CENTRE FOR AUTISM
MIDDLETOWN

LEISURE AND COMMUNITY

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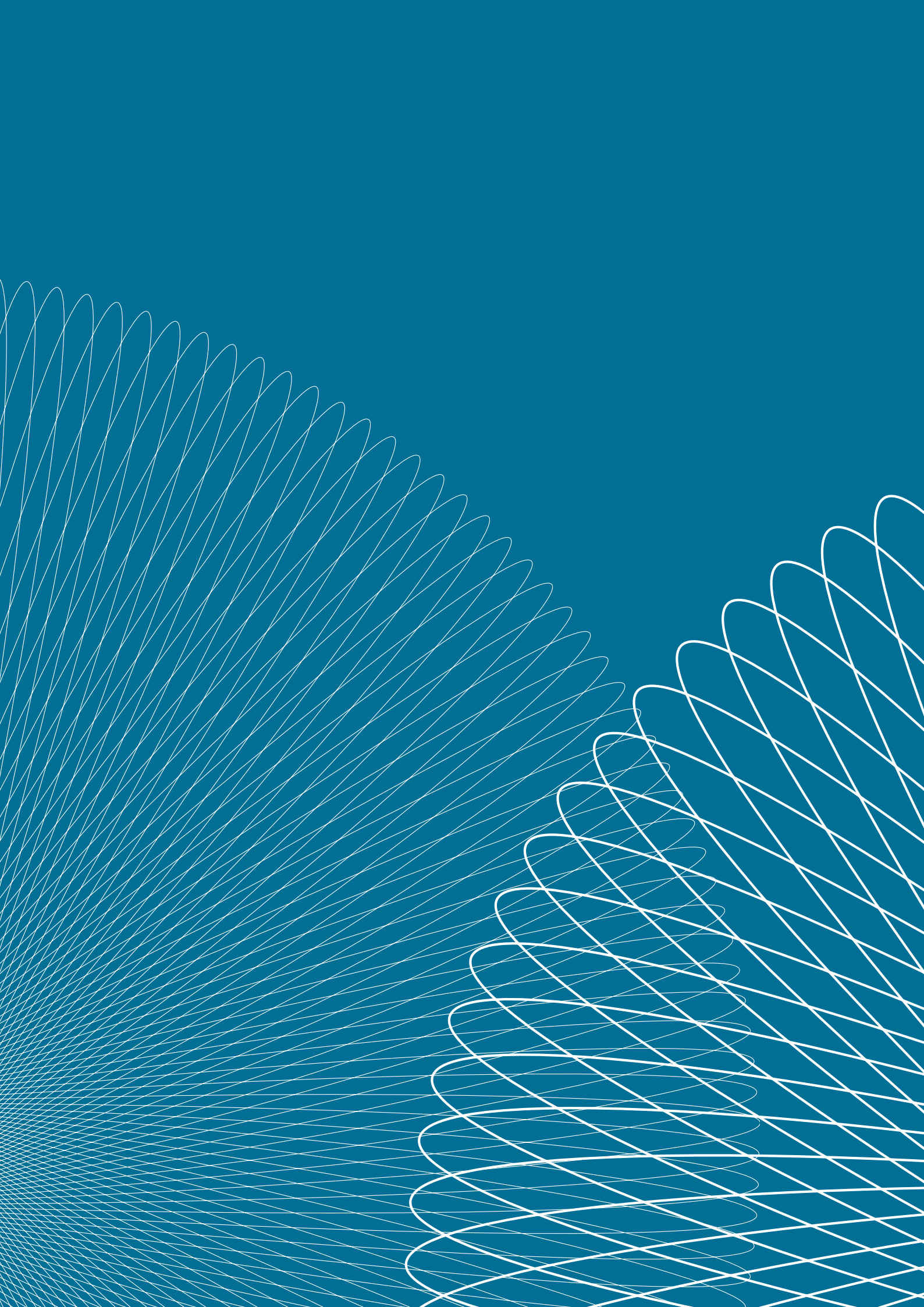

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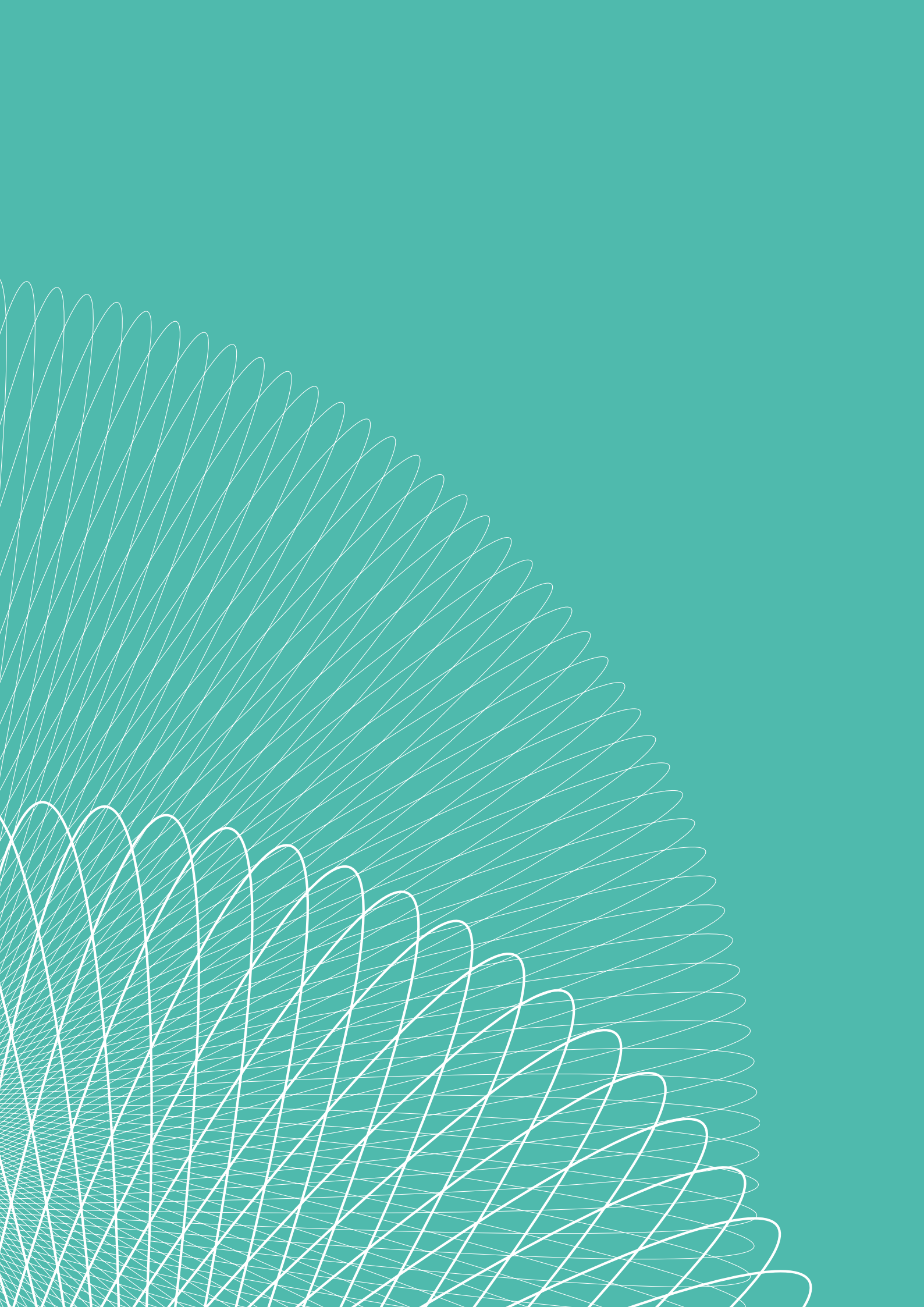


INTRODUCTION

Feeling part of a community and having the opportunity to do things that we enjoy are central to everyone's well-being. For a long time, research that explored autistic people's engagement with community and leisure activities focused on changing the autistic person. 'Social skills training' was often highlighted as a method thought to improve autistic people's experiences engaging with the community.

In this Bulletin, we're highlighting work that challenges assumptions that are based on non-autistic ways of understanding community and leisure. We're focusing on research that emphasises what autistic people want from leisure activities and community engagement, and we're exploring what makes autistic people feel comfortable in their communities.

The Bulletin begins with an interview with Diarmuid Heffernan, consultant, support worker and autistic advocate. Diarmuid has worked extensively with autistic people to support them to find joy in shared activities across a range of settings.

Please note that the views represented in this document do not necessarily reflect the views of Middletown Centre for Autism.

The language used in this Bulletin is autism-affirming and neurodiversity-informed. Some of the papers summarised use more medical and deficit-focused terminology and approaches. This Bulletin is created for autistic people, family members and professionals to learn more about research being conducted. The language chosen here is intended to be as inclusive as possible to the broad autism community.

Where possible, we try to highlight research that has been created by autistic researchers or co-produced with autistic community members. The Centre encourages all researchers to actively involve autistic people in every step of their research so that their experience and expertise is central to the process.

Definitions:

Neurodiversity is the scientific truth that people vary in the way that their brains process and respond to information.

'Neurotypical' describes the majority of people. While all brains are unique, most people think, sense and communicate in similar ways. Traditional education and employment settings tend to suit neurotypical people well because they are systems built by neurotypical people for neurotypical people.

'Neurodivergent' describes the minority of people. The way that they process and respond to information differs from the majority. They may struggle in traditional education and employment settings that are designed for neurotypical ways of processing and responding.

INTERVIEW WITH DIARMUID HEFFERNAN

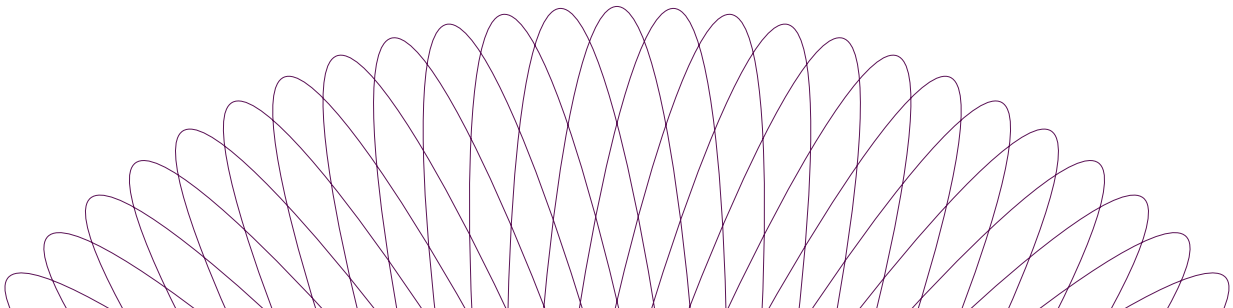
Diarmuid Heffernan is an autism consultant and support worker who has worked with autistic adolescents and adults for nearly 20 years. During this time, he has worked with dozens of autistic young people, authored and co-authored books on autism and the experiences of autistic adults, contributed to the development and delivery of several higher education courses in the field of autism. One of Diarmuid's areas of interest is the expression of creativity in autistic people and he currently guest lectures on the Masters in Arts and Engagement in MTU. Diarmuid is autistic himself.

