# Reducing Disability Stigma in the Arab-American Population by Introducing the "Learn the Signs. Act Early" Campaign

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## Background

The Arab culture is a beautiful, complex one that includes some stigmas about the world of disabilities. The majority of research in the field of autism has been conducted in Western countries with readily available resources. In the developing countries and specifically in the Arab world, the field of child psychiatry is relatively new. Autism was not a subject of interest in the region until the late 1990s<sup>1</sup>. Lack of awareness, resources and culture contribute to the unmet needs of autism patients in the region.

Stigma is a common problem among the disabled community, across many cultures. It affects the person with the disability, but may extend to the whole family.

## Objectives

The purpose of this project was to raise awareness and break the social stigma attached to disabilities by educating the local Arab-American community about what autism is, and how early treatment can improve the outcomes for children.





### Methods

An hour-long seminar introducing the "Learn the Signs. Act Early" program was delivered at the local mosque – a melting pot that serves people from over 20 different cultures and ethnicities. The presentation, offered both in Arabic and English on two different days, included

- Explaining different types of disabilities
- Introducing People First language
- Teaching the signs of autism and the importance of acting early.

The 20 participants who attended the Learn the Signs. Act Early program came from various backgrounds.

- 55% Syrian
- 15% Pakistani
- 30% Other Libyan, Jordanian, Egyptian, Hispanic, and European Americans

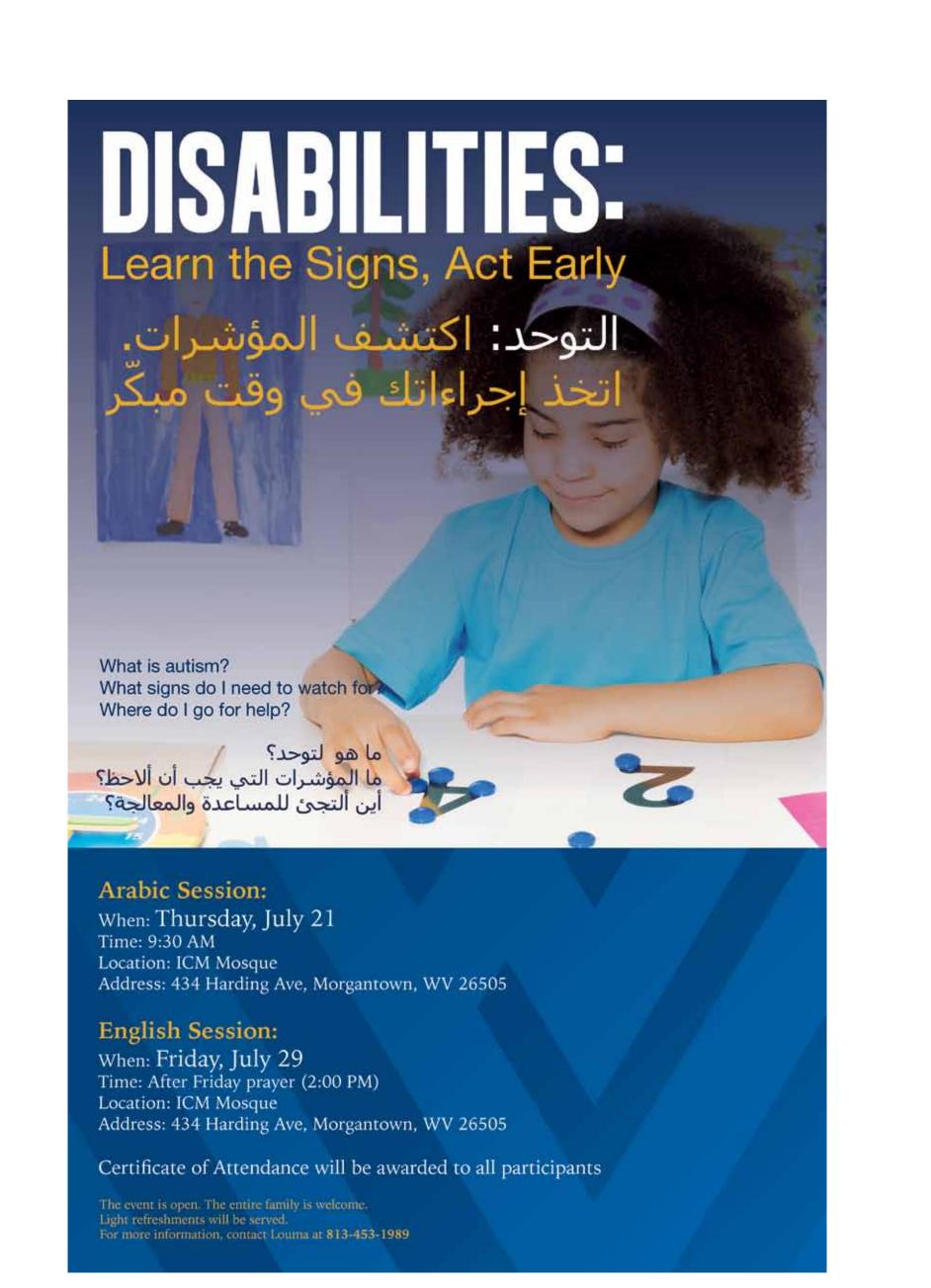
The average participant age was 38 years old, with the youngest being 14 years old and the oldest 72 years old.

Pre- and post-test assessments were conducted with all participants to measure beliefs about autism's causes and confidence in knowing where to go to seek autism-related services.

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#### Results

**98%** reported increased confidence on where to go for help, and 92% strongly agreed that the program was helpful in increasing their knowledge about autism. The post-seminar assessment revealed a dramatic 70% improvement in autism knowledge when compared to the pre-presentation test.



## Conclusions

Fear of stigma may keep families from pursuing early autism diagnoses and treatment, actions critical to achieving the best outcomes for young children with the disability. Education to address disability stigma and increase autism knowledge may help parents act early. The "Learn the Signs. Act Early" campaign, an educational program targeting the local Arab-American community, was well-received and effective at increasing knowledge of autism and confidence in knowing where to seek help.



Putting together an educational program for a specific community is feasible if the population is targeted in their native language, and the campaign is delivered in a comfortable, familiar setting.

#### References

1Hussein, Hanan, and Ghada RA Taha. "Autism spectrum disorders: A review of the literature from Arab countries." Middle East Current Psychiatry 20.3 (2013): 106-116.



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