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Original Article

A mixed-methods examination of the gap between intelligence and adaptive functioning in autistic young adults without intellectual disability

Published in the Peer-reviewed Journal

Autism: International Journal of Research and Practice

The full article can be found here:

<https://doi.org/10.1177/13623613211018334>

Key Terms

Mixed-methods studies combine quantitative measures (e.g., multiple-choice questionnaires) with qualitative measures (e.g., coding of interview responses) to provide a more comprehensive understanding of a topic than could be provided by only one of these methods.

Peer-reviewed journals include studies that have been read and critiqued by experts in the respective field to ensure they meet quality standards.

Adaptive functioning is a set of age-appropriate skills necessary to live independently.

Why was this study conducted?

- Many autistic individuals do not have an intellectual disability, meaning that they are of average-to-above average intelligence and often do well academically. However, many face obstacles to achieving adult milestones like full-time employment and residential independence.
- SARRC's research team and others have demonstrated a significant gap between intelligence and **adaptive functioning** in autistic young adults without intellectual disability. This means that although some autistic adults have high verbal abilities and are very intelligent, they face challenges in skill areas that are necessary to live independently as an adult (e.g., vocational skills; transportation; self-care).
- Previous research in this area focused only on parent/caregiver responses on standardized surveys and provided little insight into why autistic adults experience these challenges or successful strategies to overcome them.
- This study was conducted to provide **a more comprehensive understanding of adaptive functioning in autistic young adults**, including the identification of **potential strategies that could be used to improve adaptive functioning skills**.

What did the study involve?

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Autistic young
adults
and their parents



Standardized
assessments of
intelligence and adaptive
functioning



Separate 90-minute
interviews with young
adults and their
parents

What were the main study findings?

- On average, young adults' adaptive functioning scores were more than 20 points lower than their IQs, indicating a **clinically significant disadvantage in adaptive functioning**.
- Most young adults were managing at least some, but not all, adaptive functioning skills independently. Many continued to **gain skills through experience and formal learning activities**.
- Some young adults experienced **interruptions to independence** in one or more skill areas.
- Young adults and their parents also described **adaptive functioning skills as interconnected**, meaning that independence in one skill area (e.g., healthcare) was often dependent on another skill area (e.g., transportation).

Interdependence vs. Independence

- **Interdependence** is an alternative to the concept of independence, and acknowledges that all people regardless of disability status receive support from their families, communities, and social structures
- All young adults in the study, including those who had achieved multiple adult milestones, demonstrated **interdependence**, meaning that they sought support from their families, coworkers, and societal structures (e.g., social security) in their day-day-lives.
- The study authors echo other stakeholders by suggesting the possibility **interdependence may be a more appropriate goal than complete independence for autistic adults**.

Unmet Service Needs

- Executive functioning strategies
- Self-advocacy skills
- Improved self-confidence
- Learning to ask for and accept help
- Safety skills
- Financial topics
- Transportation
- Specific vocational skills
- Social skills
- Career planning
- Life planning
- Health care

Parent Involvement

Interview responses suggested the need to balance helpful (e.g., setting reasonable expectations) and harmful (e.g., doing everything for their young adult) parent involvement.

Person-Environment Fit

Although all participants faced obstacles to independence, many overcame these obstacles by finding accepting work or geographical environments and developing work-around solutions, which is consistent with previous research that highlights the importance of **goodness-of-fit** between autistic adults and their environments.

Original Article Citation

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