You have worked with autistic young people for many years now. What have you observed about how autistic young people view community?

My first foray into creating a leisure activity for autistic adolescents was a 'social group'. The idea behind this was to provide a space where autistic young people could meet and connect. The first (and only!) group of this type I attempted did not work. My assumption was that the common experience of being autistic alone would be enough to connect the group. I was wrong but I felt I had the nucleus of a good idea. This idea was that connection and belonging are a desire and need for most autistic people as much as most allistic people. My experience of most young autistic people is that they do not want to feel different to those around them, they want to be a part rather than apart but the opportunities to do so are often on allistic terms and in unsuitable ways.

The following are some points based on my observations and experiences around the benefits of leisure activities for young autistic people:

- There is an ever-expanding repository of research into the benefits of exercise for autistic people, particularly in terms of managing anxiety and overall mental health and well-being.
- The exercise groups I created were based on an activity (the gym) but were also intended to be a way for people to interact with each other without this interaction being foisted on the participants. I took a laissez-faire approach to facilitating the groups and in fact I participated myself with the intention of creating a guided but egalitarian space. My observation over a long period of time was that many of the participants gradually began to interact organically and, in this way, real friendships were formed.
- Other participants in this group did not actively participate in terms of talking with others. I think of a young person who was part of a creativity group that my partner and I ran online during Covid (through our organisation CreAUT). This young person had their camera and sound off throughout all our sessions and they chose never to share their work. Subsequently, in putting together an exhibition of the work produced via CreAUT, they submitted what they had been creating during the sessions and it was work of the utmost beauty and skill. Furthermore, their parent told us that their child loved all the sessions.



- An important takeaway from the previous bullet point is that what 'participation' looks like needs to be viewed from an autistic rather than allistic perspective. If an attendee of a group is not actively speaking or interacting this does not necessarily mean they are not enjoying or benefitting from the experience.

- Leisure spaces can provide a very important alternate space to school or home (I will discuss online spaces later). Many of the young people I have worked with have very few, or no friends in school. The vagaries of secondary level education and its relative inflexibility, the sensory overwhelm of school spaces and the increasing awareness of social difference can make school spaces very difficult to manage for many autistic young people. Home spaces are frequently a sanctuary from the stressful environment of school. The challenge here is that the process of psychological, social and emotional development from childhood through adolescence and into early adulthood generally requires more input than most home spaces can provide. My experience is that a leisure space can provide a safe space for development, it can provide a welcome alternative to school and, simply put, it can be instrumental in beginning to develop a sense of self that is not as influenced by allistic expectations.

- My experience is that the confidence gained from autistic leisure groups is transferable to allistic spaces. The most frequent worries articulated by the young people I work with are being judged by others, messing up a conversation, saying the 'wrong' thing. In autistic spaces (over time) these worries dissipate and I have observed many young people begin to express themselves with increased confidence. If there is a space where one is accepted, this confidence can be applied to the allistic spaces in a 'this is just me' way where the autistic person may not always say the 'right' thing but have the confidence to transcend the discomfort or fear of interacting.

In an increasingly online world, is there anything that should be considered about virtual spaces versus physical spaces?

I must firstly acknowledge my age and that, as a man in his 50s, the internet was not part of my life until the last 20–25 years. I brought this lack of knowledge or experience (and probably bias against online spaces) with me when I began working with autistic people, so I have had to listen, read and learn in the intervening years.

Here are my observations and experiences about online and physical leisure spaces:

- During Covid, the world had to move to online spaces for work, leisure and other purposes. From my perspective, my partner and I began to provide online creative sessions via Zoom. This space worked very well in terms of providing a creative outlet but also, and just as importantly, providing a safe space for interactions. The space allowed for the forming of a collective and, socially, it worked very well in terms of people interacting with each other.

- Many people I have worked with will say that online spaces are easier spaces to interact in as opposed to physical spaces. Online spaces do not contain the variables that a physical space does and interactions in online spaces that are text based allow autistic people to contemplate what they are going to say, how they will respond to others and, in many cases, my clients have said they feel they can be more themselves in this space.

- Online spaces can expand the concept of community beyond some of the limiting factors that exist in physical spaces, such as finding others with similar interests, not having the same sense of 'baggage' that many young autistic people feel they carry. An example of this baggage might be a sense of having made social mistakes in spaces where others will remember said mistakes.

- Many clients have talked about gaming avatars being representative of a more confident self (than the self manifest in physical spaces). In some cases, clients have excelled at particular online games and feel valued by others in the gaming community because of their gaming skills.

- On the negative side, there is always the possibility of exposure to toxicity in online gaming spaces and this is difficult to prevent. Physical spaces generally provide better opportunities for supervision/safety.

A model worth considering is the hybrid physical/online one where, for example, some of the group may want to participate in an online Minecraft session while others may want to exercise in a gym. (Of course there can be crossover between the two but the establishment of a core group allows people who are interested to participate at the level they are able for and feel most comfortable with.)

From your experience, both as an autistic person and as a professional, what elements are likely to make leisure activities more accessible for autistic people?

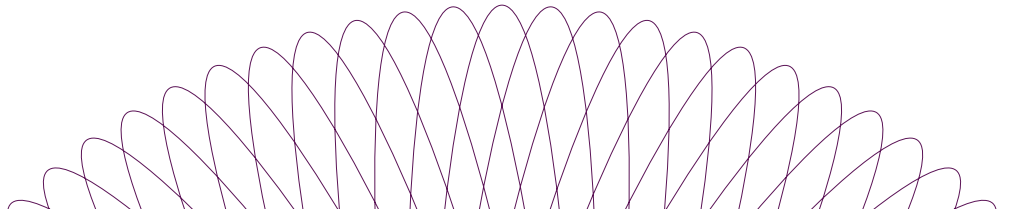
As previously alluded to, anyone considering starting a leisure group should, where possible, consult with autistic young people in the first instance to establish the types of activities they may want to participate in.

The aims and goals of establishing a group should be clear to those creating the group and the participants. Basing the group on an activity rather than necessarily basing it on the social element may be optimal.

- The space where the activity takes place is crucial. As an example, the gym group I was involved with had a space to themselves for the hour of the session. This served as a reassurance to participants in terms of not feeling judged by others. It also meant we had some degree of control over the sensory environment; we didn't have loud music or some of the performative noises made in most gyms!

- In terms of making participation as straightforward as possible, we did not use the changing rooms, and we had an agreement with the gym where the participants could get through the reception area en masse without being stuck in a long queue.

Lastly and maybe most importantly, fun should be a cornerstone of any group. I would say that if a leisure group is not fun then it is not working to its optimum. I would always be aware that many of the young people I work with may not have much fun in their everyday lives. As a quick thought experiment, just take a moment to think about how frequently you laugh with others in a given day then think what it would be like without that.



INVOLVEMENT OF AUTISTIC ADULTS IN RECREATIONAL ACTIVITIES

BACKGROUND

Historically, the majority of research studies focusing on autism have examined screening, assessment and diagnosis. More recently, research has begun to focus on quality of life (QoL) for autistic people, finding that taking part in recreational activities can reduce the negative impact of stress, while satisfaction with leisure activities has been linked to fewer depressive symptoms.

Some research has looked at the types of leisure activities that autistic people prefer to be involved in, finding that both young people and adults favour planned, solitary activities that are based around their interests. Studies looking at participation rates found that autistic people participate less often in activities in the community, found fewer areas of participation important and were less satisfied with their participation in comparison to non-autistic people.

A survey found that 35.4 per cent of autistic adults and 65.3 per cent of parents of autistic adults reported a desire to engage in activities. It is possible that barriers to participation may be preventing autistic people from taking part in leisure and community activities.

RESEARCH AIM

The present study focused on autistic adults from Quebec, with an aim to describe their participation in recreational activities. The focus was on facilitators and barriers to participation.

RESEARCH METHOD

Participants in the study included 203 autistic adults and 113 parents of an autistic adult. All participants lived in the province of Quebec, were aged 16 or over and diagnosed as autistic or the parent of an autistic adult/adolescent.

The study was part of a broader survey by the research team, which was funded by the Government of Quebec. Data was collected via an online survey available for either autistic adults or parents of autistic adolescents/adults. Participants answered:

- Which activities, apart from school, work or volunteer work, occupied your days, weekends and evenings in the previous year?

They could then tick as many options as they wished from the following:

- Individual sport, team sport, working out at the gym, individual artistic activity, group artistic activity, cultural outing, nature walk, city walk, collecting things, other activity/ies, and no activity.

They were then asked to indicate how frequently they take part in an activity, who they participate with and what barriers or facilitators they felt they experienced.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

On average, participants took part in 3.1 different activities in the past year. About 5.7 per cent stated that they had not taken part in any activities. Almost 20 per cent of participants frequently took part in one or more activities, while 22.8 per cent reported that they were not frequently involved in any activities.

In relation to activity type, 19.9 per cent took part in sports activities, 20.5 per cent participated only in cultural activities, and 23.7 per cent took part in both. Nearly 95 per cent took part in at least one activity with a partner. The majority of participants stated that they also took part in at least one activity alone. The most frequent partners for activities were family members (including spouses) and friends.

The three things most commonly mentioned as facilitators for participation were: having an interest in the activity, feeling comfortable in the environment and taking part with a partner. The three biggest barriers to participation were: uncomfortable environment, the presence of a crowd, and cost. Responses differed between autistic adults and parents in relation to barriers. Self-reporting autistic adults focused on practical aspects of the activities such as cost and opening hours. Parents were more likely to focus on the quality of the service such as adapted facilities, rule flexibility and staff qualifications.

Responses also differed in relation to whether participants were living independently or not: those who lived independently focused on practical challenges (the comfort of the environment, opening hours, the possibility of taking part from home or the presence of a crowd), while those who did not live independently focused on factors that fit their needs (such as adapted facilities, flexibility of rules and qualified staff).

Participants who did not frequently take part in any activities focused on different factors. Few of them mentioned interest in the activity, nor did they focus on the importance of getting involved or getting out of the house. Few mentioned wanting to feel useful or feeling competent or feeling comfortable in the environment. However, participants who did not frequently engage in any activity had similar views regarding barriers to participation identified by people who more often take part in activities.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The study results show that autistic adults take part in a broad range of activities and a broad number of activities. This highlights the importance of challenging assumptions and stereotypes related to activity participation.

