

An Exploration of Friendship In Autistic Adolescents

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Abstract

Autistic adolescents, particularly females, often face unique challenges in forming and maintaining friendships due to difficulties in social communication and interaction. Traditional views of ASD suggest that individuals with the disorder lack the desire or capacity for friendships, but recent research has challenged this assumption, highlighting that while these adolescents may desire friendships, they often struggle to navigate social dynamics due to communication deficits and social barriers. This research seeks to explore the lived experiences of female adolescents with ASD, emphasizing how they define and experience friendship. By conducting unstructured interviews with 2 female adolescents aged 13-17, this research aims to provide insight into their perceptions of friendship, the qualities they seek in friends, and the challenges they face in fostering meaningful peer relationships.

ASD: Autism Spectrum Disorder

Background

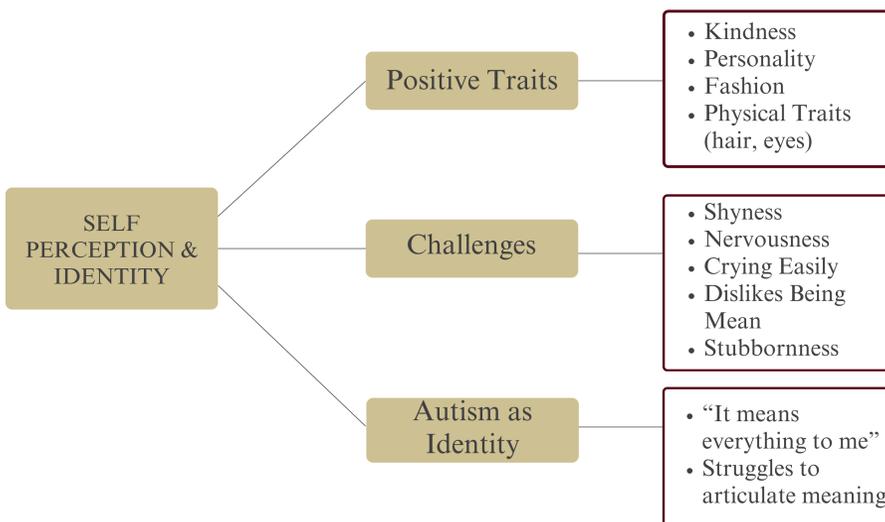
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Research Question: How do females with ASD define and experience friendship?

Method

- Participants: two female autistic adolescents age 14 and 13
- Single Subject Interview Study
- Two Qualtrics surveys: one interest and one demographic
- Interview Question Guide and picture reference cards
- Zoom recorded interview generated a transcript
- First Round Coding: Structural Coding
- Second Round Coding: In Vivo Coding
- Third Round: Categorical Analysis of Themes
- Interrater reliability: transcripts and coded data were analyzed by team members to determine its validity.

"It (Autism) means everything to me"



What do you wish others knew about Autism?

“Their intelligence, they’re smart, they’re kind”

References



Results

- 8 themes were derived from the interview data.
1. Self-Perception and Identity
 2. Interests and Hobbies
 3. Perception of Others
 4. Friendships and Social Connections
 5. Ideal/Perfect Friend
 6. Social Media and Communication
 7. Conflict and Social Struggles
 8. Support System for Making Friends

Discussion

The findings from the study highlight key aspects of self-perception, social interactions, and the role of communication in friendship-building. Participants exhibited strong self-awareness, identifying both their strengths and areas for improvement. While they viewed themselves as kind and valued their personal traits, they also acknowledged challenges such as shyness, nervousness, and difficulty managing emotions. Notably, autism was considered a central aspect of their identity, though its precise significance remained difficult for them to articulate.

Interests and hobbies played a crucial role in participants' lives, providing comfort and enjoyment. Activities such as playing the ukulele, solving puzzles, watching television, and visiting familiar places like the aquarium contributed to their sense of stability and personal fulfillment. These interests also served as potential bridges for social connections, reinforcing the idea that shared activities are fundamental to relationship-building.

When considering relationships with others, participants valued qualities such as kindness, intelligence, respectfulness, helpfulness, and humor. Admired individuals, including friends and family members, were recognized for their social skills and ability to maintain connections. This emphasis on positive social traits suggests that participants appreciate strong and supportive relationships, even though they experience difficulties in forming and maintaining them.

The nature of friendships among participants was characterized by shared activities, including playing games, attending parties, and engaging in online interactions. However, maintaining friendships was challenging due to experiences of bullying, name-calling, and conflicts that often resulted in complete disengagement. The tendency to withdraw from relationships following negative social experiences suggests difficulties with conflict resolution and social repair, which may contribute to feelings of isolation.

Participants' ideal friendships are centered on consistent presence, kindness, and shared experiences. They envisioned frequent interactions with friends, preferably in safe and familiar environments such as homes.

The emphasis on consistent availability suggests a desire for stability and reliability in friendships, highlighting the importance of dependable social connections.

Social media played a dual role in participants' lives. While platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat, YouTube, and Pinterest were used for entertainment and trend-following, and digital communication tools facilitated social interactions. Despite the use of social media for communication, there was a slight preference for in-person interactions, suggesting that digital tools serve as a supplement rather than a replacement for face-to-face engagement.

Conflict and social struggles were recurring themes in the findings. Participants frequently reported feeling ignored, being subjected to bullying, and facing challenges in maintaining long-term friendships. The predominant response to conflict was avoidance, with participants choosing to disengage rather than seeking resolution. This pattern of behavior underscores the need for support in developing conflict-resolution skills to foster healthier social interactions. Support systems, including teachers and parents, played a vital role in facilitating friendships.

While participants acknowledged that their friends were aware of their autism, they did not view this awareness as a crucial factor in their relationships. This suggests that while autism is an important aspect of their identity, social connections are primarily built on shared interests and interpersonal compatibility. Overall, the results highlight the complexities of friendship-building for individuals who experience social challenges. While participants value and desire meaningful connections, difficulties in social initiation, conflict resolution, and emotional regulation pose significant barriers. Future efforts should focus on providing structured social opportunities, enhancing conflict management skills, and fostering supportive environments to improve social inclusion and relationship stability.