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Friendship, loneliness and depression in adolescents with Asperger's Syndrome

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Abstract

This study investigated the relation between friendship, loneliness and depressive symptoms in adolescents with Asperger's Syndrome (AS). Thirty-five adolescents with AS and 35 controls matched on chronological age, school year and gender distribution, completed questionnaires designed to ascertain the quality of their best-friendship, motivation for developing friendships, feelings of loneliness and depressive symptomatology. Relative to the comparison group, the participants with AS reported poorer quality of best-friendship and less motivation to develop friendships. The individuals with AS displayed higher levels of loneliness and depressive symptoms, with loneliness being negatively correlated with the quality of their best-friendship. Increased levels of loneliness in the adolescents with AS was predicted by the extent to which their best-friendships were characterized by high levels of conflict/betrayal. Increased depressive symptoms in the adolescents with AS were also predicted by this factor. The findings indicate that increased levels of negative affect may be related to the poor quality of social relationships often reported in this population.

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Keywords: Asperger's Syndrome; Adolescence; Peer relationships; Depression

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Asperger's Syndrome (AS) is a developmental disorder that is considered to be at the high-functioning end of the autism spectrum. Asperger's Syndrome is characterized by social impairment and isolated idiosyncratic interests (as with 'classic' autism), without a history of language impairment (unlike 'classic' autism) (American Psychiatric Association, 1994). Although the official recognition of this condition is relatively recent (first appearing in the DSM-IV, 1994), the social difficulties experienced by these individuals have been well documented (for a review see Attwood, 1998). Individuals with AS demonstrate clear limitations in their ability to take part in reciprocal communication and show a lack of understanding about unwritten rules of communication and conduct (Attwood, 1998). These individuals have been described as socially intrusive or awkward, often asking inappropriate questions, coming too close to others and/or remaining aloof (Szatmari, 1991). Unsurprisingly, these limitations often prevent individuals with AS establishing meaningful social relationships (Attwood, 1998).

Social relationships, and in particular friendships, play a vital role in a child's development (Berndt, 1999; Hartup & Stevens, 1999). Friendships provide an opportunity to develop social and cognitive skills such as cooperativeness, sharing, altruism and conflict management (Newcomb & Bagwell, 1998). Furthermore, friendships promote emotional development by providing children with emotional security, intimacy and companionship. These constructs are closely associated with greater feelings of self-worth (Rubin et al., 2004). Children and adolescents without friends or with poor friendship quality are at risk of loneliness, stress, negative affect and concomitant developmental psychopathologies (Hartup & Stevens, 1999).

Loneliness reflects a discrepancy between the perceived quantity and quality of one's desired, and one's actual relationships (Cassidy & Asher, 1992). For many years there was a conception that individuals with AS and autism (collectively autism spectrum disorders, ASD) are content with or even prefer social isolation. Kanner (1943), for example, described individuals with ASD as having a "powerful desire" for aloneness (p. 249). Orsmond, Krauss and Seltzer (2004) found that participation in social activities and having friendships were low in a large sample of adolescents with ASD. Observational data demonstrate that adolescents with ASD appear less likely than persons with mental retardation to demonstrate spontaneous interest in and responsiveness to other people, suggesting that they have a relative lack of intersubjective engagement (Hobson & Lee, 1998). Furthermore, because of the deficits of theory of mind (Kaland, et al., 2002) and emotion understanding (Capps, Yirmiya, & Sigman, 1992), one might expect individuals with ASD to have difficulty in understanding the concept of loneliness. Importantly, however, recent studies have begun to challenge these assumptions (e.g., Bauminger & Kasari, 2001).

Bauminger and colleagues (Bauminger & Kasari, 2000; Bauminger, Shulman & Agam, 2003, 2004), for example, undertook a series of studies that sought to quantify the impact of poor quality of social relationships on the emotional functioning of children with high-functioning autism. The children with autism perceived their friendships to be of poorer quality than the typically developing comparison participants and, importantly, also reported greater feelings of loneliness (Bauminger & Kasari, 2000). However, a further experiment showed that the children with autism appeared to understand loneliness differently from the typically developing children; whereas the typically developing children defined loneliness using a combination of social-cognitive (i.e., being alone with no one to play with) and affective terminology (i.e., feeling sad), the children with autism tended to define loneliness using social-cognitive descriptions only. This led the authors

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