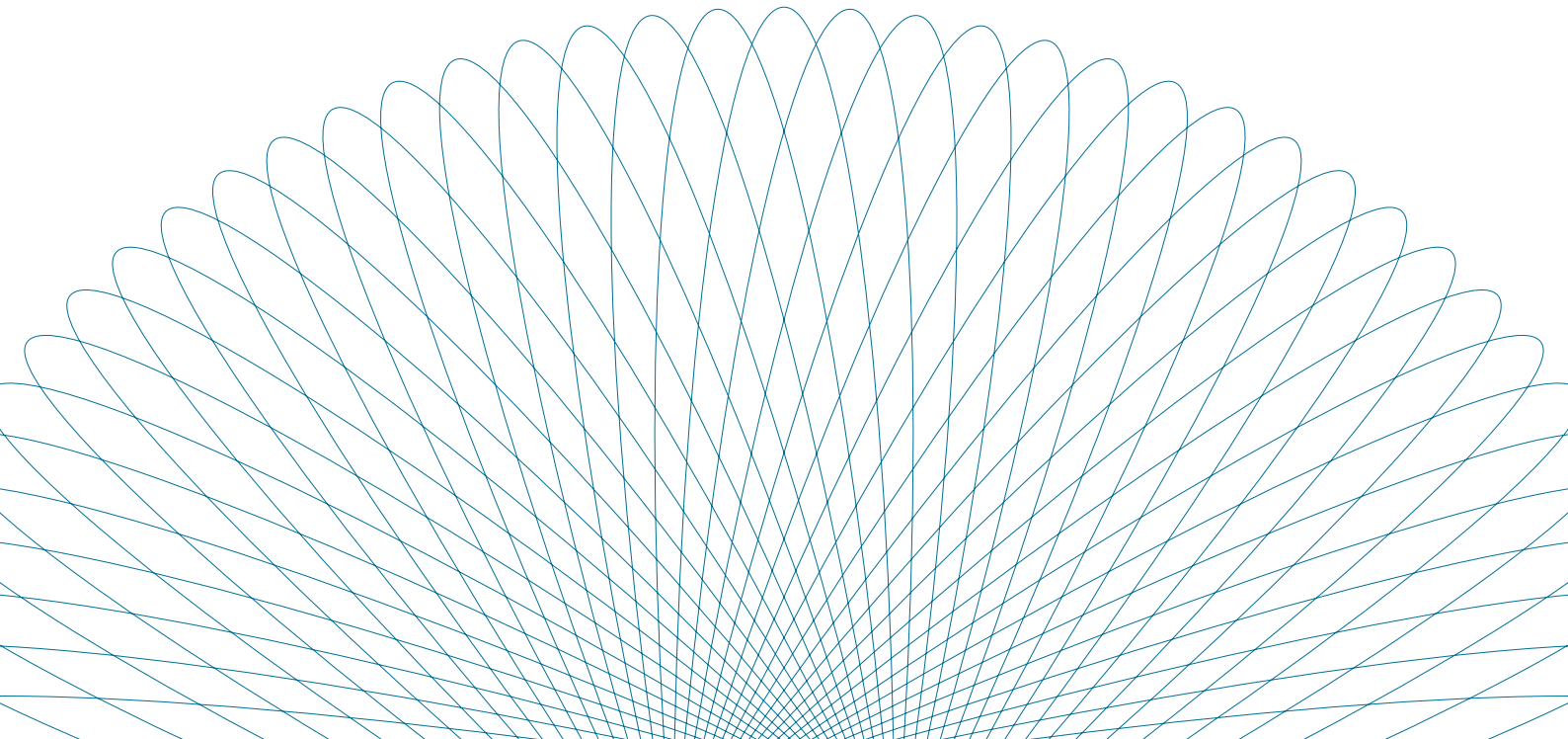
While some participants engaged in activities alone, family were found to play a crucial role in facilitating participation for many autistic adults. Given that, for some, a barrier to participation was not having anyone to attend with, family members may wish to find shared interests to support their family members in taking part. Perhaps, most importantly, external supports need to be put in place to allow family members the time and energy to foster their autistic child's engagement and enjoyment in leisure activities.

Special interests were found to be an important facilitator of participation in activities. By giving autistic people space to explore their interests it may be more likely that they will find ways to participate in related activities.

While the study focused on participation, it did not have the scope to focus on satisfaction and enjoyment. With any recreational activity, the primary goal should be a focus on the person's joy in participation.

FULL REFERENCE

Préfontaine, I., Normand, C., Berbari, J., Fecteau, S., Ruel, J., Couture, M.; ACAA TEAM. (2024). Involvement of Autistic Adults in Recreational Activities. Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-024-06521-0



PARTICIPATION IN SOCIAL AND LEISURE ACTIVITIES AFTER HIGH SCHOOL FOR AUTISTIC YOUNG ADULTS

BACKGROUND

Participation in social and leisure activities is often used to measure the quality of a person's life. This study builds on previous research to understand the extent and nature of social engagement among young adults, focusing on activities, barriers, satisfaction, and differences across gender and educational experiences.

The authors of this research outline and report on some research that is, on average, a decade old and they suggest that the findings may now be updated given the increase in understanding of autistic experience and the neurodiversity movement. Further, understanding of participation in leisure activities needs updated examination due to the growth in overall diagnosis and, specifically, in diagnosis for women and girls.

RESEARCH AIM

This research paper looks at social participation practices in young adults who have recently graduated from the US school system. Seeking to build on earlier research, the authors focused on four key areas:

- engagement in social and leisure activities
- barriers to engagement in social and leisure activities
- satisfaction from engagement in social and leisure activities
- differences in engagement in social and leisure activities across gender and in relation to prior high school experiences of social participation.

The authors of this study seek to gather their information from a larger and more ethnically, geographically and gender-diverse cohort of young adults within the US.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study was part of a larger study conducted by the Centre on Secondary Education for Students with Autism (CSESA) and was carried out as a follow-up study 2–3 years after the original CSESA study. The researchers collected information from 170 autistic young adults who were out of high school, ranging in age from 18–25 years. This included 143 participants who identified as male, 26 participants who identified as female and 1 participant who identified as non-binary. The participant group was racially and ethnically diverse.

Information from the participants was gathered using questionnaires, interviews and standardised assessments.

Young Adult Questionnaire and Interview

The researchers asked 10 questions that covered 5 topics. For each topic there was a yes/no question about social engagement or community participation, which was followed by a satisfaction question that was answered on a 3-point scale. The researchers typically read the questions aloud to the young adults and used visual cues to support the participant's response. They note that information was often initially identified in questionnaires and interviews with the parents, and also that it was necessary to simplify previously validated questions to support understanding and participation, given the wide range of intellectual abilities of the collective participants.

Parent Questionnaire and Interview

The questions from the parent questionnaire were answered using a 5-point frequency scale, with parents asked to focus on their child's social engagement in the past month. The nature of their child's social participation practices was grouped into the following categories: planned get-togethers, organic get-togethers, texts and phone calls, and social engagement over the internet. Total scores included sums across these four areas.

Activities Card Sort

Both the young adult group and the parent group completed the picture card sort activity, where each card was a picture of a particular activity. 24 social or leisure activities were presented. Young adults sorted the cards to identify if they had done the specific activity in the last 6 months and if not, whether they were interested or not interested in the activity. If they were interested but had not engaged in the activity, they were asked to indicate why by using a 6-point scale. Parents completed the same task and provided information based on their own perceptions.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The authors report that, overall, the autistic young adult participants had high levels of social participation, with 92.4 per cent reporting that they had met new people, 87.5 per cent reporting that they had friends, and 74.8 per cent reporting that they had called or texted friends.

Engagement in social and leisure activities

The most common social activity reported by the autistic young adults was going out to a restaurant, followed by calling/texting/social media, meeting new people, playing games, and attending family gatherings.

Over 90 per cent of the young adults participated in those activities. Participation in leisure activities was 90 per cent and the most common leisure activities reported were surfing the internet, listening to music or talk radio, watching television, and collecting/hobbies.

Parents reported a wide range of participation in social activities for their young adult children. On average, the autistic participants were engaging socially with others over the internet once per week and in person 1–2 times or a few times per month. When comparing the data between this current study and the original CSESA study, technology-based social participation was significantly more frequent than in the original study.

Satisfaction with social participation

Although most participants identified that they were satisfied with their social participation activities, 75 per cent of the young adults reported that they would like their social life to look different in the future. An analysis of the data identified that young adults would like to participate in an average of 1.9 more social activities and 1 more leisure activity that they did not currently participate in.

While the most desired leisure activity varied significantly and included going to a park or museum, caring for a pet, playing a musical instrument and writing, there was significantly more consistency evident with respect to social activities. Around half of the young adult participants reported that they would like to date and the other half had desires to be in a long-term relationship. Similarly, parents also reported dating and relationships as sought by their young adult children.

Barriers to social participation

The most prominent barrier to participation in social activities was the young adults' perception of 'not being able to', which was reported 58 per cent of the time on average. Other barriers to participation, averaging 10 per cent of responses, were 'makes me uneasy', 'never thought of it', 'need support from others' and 'it's too hard'.

In relation to barriers to participation in leisure activities, 'not being able to' averaged 59.1 per cent of all responses. Also resembling social activities, 'need support from others' and 'it's too hard' were identified barriers to engagement for approximately 10 per cent of the leisure tasks. By some comparison to non-participation in social activities, 'never thought of it' was identified as a reason for not engaging in leisure activities 21.7 per cent of the time.

In correspondence with their young adult children, parents also reported 'not able to' as the most common barrier to their young adult children's capacity for engagement in social and leisure activities.

Influence of gender differences and high school experiences

The autistic young adults in this study were divided into two groups with respect to their education programme. The research study reports that 83 of the participants engaged in the standard diploma programme, while 37 received a modified diploma programme. Some differences were identified as based on the young adults' high school programme.

For the young adults who had accessed the standard diploma education programme, 83.1 per cent reported that they had friends and 91.6 per cent reported meeting new people. For those participants who accessed the modified diploma, 97.3 per cent reported that they have friends, with 94.4 per cent reporting that they continue to meet new people. By some contrast, 75.9 per cent of the young adults who accessed the standard diploma reported more engagement in phone calls or texts and more frequently wanted a change in their social life. In addition, parents also reported a higher rate of social participation in social and leisure activities for the young adult children who had received a standard diploma.

With respect to gender differences, the information collected from both the parent group and the young adult group did not show any significant differences in social participation or social satisfaction by gender. However, the authors of this study did list gender diversity as a limitation that may impact the generalisation of their findings. Further, it was reported that since only one participant identified as non-binary, the results were reported based on the male and female participants.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

By the authors of this study:

- More education for neurotypical people will help to reduce barriers.
- More co-produced, autistic-led research is needed in the area of dating and relationships.

