

# SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS OF TEENAGERS WITH HIGH-FUNCTIONING AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER

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### INTRODUCTION

Adolescents with an ASD struggle to create and maintain friendships with students of the same age (Laugeson, Frankel, Mogil, & Dillon, 2009). The emotional maturity of adolescents with an ASD is significantly lower than that of their peers, which also hampers the development and maintenance of relationships with their peers (Myles & Adreon, 2001). Some authors argue that individuals with an ASD are conscious of their social weaknesses and express their preoccupation towards establishing and maintaining friendships (Church & al., 2000). A study by Church and his collaborators (2000) also reveal that, contrary to popular belief, it is false to assume that all adolescents with an ASD prefer avoiding interactions with their peers despite enjoying solitary moments. Nonetheless, it seems difficult for them to develop friendships. Indeed, according to Orsmond, Krauss and Seltzer (2004), 46% of adolescents with an ASD living in the United States do not have friends while their typically developing classmates have an average of 3.6 friends (Gross, 2004). Lasgaard and his collaborators similarly conclude this; their findings show that 21% of boys with an ASD always or often feel alone (Lasgaard, Nielsen, Eriksen, & Goossens, 2010). Although people with an ASD report having at least one friend, the social ties are less stress in regards to security, companionship and helpfulness (Bauminger & Kasari, 2000). In this regard, a Quebec-based study revealed that youth with an ASD report having an average of three friends, but that they do not meet with these friends outside of school (Poirier & Vallée-Ouimet, 2015). The lack of social skills, i.e. the behaviors that are learned and that are socially acceptable to establish positive relations with others (Walker, Colvin, & Ramsey, 1995), impede the desire to interact with others. Adolescents with an ASD are, therefore, more inclined to engage in solitary activities and to spend less time interacting (Symes & Humphrey, 2010). However, Dann (2011) mentions that adolescents with an ASD of the same sex and presenting the same degree of severity could develop a reciprocal friendship.

Aside from the difficulties associated with interpersonal relations that adolescents with an ASD face, intimidation also represents a reality of their school life. Indeed, an American study showed that 10.6% of typically-developing adolescents (6<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> grade) state being a victim of intimidation while 13% claim to be the intimidator. Among this youth, 6.3% state being both a victim and an intimidator (Espelage, 2002).

These students notably risk being the target of intimidation and mockery due to their limited amount of friends and lack of social abilities (Martlew & Hodson, 1991, cited in Van Roekel, Scholte, & Didden, 2010). In fact, 30% of students with an ASD are subject to intimidation more than once per month (Van Roekel and al., 2010). A study among teachers by Van Roekel and colleagues (2010) indicated that bullying among young people with an ASD would be more frequent than actually reported. Due to their difficulties in social communication, adolescents with an ASD do not always express nor necessarily understand situations of intimidation. Moreover, such situations are not always revealed by adolescents with an ASD given that this depends greatly on their interpretation of the act. Indeed, if their understanding of intimidation solely includes acts of physical violence, it is probable that acts of verbal violence may not be reported (Plimley & Bowen, 2006).

### OBJECTIVE

The objective of this research is to describe ASD adolescent's perspective of their social reality.

### METHODE

This study is part of a doctoral research project that compared the perception of students with ASD regarding their transition to high school compared to that of their typically-developing peers. For the purpose of the present poster, only the cumulated responses of ASD students are presented. In total, 14 ASD sixth graders (12 boys and 2 girls) of an average age of 12.35 (SD = 5.43 months) (1 asperger; 2 autistic; 2 ASD; 3 PDD-NS; 6 PDD) were recruited in this study.

The results presented are extracted from a portion of the semi-structured interview that was composed of 60 open-ended and closed-ended questions, which was validated by three ASD experts. It was further validated through qualitative analysis and pre-experimentation with two typically-developing adolescents. Moreover, the interview was conducted among two ASD students in order to ensure proper comprehensiveness. Considering that they demonstrated a good understanding of the questions, their responses were integrated to the research findings.

The findings from these semi-structured interviews were grouped in frequencies and averages. Therefore, no verbatim were transcribed. In addition, each theme named by the participants were listed and recorded in frequencies.

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

When the adolescents of the study were questioned regarding their social relations, they responded having on average 7.1 friends (SD: 4.99). In fact, one participant revealed that 18 people, notably all students from his class, were his friends. The other participants of the study claim to have 0 to 14 friends in school. The majority of respondents ( $n = 9$ ) believe that it is important to have friends: "I have a lot of friends. I have good relationships." One participant wished to have more friends: "Otherwise I will be all alone and that's lonely. I would be bored to death." For others ( $n = 2$ ), it is not important to have friends: "It is really not important, but it is good to have friends." Two other respondents reveal that they are indifferent in this regard.

The notion of friendship does not always seem clear to adolescents with ASD: "I do not know if I really have friends." The concept of having friends and classmates is not well understood: "Everyone in my class is my friend." All the participants, except for one, report having friends at school. In fact, there exists a notable difference among the majority of participants between the number of people considered to be friends (friends in school) and the number of friends met outside of school. Indeed, respondents state seeing on average 1.8 friends (SD: 2.61) outside of school grounds.

When questioned on their notion of intimidation, participants claimed that intimidation consists "being bothered, made fun of and laughed at". More than half ( $n = 8$ ) of participants mentioned having been victims of intimidation: "I thought it was funny, but when I learned what it was, I did not like it." For some, mockery ceased after an intervention by a school employee. For others, harassment was present for longer periods. Inversely, six participants claim to not have been victims of mockery. Although, for some, it is difficult to differentiate intimidation from other isolated acts of mockery.

In light of the given results, the adolescents of the sample note having more friends than others adolescents with an ASD. While Orsmond, Krauss and Seltzer (2004) reveal that 46% of adolescents with ASD have no friends, only one participant of this sample confirm not having any friends. The adolescents claim have on average more friends than what is reported in Gross' study (2004). It is important to nuance this result given that one participant named all the students of his class to be his friends. This result is also more elevated than the average number of friends reported by Poirier et Vallée-Ouimet (2015). Indeed, the authors of this Quebec-based study reveal that only half of participants saw their friends outside of school, while the present study showed that to be true in one third of participants. However, if it is considered that friends are people one sees outside of school, the average number of friends that participants have diminishes et closely approximates results from Gross (2004) and Poirier et Vallée-Ouimet (2015). Only one participant said to have a dozen friends outside of school. This can be explained by the fact that they participated in extracurricular activities. The large number of friends seen in school can be explained by the fact that respondents of this present study are students with ASD of low severity, which can facilitate social relations with other peers. Given that they are integrated in an ordinary classroom setting, this allows them to be in contact with more youth of their age. Also, almost half of recruited participants attended a school which offered services to ASD students. This implies that, in school, there are specialized classes for students with ASD and opportunities to integrate a regular classroom setting. Hence, it is possible to believe that teachers as well as other students are more sensitive to ASD students' condition. All these factors can explain the high average of friends in school.

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