, and helped extend DEIJ learning beyond a single meeting or committee.

We encourage DADD members to explore the Community Chat recordings on the DADD YouTube page and continue using them as a resource for reflection, teaching, and practice.

As we transition out of this role, we are thinking less about a finished set of accomplishments and more about the conditions that make belonging possible. DEIJ work is often measured through programs, events, and initiatives, but it also lives in the quieter parts of organizational life: how members are invited into leadership, how new scholars and practitioners are mentored, how families and community members are represented in professional conversations, and how the division responds when members identify barriers or needs that have not yet been addressed.

We hope DADD continues to build structures that make participation more accessible and meaningful for a wide range of members. This includes continuing to consider how students, early-career professionals, educators, researchers, practitioners, families, and individuals with lived experience can see themselves reflected in the division's opportunities and priorities. It also means continuing to ask how DADD can further reduce barriers to involvement, create more pathways into leadership, and support members who may be new to the organization or unsure where they fit.

We also hope the division continues to create space for learning that is practical, relational, and accountable. The field of autism and developmental disabilities is shaped by rapidly changing conversations about identity, language, access, disability justice, cultural responsiveness, and community partnership. Professional organizations like DADD have an important role to play in helping members engage in these conversations with care.

Finally, we hope DADD continues to treat DEIJ not as a separate goal, but as part of the division's broader mission. When DEIJ is connected to leadership development, membership, awards, publications, communications, and professional learning, it becomes part of how the organization grows. That kind of work is not always immediate or visible, but it matters. It shapes who feels welcome, who feels valued, and who sees DADD as a professional home.

We are deeply grateful to the DADD Executive Board, the Diversity Chair, the committees we collaborated with, and the broader DADD community for their trust and partnership. It has been an honor to contribute to this work and to learn alongside such dedicated colleagues. As we conclude our term, we look forward to seeing how DADD continues building a community where members of the autism and IDD field are supported, represented, and valued. ■

Save the Date!

28th International Conference on Autism, Intellectual Disability & Developmental Disabilities

Phoenix, Arizona | January 6–9, 2027

Upcoming Important Dates:

June–July 2026

- Proposal review process

August 1, 2026

- Proposal decisions sent to primary author

September 15, 2026

- Last day for Early Bird Registration rate

October 1, 2026

- Draft conference program posted
- Last day for exhibitor and sponsor 25% discount

December 12, 2026 (5:00pm MST)

- Last day to book a room in the DADD hotel block

January 6, 2027

- Pre-conference Training Institutes*
- Conference begins (4:00pm MST)

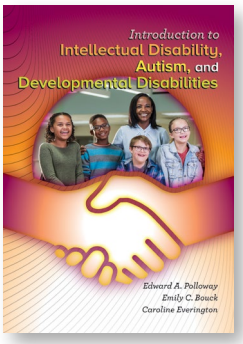
January 9, 2027

- Conference ends (9:00am MST)
- Post Conference Sessions* (9:30am–12:30pm MST)

**Pre- and Post-Conference Sessions are available for a separate fee*

Introduction to Intellectual Disability, Autism, and Developmental Disabilities

Edward A Polloway
Emily C. Bouck
Caroline Everington

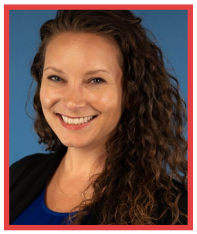


This foundational text presents a comprehensive introduction to intellectual disability, autism spectrum disorder, and other developmental disabilities, focusing on characteristics, evidence-based practices, and supports across the lifespan.

Designed for educators, service providers, and future professionals, the book integrates research, policy, and practice to help strengthen outcomes and inform instruction in diverse educational and human service settings.

Get your copy now! Click here to purchase. ■

Editor's Note



Kelly B. Kearney, EdD, BCBA-D
Editor, DADD Express

Dear DADD Colleagues,

Welcome to the Summer 2026 issue of the *DADD Express*. This issue features a Teachers' Corner article focused on a critical topic: effectively supporting students with developmental disabilities who also have complex medical needs. We also highlight upcoming DADD Board nominations and share important dates for the 28th Annual DADD Conference, to be held January 6–9, 2027, in Phoenix, Arizona.

DADD remains committed to enhancing the quality of life for all individuals with autism, intellectual disability, and other developmental disabilities. This impact is made possible through the dedication of members like you. We encourage you to consider nominating a colleague—or yourself—for an open Board position, or to contribute a manuscript to the *DADD Express* or *ETADD*, the Division's official journal. Ongoing member engagement is essential to advancing positive educational and life outcomes in our field.

We hope to see you in Phoenix this January!

Call for Submissions

We invite you to contribute to an upcoming issue of the *DADD Express*. Your expertise and innovation are vital to the continued strength and impact of this newsletter. We are seeking submissions that provide practical, evidence-based guidance to inform and support our community. As practitioners, researchers, and advocates, your perspectives play a key role in advancing the field. By sharing your insights, successes, and lessons learned, you help expand our collective knowledge base and further our shared mission of improving outcomes for children and adults with developmental disabilities. The success of this newsletter relies on the contributions of dedicated members like you.

Thank you for your continued commitment to DADD's mission and for considering the *DADD Express* as a platform to share your expertise with our community.

To submit a manuscript or learn more about our submission guidelines, please contact us at express@daddcec.com. We look forward to featuring your contributions in upcoming issues. ■

Kelly B. Kearney, EdD, BCBA-D
Editor, *DADD Express*