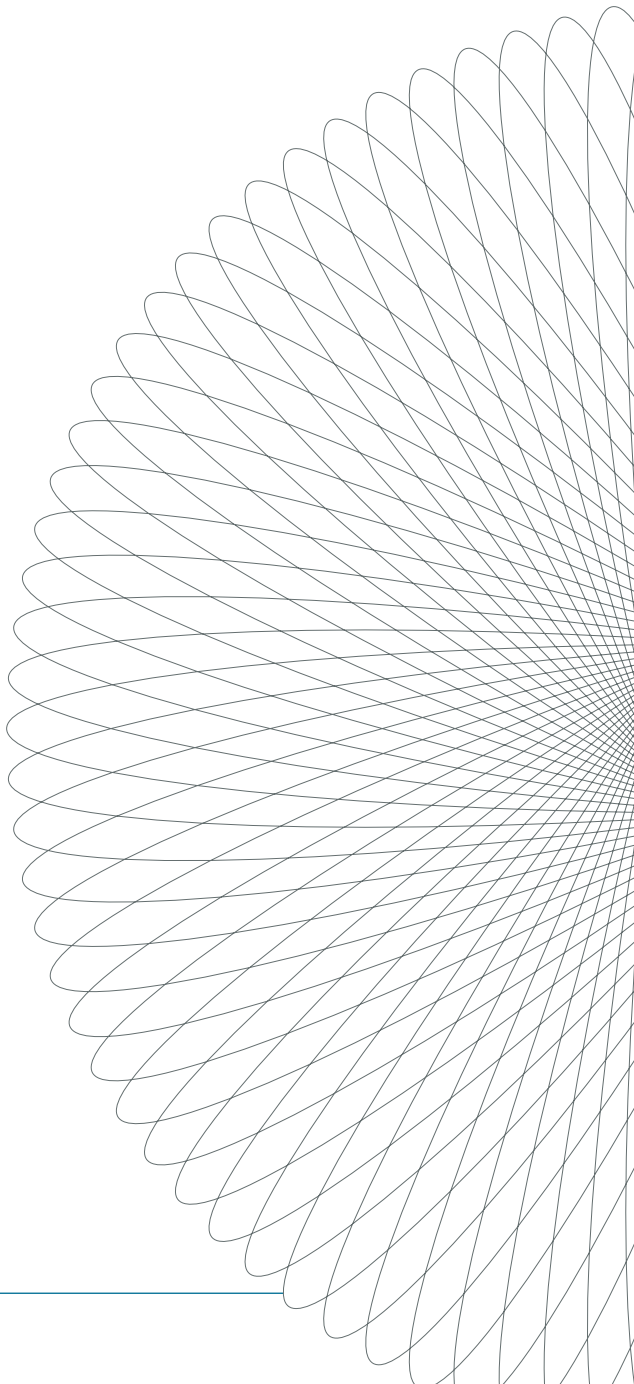
- Specific programmes and support services are required to help autistic young adults with navigating dating and the development of long-term relationships.
- More research is needed on how technology is a support to social participation. This research needs to centre the expertise and experience of autistic people.
- Identifying and educating autistic people and supporting adults on the potential harms of technology, for example, overuse or staying safe while online.
- Better programming in school so that autistic people feel more prepared as they transition to adulthood.

By the author of this summary:

- Develop comprehensive transition programmes that prepare autistic students for post-high school life, focusing on social skills, leisure activities and independent living.
- Integrate social and leisure activities into the curriculum, ensuring that autistic students have opportunities to engage in diverse social settings.
- Establish peer mentoring and support groups to foster social connections.

FULL REFERENCE

Steinbrenner, J.R., Odom, S.L., Hall, L.J. and Kraemer, B. (2024). Participation in Social and Leisure Activities After High School for Autistic Young Adults. Remedial and Special Education. 0(0). https://doi.org/10.1177/07419325241277094



A CRITICAL HIT: DUNGEONS AND DRAGONS AS A BUFF FOR AUTISTIC PEOPLE

BACKGROUND

Tabletop role-playing games (TTRPGs) are popular hobbies that may offer specific social, educational and therapeutic benefits for all.

This study explored how Dungeons and Dragons (D&D), a cooperative TTRPG, can create a safe space for autistic adults to build social connections, explore identity and engage in meaningful, shared narratives with other autistic adults without the pressure to conform to neurotypical norms.

RESEARCH AIM

This research aimed to:

- Investigate how TTRPGs function as safe, socially affirming spaces for autistic adults
- Explore the lived experience of autistic players in D&D groups.
- Understand how these games support social interaction, identity expression and emotional processing from a neurodivergent standpoint.

RESEARCH METHOD

The research team employed a qualitative, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), reflecting a commitment to exploring lived experience. Participants were recruited through online platforms such as Reddit and Discord, particularly in online communities that focused on D&D and TTRPGs. Inclusion criteria required a formal autism diagnosis and willingness to engage in an online D&D game.

Eight autistic adults (ages 20–34, with diverse gender and cultural identities) were divided into two groups based on availability. This setup allowed for consistent participation in a six-week game programme.

Participants played 'Waterdeep: Dragon Heist', a pre-made D&D adventure, facilitated by an experienced gamemaster who was also a researcher. Over the six-week game period, the six online game sessions ran once per week, for 2–4 hours and included comfort breaks. The game was delivered entirely online.

Following the final session, each participant took part in a one-on-one, semi-structured interview via Microsoft Teams. These interviews, lasting 30–60 minutes, invited participants to reflect on both in-game and out-of-game experiences. Questions focused on comfort, connection, identity and emotional expression within the TTRPG space.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Three primary themes emerged from the data:

Social Motivation and Masking

- Participants expressed a strong desire for connection but also highlighted the social fatigue and challenges that often accompanied real-world interactions. In contrast, the structured and role-based format of D&D created a low-pressure environment where participants could interact more freely and be themselves – often through their characters.

More Successful Interactions in TTRPGs

- D&D offered a framework of predictable rules and collaborative storytelling, which helped reduce social ambiguity and anxiety. Participants found it easier to communicate and problem-solve in this setting, where shared goals and cooperative play encouraged mutual understanding and respect.

Emotional Investment and 'Bleed'

- The phenomenon of 'bleed' – where players' emotions cross over between themselves and their characters – was significant. Participants used their characters to explore complex emotions, personal narratives and alternate identities. This emotional engagement not only deepened self-awareness but also fostered empowerment and increased self-esteem.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

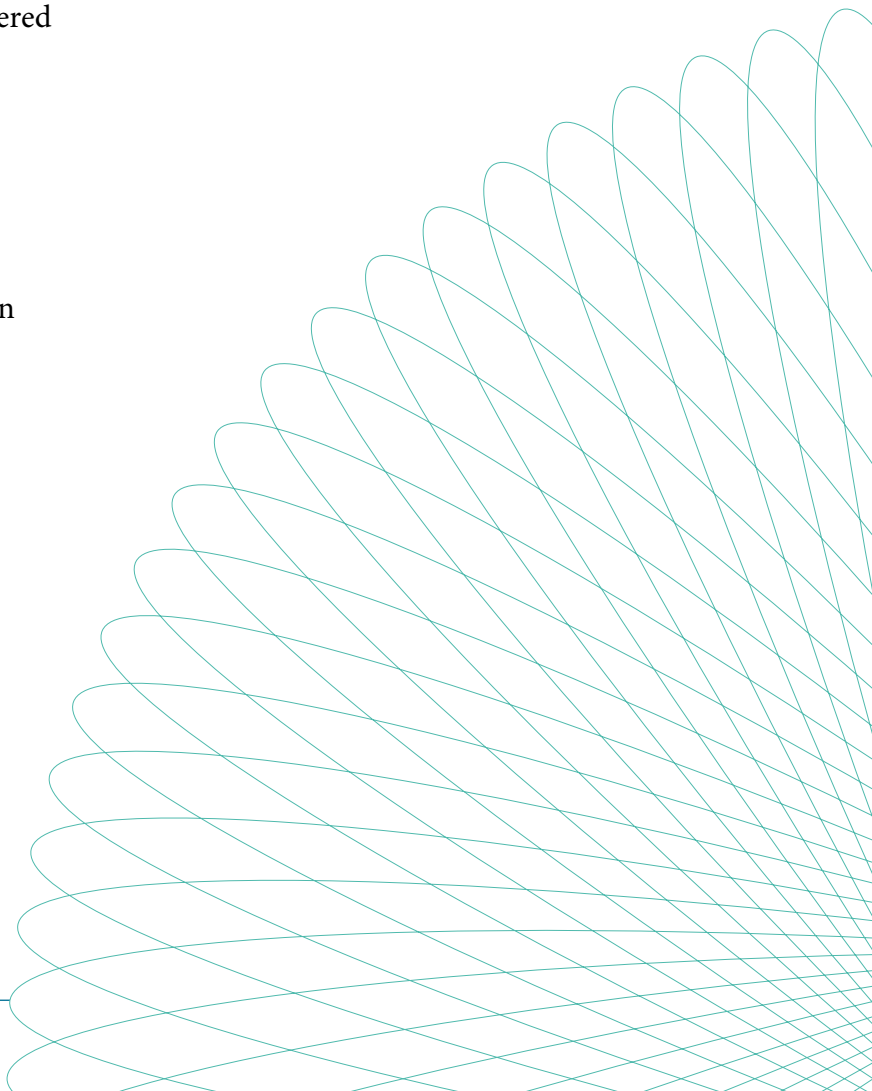
Although this study is limited by the small sample, the results are compelling, especially if working with or wanting to enhance a relationship with someone who is interested in TTRPGs such as D&D.

This study reinforces that interest-based activities like TTRPGs enhance opportunities for social connection, creativity and personal growth.

Insights from this study suggest that TTRPGs like D&D can support relationship-building in mixed-neurotype teams in educational and workplace settings.

FULL REFERENCE

Atherton, G., Hathaway, R., Visuri, I. and Cross, L. (2024). A critical hit: Dungeons and Dragons as a buff for autistic people. Autism. 29(2), pp. 382–394. https://doi.org/10.1177/13623613241275260



GAME CHANGER: EXPLORING THE ROLE OF BOARD GAMES IN THE LIVES OF AUTISTIC PEOPLE

BACKGROUND

This short report documents findings from three studies examining the overlap between autism and hobbyist board gaming. Across the three studies, the research team explore how and why board games may be a popular hobby among the autistic population, and its potential utility for improving autistic well-being.

RESEARCH AIM

This report documents three studies which aimed to:

- Investigate the prevalence of autism and autistic traits among board game hobbyists.
- Understand the motivations and preferences of autistic people who participate in board games.
- Explore how board games support autistic people in navigating social environments and expressing themselves authentically.
- Identify the potential of board games as tools to enhance well-being.

RESEARCH METHODS

A mixed-methods approach was used across the three interconnected studies. Participants were recruited from special interest groups for board gamers on social media, and further invites were sent out to gamers from industry mailing lists. Both autistic and non-autistic gamers were eligible to participate in the study. All participants gave informed consent and the study received ethical approval.

Within study 1, a quantitative online survey was completed by over N = 1,600 board game enthusiasts to assess the prevalence of autism and related traits and to understand motivations for play.

Within study 2, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 13 autistic board game hobbyists, focusing on how and why they engage with the hobby.

Finally, within study 3, 28 autistic people were introduced to board games and then examined their utility through focus groups.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Across the three studies four broad themes were found which included Theme 1: Systems are Both Comforting and Stimulating; Theme 2: Passions and Escapism; Theme 3: Games as a Social Lubricant and Theme 4: Social Games and Deception. The general summary of these themes and findings is given below.

Prevalence

Study 1 found that, as hypothesised, the proportion of autistic people and those with elevated levels of autistic traits are over-represented among board gamers compared to the general population.

Motivations and Preferences

Across the studies, board games were praised for their systems and rules, which provided clear boundaries for interaction. These predictable structures reduced social uncertainty, allowed space for personal strengths (like strategy and pattern recognition) and supported comfort and confidence.

Many autistic participants found games to be a form of positive escapism and a space to connect with intense interests or passions. This overlap between gameplay and intense interest offered deep engagement and satisfaction.

Social Connection through Gameplay

Games served as an alternative, more accessible form of social interaction. Participants described board games as a 'social lubricant' that made connection easier and more meaningful, especially compared to more open-ended or informal social settings.

While some games (e.g. deception-based games) were described as more difficult, participants also found them enjoyable, noting the opportunity to practise social nuance in a contained and forgiving space.

Enhance Well-being

Study 3 showed that even participants new to the hobby resonated with the same themes. Board games were found to be welcoming, cognitively engaging, and effective in bringing together autistic people with varying needs and interests - many of whom had never interacted socially outside their established circles.

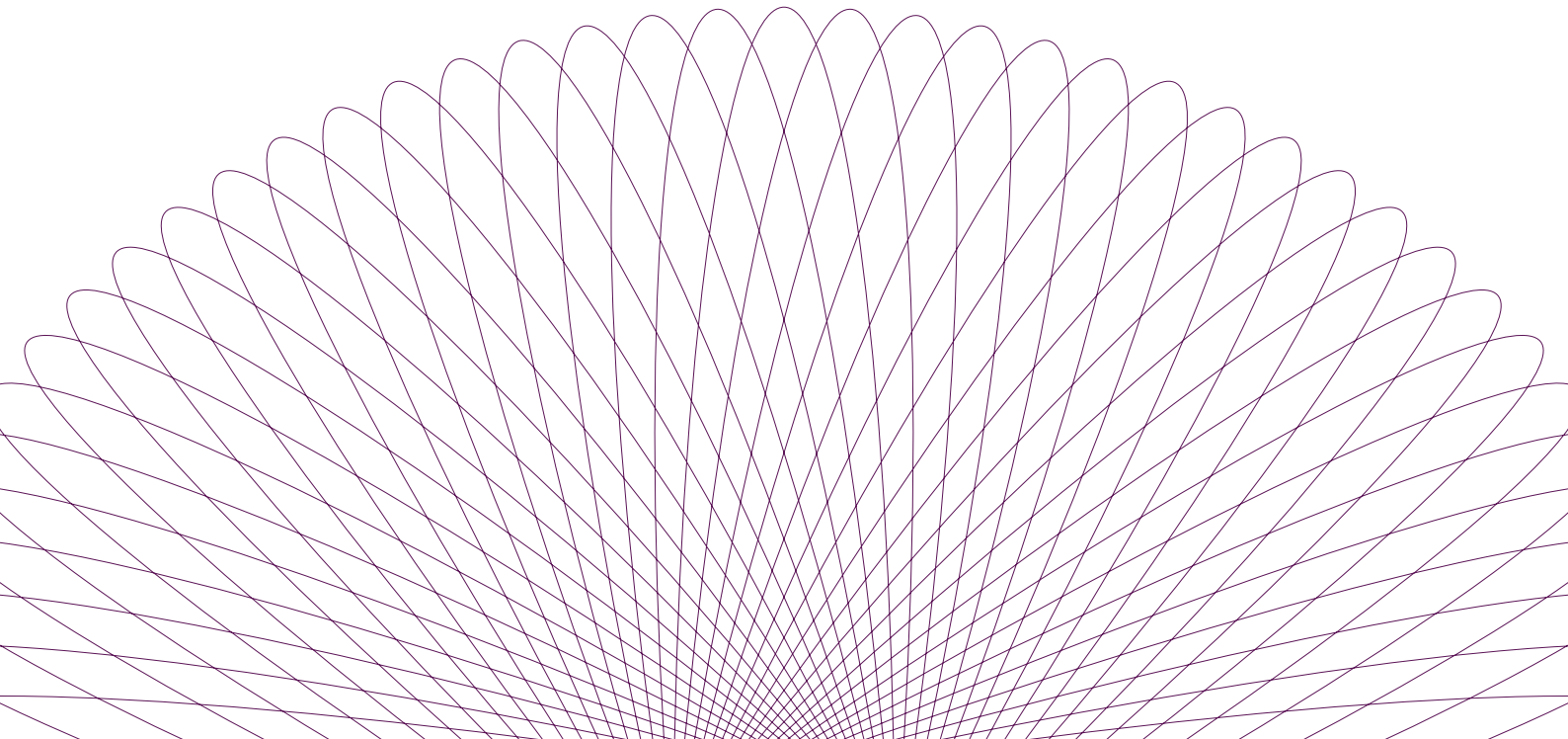
IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

This research reinforces that board game groups can serve as inclusive, low-pressure environments where autistic and non-autistic people can connect over shared interests.

Supportive adults should consider incorporating board games into group or individual settings to promote social development, reduce anxiety and enhance self-esteem – without requiring masking or forced conformity to neurotypical expectations.

FULL REFERENCE

Cross, L., Belshaw, F., Piovesan, A. and Atherton, G. (2024). Game Changer: Exploring the Role of Board Games in the Lives of Autistic People. Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-024-06408-0



INTERESTS, PLANS AND HOPES FOR LIFE AFTER HIGH SCHOOL FROM AUTISTIC YOUNG ADULTS' PERSPECTIVES

BACKGROUND

Limited research exists on autistic teenagers' and young adults' hopes and dreams for life after school. The Center on Secondary Education for Students with Autism (CSESA) is a multisite two-year programme for autistic high school students. A completion study was conducted across three sites where this programme was used. Eliciting student needs on programme completion would allow for improved education planning and more focused teaching into the future.

RESEARCH AIM

The researchers scoped out previous studies on autistic school leavers which highlighted areas to be explored in their research. It was notable that autistic students with learning difficulties were rarely included in any previous work, so efforts were made to best involve this population. Multiple areas of adult living were identified as relevant to the young people. Where the young person was not engaged in a particular area, it was hoped to identify any barriers so they might be removed from future programmes.

RESEARCH METHODS

150 young people, aged 17–25, took part in the research – 120 had completed high school, 30 were still at school. The research had two main elements, both conducted at the same time, mostly in person with one interviewer. Some research took place over Zoom.

A card sort activity included photos of 63 life activities across 6 domains: chores, leisure, social, health and fitness, education and learning, and work. The young person was asked if they were currently doing the activity. They could respond verbally or by pointing to a 'Yes/No' visual. If 'No', they were asked if they were interested in doing the activity. If they responded 'Yes' to this, they were asked to identify barriers that had prevented them doing each activity to date from a list of 6 options: Unable, Uneasy, Health Issues, Too Difficult, Need Support, Never Considered.

The next part of the research was a semi-structured interview with a 25-item questionnaire asking about high school, current life and hopes and dreams for the future. The questions had an initial 'Yes/No' response, with an option for the young person to give further detail.

The results were then analysed with simple overall percentages being used for the first part of the study and thematic analysis of participant responses in the second part.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The card sort activity indicated that most young people engaged in leisure activities and had hobbies such as reading, surfing the internet, gaming, TV or listening to music. They tended to report healthy lifestyles and attended social gatherings. Some were working.

Of particular interest were the activities that the young people would like to do but had indicated barriers to participation, including going on a date and being in a long-term relationship, paying bills, driving, keeping personal health records and budgeting.

The interviews showed that the young people had a wide variety of interests across technology, sports and the arts. For some, their work was their interest. However, 80 per cent of participants wanted a different job in the future, with digital media, retail, STEM and education/childcare as the most popular categories.

Interviewees expressed a wish to be more confident socially both with friendships and in romance. Hopes for the future mainly focused on being independent.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The information gleaned from the young adults gives ideas for programme improvement at high school in the following areas:

- Include content to develop skills in budgeting, paying bills and keeping health records.
- Provide information on dating in areas such as determining compatibility, finding common interests, sharing expectations.
- Education on relationships perhaps including role-playing, including identifying healthy relationships, setting boundaries and ending relationships.
- Increase opportunities for autistic adults to meet and interact with peers.
- Spread awareness on how to make local environments accessible for neurodiverse groups of young people.
- Provide employment support to consider career pathways, not only jobs.
- Support young people to identify their strengths and needs at work and to learn to self-advocate.
- Provide transition support from high school to work.

FULL REFERENCE

Hall, L.J., Brum, C., Steinbrenner, J.R., Hume, K., Grundon, G., Spitzer, H. (2024). Interests, Plans, and Hopes for Life After High School From Autistic Young Adults' Perspectives. Remedial and Special Education. 0(0). https://doi.org/10.1177/07419325241271377

USE OF DIGITAL PLATFORMS BY AUTISTIC CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE FOR CREATIVE DRESS-UP PLAY (COSPLAY) TO FACILITATE AND SUPPORT SOCIAL INTERACTION

BACKGROUND

Historically, research viewed children as pre-adults who required education and protection. A shift in perspective has resulted in researchers and policymakers recognising that children have a right to make their own choices and decisions. This article focuses on the importance of social geographies of childhood. Social geographies of childhood refers to places and spaces that children interact with and that influence their well-being, interactions with others and identity of self.

With advances in technology and in the wake of the 2020/21 coronavirus pandemic, video gaming and cosplay increased in popularity for children and young people. Cosplay, or kosupure, means to 'dress-up' as popular characters, originally from comic books (manga) and animation (anime) in Japanese culture. Cosplay has been linked to creative identity and positive body images. It also provides those who are 'at odds' with society an opportunity to connect with others within a community environment. Unlike the practice of masking and camouflaging, which can be detrimental to mental health, cosplay encourages self-acceptance.

Cosplay originated in convention attendance and meetups but the use of digital platforms allows cosplayers to remain at home while partaking in costume play and connecting with others. During the coronavirus lockdown, the use of technology space allowed users to continue interacting with one another while face-to-face interactions were limited. Digital spaces for cosplaying potentially allow users to gain confidence and may offer a safe practice space, prior to attending conventions in person.

The mix of digital and physical space for cosplay may present an advantage for those who find attending in person difficult. It also may provide flexibility in the methods of communication for those who prefer to socialise from a digital space.

RESEARCH AIMS

This article aimed to provide insight into autistic children and young people's experiences and opportunities for social interaction through cosplay, while accessing social-material and digital spaces. Information gathered in this article aims to use grounded theory methods to analyse data. Grounded theory means that researchers develop theories based on the type of information gathered rather than using data to answer a pre-defined question. It is based more on the personal and lived experiences of participants.

RESEARCH METHODS

This research paper undertook an analysis of online, publicly available content to collect the thoughts and feelings of autistic children and young people who cosplay. The researchers analysed blog posts, articles and literature from autistic authors and from parents and caregivers of autistic children. As previously mentioned, the researchers used grounded theory as a mode to identify common themes arising from this literature analysis.

General social media was not included in this research as it was considered too broad a platform. Key terms used as part of this research included the following: 'children', 'autism', 'cosplay', 'blog', 'article' and 'forum' (into main search engine). No limit was placed on the location, time frame, source or nationality of posts. Forty-two articles, blogs, forum posts and literature chapters were collected and analysed.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

A number of themes were found through the review.

Isolation

Findings suggest that autistic children and young people felt isolated within or excluded from general society. Most of the literature from autistic authors expressed feeling different, strange or out of place. Parents and caregivers frequently mentioned that their children felt different, weird, strange or out of place. Feelings of exclusion and isolation were also mentioned. *'It's very difficult to be given time in today's society when you live as a teenager with a difference or disability, because those two words can be seen only as deficits'.*

Exclusion/acceptance

The second most commonly occurring theme for autistic authors was feelings of avoidance and exclusion. Similar results were gathered from parents' and caregivers' blogs and posts. They reported deliberately avoiding places and spaces that would cause their child distress. In over 50 per cent of the articles from parents and caregivers they described how their autistic children presented with extreme mood changes, withdrawal, anger or mania. In 48 per cent of the articles from autistic authors they reported feelings of low self-esteem and image challenges.

In comparison, engaging in cosplay created and/or strengthened positive feelings of inclusion and confidence in social ability. Autistic authors reported an increase in social ability and confidence as well as increased feelings of belonging, acceptance, inclusion and understanding.

In contradiction of previously held views that autistic people are withdrawn and asocial, autistic authors reported motivations for cosplay as being primarily social and as a means of providing social interaction and opportunities to develop friendships. Cosplay practice and convention attendance was described as 'therapy' and provided support to be social.

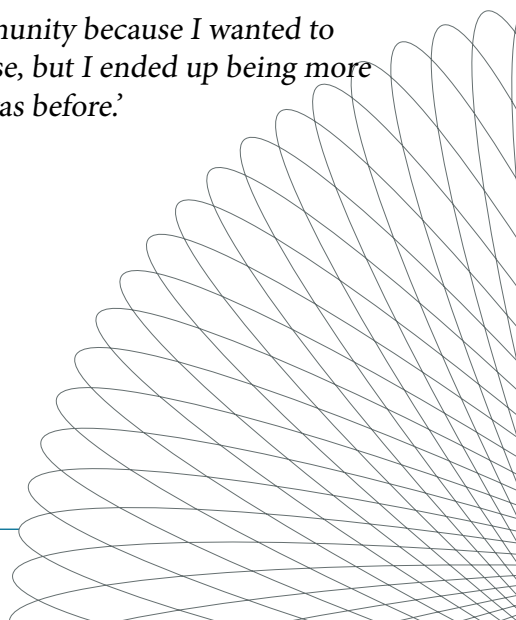
'Cosplay has become my link to the social world'.

Literature from parents and caregivers also confirmed these primary motivations for cosplay as social interaction and common interest, as well as enjoyment and having fun together.

Physical social ability

Two of the most reported physical responses to cosplay given by autistic authors included an increase in physical social ability and convention attendance. Convention attendance experiences showed positive responses for autistic people, with the cosplay community being a place which 'strives to be one of acceptance – a safe space for people of all ages, genders, races and body types'. Autistic authors described how convention attendance allowed them to feel 'in disguise', 'hidden' or 'protected'. It also allowed them to 'show their true self'.

'I got into this community because I wanted to become someone else, but I ended up being more myself than I ever was before.'



IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

- The use of digital platforms may provide autistic people and their families with space to share their experiences and interests. For autistic authors who reported feeling confusion or social exclusion, the use of digital spaces provided them with increased feelings of belonging and acceptance.
- This research has shown the importance of understanding the subjects chosen by autistic children and young people. Giving autistic young people space to follow their interests and express them safely may provide space to learn about themselves, find confidence and meet like-minded people.
- This research has shown the importance of understanding the methods chosen by autistic children and young people. For autistic authors who reported feeling confusion or social exclusion, the use of digital spaces provided them with increased feelings of belonging and acceptance.
- Further co-produced study on the extent to which digital and physical space interact with each other is required. For example, does use of one space precede the other, is there a preference for one type of space over the other and why?

FULL REFERENCE

Leyman, A. (2022). Use of digital platforms by autistic children and young people for creative dress-up play (cosplay) to facilitate and support social interaction. Digital Geography and Society. 3. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.diggeo.2022.100039

'I CAN ACTUALLY DO IT WITHOUT ANY HELP OR SOMEONE WATCHING OVER ME ALL THE TIME AND GIVING ME CONSTANT INSTRUCTION': AUTISTIC ADOLESCENT BOYS' PERSPECTIVES ON ENGAGEMENT IN ONLINE VIDEO GAMING

BACKGROUND

Online gaming is an increasingly popular leisure activity among young people, which has led to a growing interest in the relationship between gaming and well-being. To the fore is the debate on whether online gaming is liable to have a positive or negative effect on young people. Understanding the impact of online gaming for autistic adolescents is particularly important given that they spend significantly more time engaging in online gaming than their neurotypical peers. To date, the focus of research into autistic adolescents' engagement in gaming has been primarily centred around characterising problematic gaming, and on the time spent gaming, with the data gathered predominately through caregiver report. The use of gaming as a tool for 'social skill intervention' has also been a research focus. What has not been considered is what motivates autistic adolescents to engage in online gaming or the positive impact it has on their well-being. Many autistic people can experience mental health difficulties due to existing in a society that is not designed for them. Exploring the potential of online gaming as a factor that can contribute to positive well-being is of real importance.

RESEARCH AIMS

The aim of the study was to understand how gaming relates to well-being in autistic children and young people, by gathering their perspectives on the benefits of game play and their motivations for video game engagement.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study utilised the lifeworld framework: a methodology which highlights the value of a collaborative approach to understanding a young person's aspirations, challenges and personal strengths. A qualitative approach was taken, with data gathered through semi-structured interviews with 12 autistic adolescent males aged 13–15 years. Each interview took place in the young person's family home and lasted 30–60 minutes. The data gathered was analysed through thematic analysis.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Three major themes were identified from the interview data.

1. Being your own boss: a sense of agency and belonging
    - A desire for autonomy and opportunities for agency were strong motivators for engaging in online gaming.
    - Gaming provided the young people with the opportunity to make decisions and to have control over an aspect of their life.
    - Gaming provided experiences that were not available or achievable for the young people in real life.
    - Gaming facilitated communication with others and the development of friendships.

2. Regulating emotions through gaming and escapism
    - A strong motivator for gaming was that it offered an escape from the stress of everyday life.
    - Gaming provided a safe space and time away from outside pressures.
    - Gaming provided a way for the young people to successfully manage emotions such as anger and stress.
3. Acknowledgement of different priorities
    - The young people acknowledged that gaming could have a negative impact on aspects of their home life.
    - The young people were aware that their parents' perspective on gaming was different to theirs but felt that this was due to a lack of parental understanding.
    - That immersion in a game could impact on other activities such as homework or self-care was recognised by the young people in the study.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

- Consideration must be given to the first-hand experiences of autistic young people in research.
- Gaming provides a positive outlet for autistic young people.
- Online gaming can promote agency and decision-making skills which are important for self-advocacy throughout life.
- Gaming provides an opportunity for creativity and perspective-taking for autistic young people.
- Gaming can provide strategies to self-manage emotional well-being.
- A sense of belonging can be fostered through online gaming.
- The study offers valuable insight into how parents and professionals can adopt a sensitive approach to support through acknowledging the needs, priorities and experiences of autistic young people.

FULL REFERENCE

Pavlopoulou, G., Usher, C. and Pearson, A. (2022). 'I can actually do it without any help or someone watching over me all the time and giving me constant instruction': Autistic adolescent boys' perspectives on engagement in online video gaming. British Journal of Developmental Psychology. 40(4), pp. 557–571. https://doi.org/10.1111/bjdp.12424

TRAVERSING THE COMMUNITY IS UNCERTAIN, SOCIALLY COMPLEX AND EXHAUSTING: AUTISTIC YOUTH DESCRIBE EXPERIENCES OF TRAVELLING TO PARTICIPATE IN THEIR COMMUNITIES

BACKGROUND

Autistic young people often face challenges when navigating work, training, and social opportunities within their communities. This study focused on the difficulties associated with physically travelling to and from these activities within communities – often referred to as 'community mobility'. Independent travel is a complex task that can present significant barriers for autistic people, and challenges in this area may limit opportunities for community engagement.

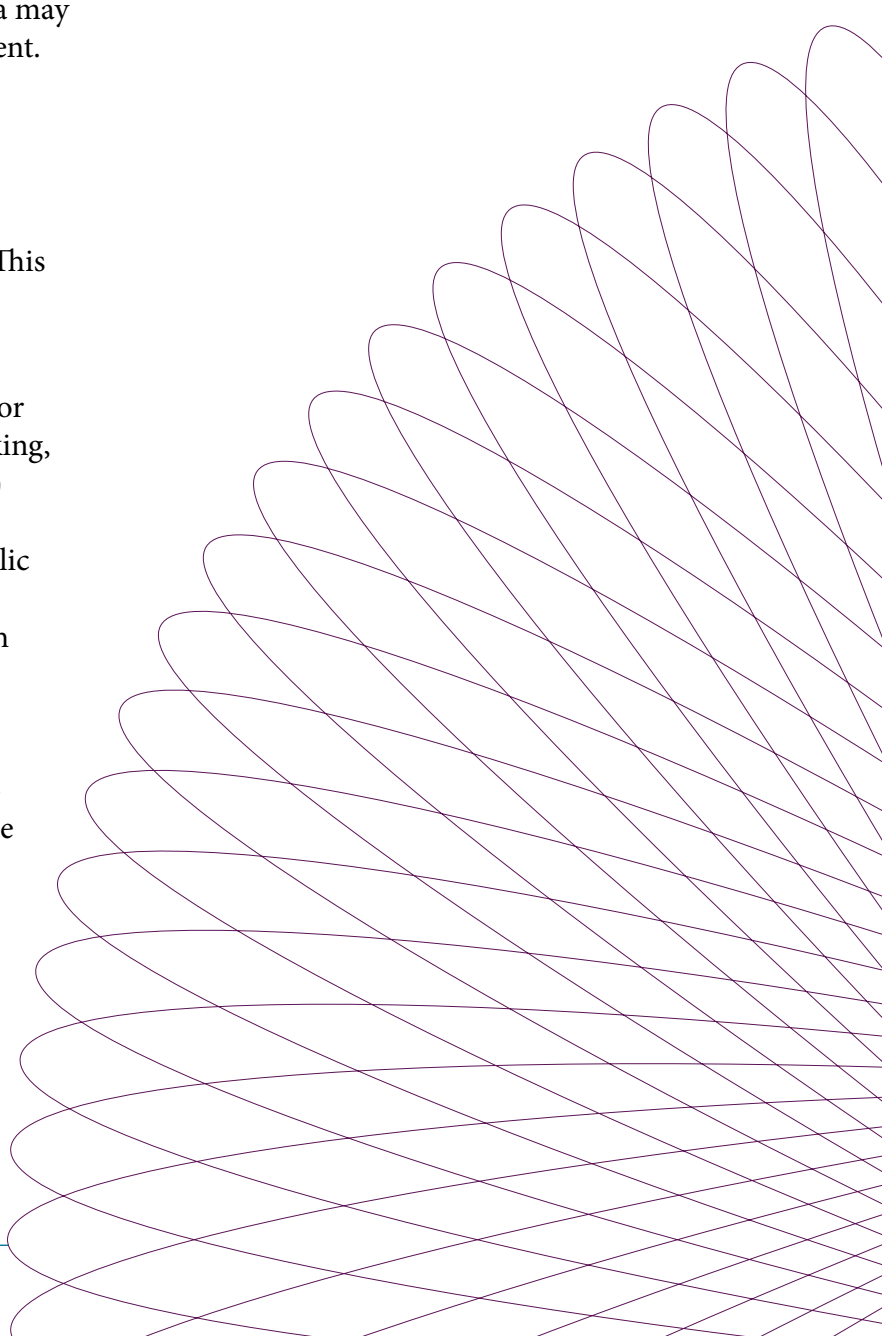
RESEARCH AIMS

The aim of the study was to explore the experiences of autistic youth in relation to navigating travel within their communities. This included:

- understanding how autistic young people perceived and experienced their options for travel within their communities (e.g. walking, cycling, using public transport or driving)
- understanding how the availability of public transport and the layout of urban spaces affected their opportunities to engage with their communities
- identifying what personal factors (such as interests, physical health and mental well-being) may affect their capacity to navigate their communities.

More broadly the study sought to:

- identify barriers that reduce the ability of autistic people to engage with their communities
- highlight factors that may facilitate easier and more meaningful community engagement.



RESEARCH METHODS

Eight autistic participants aged 18–26 years old took part in this study. All were either able to drive, use public transport independently, or were in the process of developing this independence. Most participants lived at home with family. The study was conducted in Australia, with most participants residing in urban Sydney.

Participants were interviewed at the beginning of the study. The researchers then accompanied them on several trips to various community locations (such as libraries, cafés, shopping centres, and training venues). Follow-up interviews were then conducted.

Interview questions included:

(a) how do you get around the community?

(b) what is easy or hard about moving around community spaces?

(c) what are your preferences for travelling to and participating in community activities?

(d) how does getting around independently relate to your community participation?

The study was supported by a research group (which included autistic people) which contributed to the shaping of both research questions and evolving themes. Participants were also offered flexibility around interview conditions, including location of interview and whether to include a family member in the interview process.

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RESEARCH FINDINGS

The authors identified four key themes, each containing several subthemes. These included the importance of home as a 'safe haven', the unpredictable nature of community environments, the efforts required to navigate such environments, as well as the skills and supports that contribute to successful mobility within communities.

Challenges and barriers for autistic youth in navigating their communities

- Many of the participants had experienced bullying in school and this had a significant impact on both well-being and motivation to engage with communities outside the home.
- Feelings of vulnerability and mistrust of others that stemmed from past negative social experience were common.
- Participants articulated their need to avoid public spaces associated with previous negative experiences (such as around schools) which could complicate travel or limit opportunities.
- The perception of home as a 'safe space', combined with the challenges of navigating the community, often led participants to retreat to online spaces. However, online engagement with people who have similar interests could also support connection and facilitate opportunities for in-person engagement within their communities.
- Challenges with unpredictability in physical and social spaces as well as understanding non-verbal communication and the 'unwritten rules' of social interaction with different people along the journey (e.g. transport staff) added complexity and required significant effort to manage.

- The effort of planning and managing the logistics of travel was characterised as 'exhausting' as well as a source of anxiety – particularly if unexpected changes occurred (such as a delay in public transport).

Strategies used by autistic youth to navigate their communities

- Extensive preparation for travel, including use of smartphones to access timetables and monitor live travel information.
- Careful consideration of the timing of journeys (such as avoiding school travel time) and other strategies to try and ensure more favourable sensory and social environments (such as the use of headphones or 'quiet carriages' on trains).
- Choosing to present themselves in certain ways (such as their demeanour or attire) to protect themselves, often actively camouflaging their autistic traits.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The authors highlight the relevance of the findings to support community engagement for autistic people. These include:

- The need to recognise the impact of previous bullying experiences on autistic young people (and the vital importance of preventing these experiences more generally).
- The importance of skill development over time (from early adolescence), including skills around navigating public transport systems, urban environments and social interactions during travel.
- Emphasising the value of preparation and practice in building confidence and reducing anxiety around travel.
- Recognising the importance of both confidence and motivation (often informed by interests) for successful community engagement.
- Acknowledging the role of family in supporting the development of travel independence.
- Online engagement with communities may help develop or support opportunities for in-person community engagement outside of the home.
- Acknowledging the intense effort that may be required to traverse communities for young people and supporting the management of a sustainable balance of time spent at home with time spent in the community.

FULL REFERENCE

Kersten, M., Coxon, K., Hoe, L. and Wilson, N. (2020). Traversing the community is uncertain, socially complex and exhausting: Autistic youth describe experiences of travelling to participate in their communities. Journal of Transport & Health. 18. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jth.2020.100922

EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITY PARTICIPATION AMONG AUTISTIC CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS: BUFFER FOR INTERNALISING CONDITIONS AND FOUNDATION FOR FRIENDSHIP?

BACKGROUND

Autistic children and adolescents often experience internalising issues, such as anxiety and depression, as well as a heightened risk of experiencing difficulties in forming and sustaining friendships. Engaging in extracurricular activities may help mitigate these difficulties by offering natural opportunities for interaction with peers who share similar interests and abilities.

RESEARCH AIM

The study aimed to investigate the relationships between participation in sports and clubs and (1) success in forming friendships and (2) the presence of co-occurring anxiety and depression in a large sample of autistic youth. Furthermore, the study examines whether associations are similar for children aged 6–11 and adolescents aged 12–17 years.

RESEARCH METHODS

A secondary analysis was conducted using data from the 2018–2019 National Survey of Children's Health. The sample included 562 autistic children (ages 6–11) and 818 autistic adolescents (ages 12–17). Separate sets of binary logistic regression analyses were carried out for each age group for the prediction of three binary outcomes: friendship success, anxiety, and depression.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Per caregiver report in this large national sample, 15.7 per cent of children and 10.9 per cent of adolescents had friendship success (i.e. no difficulty in developing and maintaining friendships). Approximately half of the sample in each age group – 47.6 per cent of children and 55.1 per cent of adolescents – had a current diagnosis of anxiety, while 12.1 per cent of children and 23.6 per cent of adolescents had a diagnosis of depression.

Regarding extracurricular activity participation, approximately half of children (54.7 per cent) and adolescent (49.6 per cent) participants did not participate in either a sport or a club, while 14.6 per cent of children and 15.4 per cent of adolescents participated in both sports and clubs. Specifically, 32.8 per cent of children and 27.6 per cent of adolescents participated in sports.

Depression

In the child group, the model found that sports participation was not significantly related to depression. Factors related to depression were age, non-white race/ethnicity, and family income. In the adolescent group, results found participation in sports was significantly associated with depression, with sports participants being 34 per cent less likely to have a depression diagnosis. Girls and older adolescents were more likely to have a depression diagnosis, while non-white adolescents were 40 per cent less likely to have a depression diagnosis.

Anxiety

Results found that neither participation in sports nor clubs was significantly related to a diagnosis of anxiety among autistic children or adolescents.

Friendship success

Participation in clubs was not significantly related to friendship success in either group. In the child group, results found that autistic children who participated in sports were approximately two times more likely to have friendship success than those who did not participate in sports.

Overall, findings suggest sports are linked to higher odds of friendship success in both autistic children and adolescents, as well as a reduced likelihood of depression among adolescents. In contrast, club participation was not associated with friendship success or internalising difficulties.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

(by the authors)

- Similar to other research findings, adolescents who participated in sports were significantly less likely to have a current depression diagnosis. These findings did not apply to the child group.
- The authors suggest sports may buffer against depressive symptoms during adolescence as they integrate social interaction with physical exercise in a structured context.
- This study found no associations between sports participation and anxiety among children or adolescents. The authors acknowledge that this study did not differentiate between types of anxiety. They suggest it is important for future research to explore whether certain aspects of sports may play a protective role or support children and adolescents in managing certain types of anxiety disorders.
- The findings also revealed a link between sports participation and friendship success among autistic youth. Specifically, autistic children and adolescents who took part in sports were over two times more likely to report no difficulty in forming and maintaining friendships compared to those who did not participate.
- Interestingly, the results showed that club participation was not linked to friendship success or internalising conditions in either age group. It remains unclear why sports participation, but not club involvement, was associated with lower odds of depression and a higher likelihood of friendship success. The authors suggest this may result from differences in how club participation was defined across studies. It is possible that academically oriented clubs offer a protective effect against depression by connecting peers with shared interests and comparable skillsets. Future co-produced research should investigate how different types of clubs may uniquely influence friendship development and help guard against internalising presentations.

FULL REFERENCE

Pappagianopoulos, J., Rouch, E. and Mazurek, M.O. (2024). Extracurricular Activity Participation Among Autistic Children and Adolescents: Buffer for Internalizing Conditions and Foundation for Friendship? Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders. 54(12), pp. 4444–4455. doi: 10.1007/s10803-023-06158-5.

'I NEED THEM FOR MY AUTISM, BUT I DON'T KNOW WHY': EXPLORING THE FRIENDSHIP EXPERIENCES OF AUTISTIC CHILDREN IN UK PRIMARY SCHOOLS

BACKGROUND

Friendships form an important part of our social world – they can support and protect our well-being and are often a source of happiness and comfort. For children, friendships can often form a vital support to development, offering opportunities to practise and learn prosocial behaviours. Yet friendships can be complex to navigate and maintain. Previous research into the friendships of autistic people has tended to be more quantitative in nature (e.g. reporting on the number of friends), whereas existing qualitative research into this topic has often prioritised the perspectives of adults or older adolescents, leaving a gap in understanding how younger autistic children perceive and navigate friendships.

RESEARCH AIM

This study explored the lived experiences of 19 autistic children in UK primary schools, with the aim of further understanding their perception of friendship. The researchers were also interested in whether there were differences in the experiences of friendships depending on the age and gender of a child. In addition, the researchers aimed to identify aspects of their friendship experiences that may lead to the development of more effective social supports for autistic children more generally.

The authors of this study seek to gather their information from a larger and more ethnically, geographically and gender-diverse cohort of young adults within the US.

RESEARCH METHOD

The study employed a novel methodology that took into account the Covid-19 restrictions in place at the time. Interviews with autistic children were led by parents in the home. Parents were given semi-structured interview scripts as a guide and then either video- or audio-recorded their interviews with their children. These recordings were then reviewed by researchers. The children participating were also encouraged to use creative tools such as drawings and scrapbooks to express their thoughts and experiences around friendships, which the researchers used to contextualise interview responses. Reflexive thematic analysis was used to construct a number of themes that illustrate the researchers' interpretations of the interview data. .

RESEARCH FINDINGS

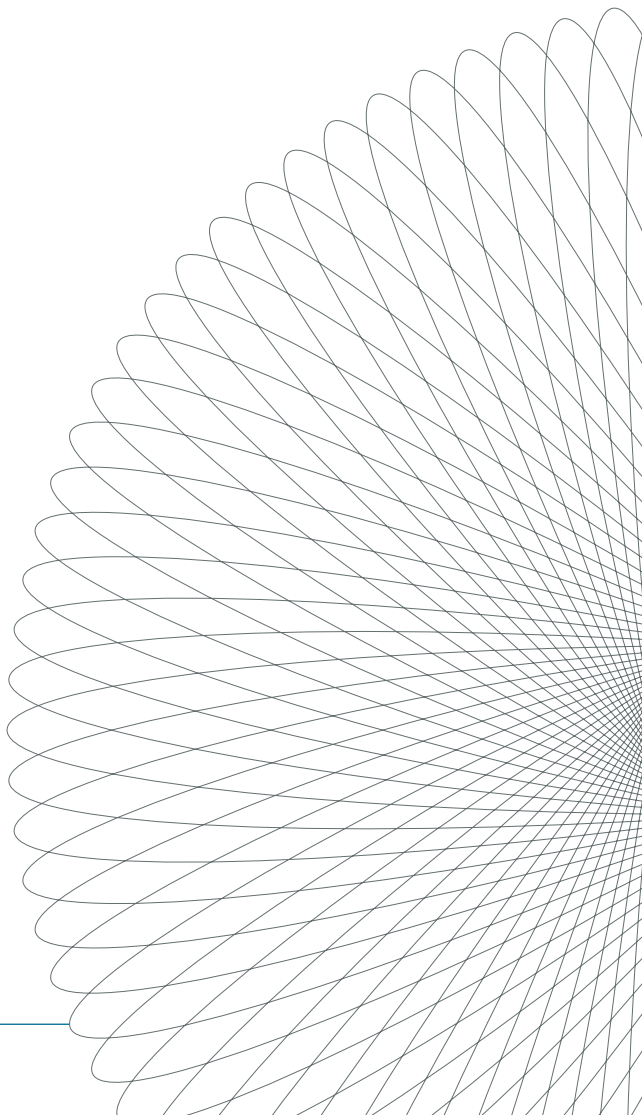
- Autistic children often valued kindness and empathy in their friends and they particularly valued feeling 'understood' by their peers. Being 'fun' was another valued attribute in friends. The types of friendships preferred were quite diverse, from large groups to one-to-one friendships, with researchers noting that friendship preferences were often aligned with those expected in younger neurotypical children. As autistic children grow older, their expectations and requirements for friendship may become increasingly different to neurotypical expectations.
- Some children expressed uncertainty about the nature of their friendships, and if they actually had 'friends'. Additionally, children in mainstream settings often reported masking in their interactions with peers.

- The researchers also found differences between the experiences of girls and boys, with girls more likely to report masking behaviour and expressing more concern about the 'social norms' of friendship than boys. For example, girls tended to attribute more value to having friendships that conformed to societal expectations (such as girls typically having a small group of close friends) even if they themselves did not particularly want this type of friendship group.
- Transitions, such as moving to a new school or classroom, were identified as times of heightened vulnerability for friendships. Many children expressed anxiety about losing existing friendships and uncertainty about forming new ones.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The authors highlight the need for a deeper understanding of what friendship means for autistic children, and this applies to key adults and non-autistic children as well as autistic children themselves. The contextualised findings of this study offer insights into the ways in which autistic friendships can be better supported and nurtured in practice.

- Autistic children value many different forms of friendship and their preferences can vary widely, as can their definition of who is considered a 'friend'. Some children may desire many friends, others prefer fewer or none. Practitioners should consult and include autistic children when designing supports, as well as ensure that any supports provided respect the child's individual preferences for friendship. It is vital to ensure that any supports do not inadvertently impose unwanted social demands.
- Autistic girls may need different supports to develop and maintain friendships than autistic boys and may need more support to navigate the expectations of friendships than boys.
- Education and supports for non-autistic children include teaching them how to adapt their social communication to be more inclusive and understanding of their autistic peers. This acceptance may, in turn, reduce pressure on autistic children to mask or conform to non-preferred styles of communication or social interaction, leading to more fulfilling opportunities for friendship.



- Schools are a key environment in which friendships with both autistic and non-autistic peers can be fostered. Facilitating opportunities for autistic children to naturally interact with classmates in a structured way around shared interests may be particularly valuable, as there is evidence that sharing interest-based activities can support friendships and foster a sense of belonging.
- The friendships of autistic children are particularly vulnerable to being disrupted or lost during times of transition. Supporting the maintenance of existing friendships at these times is vitally important and can significantly enhance autistic children's emotional well-being and sense of stability.

FULL REFERENCE

Fox, L., Asbury, K. (2024). 'I need them for my autism, but I don't know why': Exploring the friendship experiences of autistic children in UK primary schools. Autism & Developmental Language Impairments. 9. doi: 10.1177/23969415241275934.

CONCLUSION

Having the opportunity to contribute to our community and enjoy leisure activities are basic pleasures that should be available to everyone. To ensure that autistic people can fully enjoy these things, it is essential that we place autistic people at the centre of the conversation.

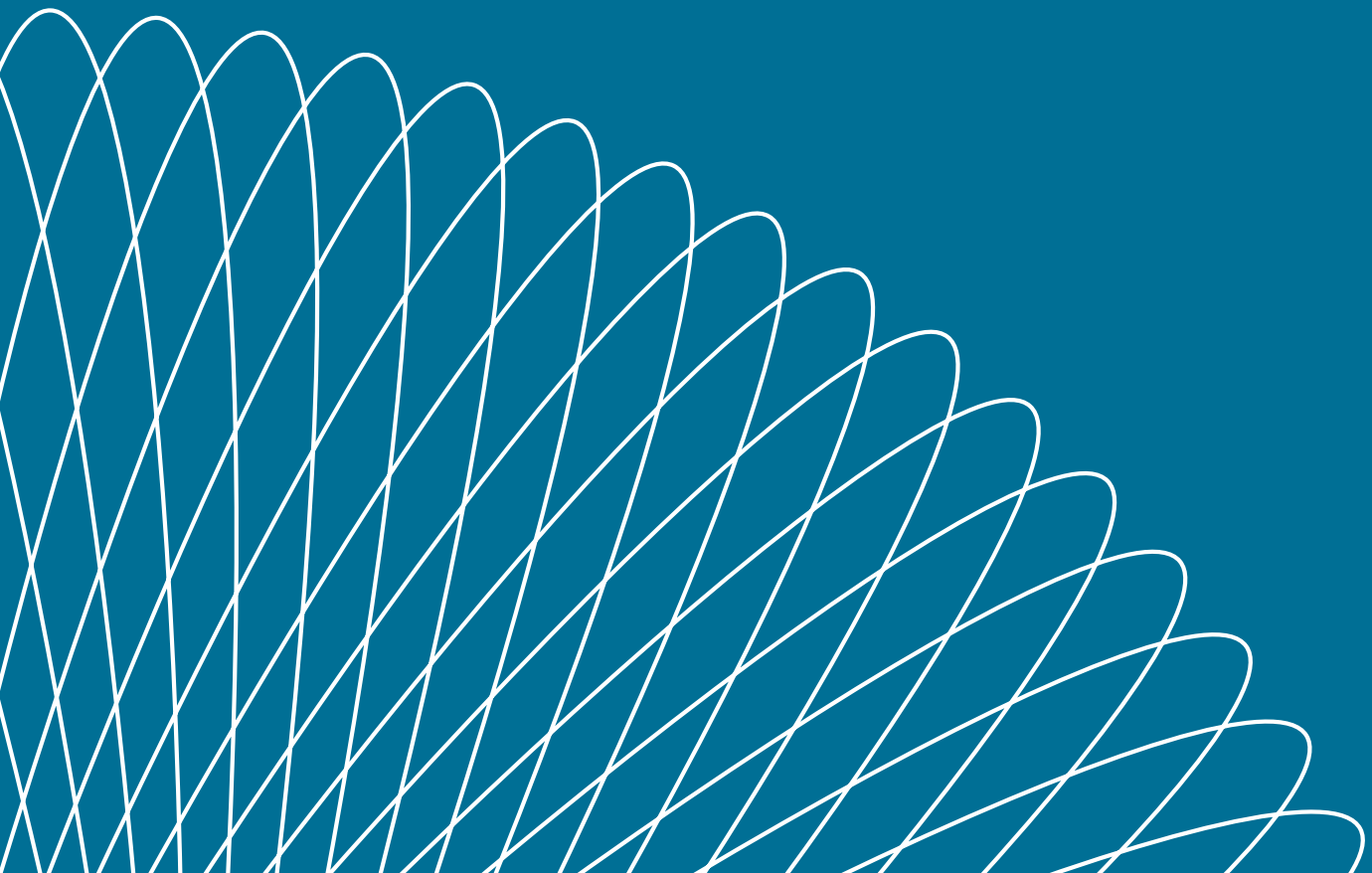
Rather than focusing on assumptions about which activities are most beneficial or what friendship 'should' look like based on non-autistic perspectives, we need to simply ask autistic people what they enjoy, what they prioritise and what they value in friendship and fun. In taking these steps, we can normalise differences and build appropriate supports so that autistic people of all ages can participate in ways that make them comfortable.

NOTES

YOUR OPINION

The Centre hopes that you have found this Research Bulletin informative. It would be appreciated if you would take a few minutes to provide the Centre with feedback in relation to this Bulletin by clicking on the survey link below.

Research Bulletin Feedback Well-being



CENTRE FOR AUTISM
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The Centre's Research and Information Service welcomes any correspondence including suggestions for future bulletins to: **research@middletownautism.com**.

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