Lay Abstracts

Title: On the relationship between autistic traits and executive functioning in a non-clinical Dutch student population

Authors: Maes, Vissers, Egger and Eling

DOI: 10.1177/1362361312442009

Lay abstract: According to the autism spectrum hypothesis, every individual can be placed somewhere on a continuum of ‘autistic’ traits, from completely absent to very prominent. Persons diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder have been shown to display impaired performance on tests of higher cognitive processes, also called executive functions, such as planning, working memory, inhibition and mental flexibility. This study assessed whether variations in autistic traits that can be observed in non-autistic populations are reliably associated with variations in the performance on tests of executive functioning. Two student populations, Social Science and Science students, which reliably differed in the degree of autistic traits as assessed with a common autism questionnaire, completed two tasks measuring diverse types of executive functions. No reliable association was found between the score on the autism questionnaire and the scores on the cognitive tests. However, two personality traits that have previously been shown to be related to autism, namely ‘harm avoidance’ and ‘reward dependence’ (responsiveness to social stimuli), were reliably linked to executive functioning. Specifically, strong harm avoidance and weak responsiveness to social stimuli were associated with, respectively, a strong tendency for systematic responding and a low mental flexibility. These results partly support the autism spectrum hypothesis and suggest that fluctuations of autistic-like or autism-related traits that can be observed in non-autistic populations are associated with fluctuations in higher cognitive processes.

Title: Prevalence of autism spectrum disorder symptomatology and related behavioural characteristics in persons with Down syndrome

Authors: Moss, Richards, Nelson and Oliver

DOI: 10.1177/1362361312442790

Lay abstract: Recent research suggests that Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) characteristics occur in 5%–35% of individuals with Down Syndrome (DS). Individuals with DS who show ASD characteristics show different cognitive and behavioural difficulties compared with individuals
with DS who do not. In this study we aimed to estimate the prevalence of ASD characteristics in individuals with DS and describe these ASD characteristics in individuals with DS in comparison with individuals with ASD and to evaluate similarities and differences in the frequency and severity of behavioural difficulties and mood in individuals with DS+ASD, DS only and ASD only. Caretakers of individuals with DS completed questionnaires including measures of ASD behaviour, activity levels, repetitive behaviour, challenging behaviour, mood and ability level. Seventeen individuals with DS+ASD, DS only and ASD only were selected and matched for degree of learning disability. A total of 19% and 8% of individuals with DS met the cut off for ASD. Individuals with DS+ASD showed more stereotyped behaviour, repetitive language, over-activity and self-injury than those with DS only. Individuals with DS+ASD were less withdrawn from their surroundings than individuals with ASD only. Individuals with DS+ASD show different levels of ability and different behavioural characteristics compared with individuals with DS only. Individuals with DS+ASD show similar characteristics to those with ASD only in some but not all areas of behaviour. These similarities and differences should be taken into account when implementing intervention and educational programmes.

Title: Longitudinal study of perceived negative impact in African American and Caucasian mothers of children with autism spectrum disorder

Authors: Carr and Lord

DOI: 10.1177/1362361311435155

Lay abstract: The purpose of this study was to examine the stability of mothers’ perceptions of the negative impact of having a child with ASD in a sample of African American and Caucasian families as their children transitioned to early adolescence. Participants were mothers and children participating in an ongoing longitudinal study of children referred for diagnosis of ASD at age two. Analyses included data from when child participants were approximately 9 and 14 years old. We found that negative impact increased significantly from late childhood into adolescence. However, African American mothers with lower education reported significantly lower levels of perceived negative impact at both ages. Findings show that for some families, the transition to adolescence is a period in which mothers experience increased amounts of negative impact and highlight the importance of examining the influence of socioeconomic variables. Furthermore, there may be cultural differences mediating the relationship between maternal education, ethnicity and perceived negative impact. Implications for the importance of including families from varying levels of socioeconomic status in ASD research are discussed.

Title: Sexual well-being of a community sample of high functioning adults on the autism spectrum who have been in a romantic relationship

Authors: Byers, Nichols, Voyer and Reilly

DOI: 10.1177/1362361311431950

Lay abstract: Sexuality is an important aspect of overall adjustment and quality of life for all individuals throughout their lives. However, little work has been done to understand the sexual well-being (particularly positive sexual functioning) of adults with developmental disabilities,
including individuals with autism spectrum disorders. Often, bright adults with high-functioning autism spectrum disorders (HFA/AS) experience social and communication difficulties that may create challenges for developing healthy sexual and romantic relationships. This study explored the extent to which gender, age, relationship status and autism symptoms were associated with a wide range of aspects (i.e. behaviour, thoughts, feelings) of the sexual well-being of 141 (56 men and 85 women) adults with HFA/AS living in the community. Participants completed an online survey. We assessed both solitary and partner-related sexual well-being, with an emphasis on understanding positive sexual functioning. Participants who were currently in a relationship reported more frequent affectionate and genital activity with a partner, and greater sexual assertiveness and sexual satisfaction, demonstrating the importance of context in an active sex life. In addition, after accounting for being in a relationship, men and individuals with fewer autism symptoms reported greater partner-related sexual well-being including: greater sexual satisfaction, assertiveness and arousability, lower sexual anxiety, and fewer sexual problems. Men also reported better solitary sexual well-being (e.g. higher sexual desire, more frequent sexual thoughts and activity), but had lower sexual knowledge. These results highlight the importance for research and education with individuals with HFA/AS to consider sexual well-being as multifaceted and consisting of both partner and solitary aspects.

**Title:** Pilot study of a school-based parent training program for preschoolers with ASD

**Authors:** Ingersoll and Wainer

**DOI:** 10.1177/1362361311427155

**Lay abstract:** This study investigated the feasibility and preliminary effectiveness of a parent training programme designed for early intervention and early childhood special education (EI/ESCE) programmes serving students with ASD. Thirteen teachers representing three intermediate school districts implemented the intervention with 27 students and their parents. Eighty-nine percent of families completed the program. From pre- to post-intervention parents improved their use of the treatment strategies and children increased their rate of language during a parent–child interaction in their home. Parents and teachers reported significant gains in child mastery of social-communication skills and teachers, but not parents, reported a significant decrease in social impairment. Parents reported a significant decrease in parenting stress. Both groups rated the intervention highly in regard to treatment acceptability, perceived effectiveness and usability. Findings suggest this intervention can be feasibly implemented in public EI/ECSE settings, filling a significant gap in services for intervention programmes serving children with ASD.

**Title:** Learning of idiomatic language expressions in a group intervention for children with autism

**Authors:** Whyte, Nelson and Khan

**DOI:** 10.1177/1362361311422530

**Lay abstract:** Many children with autism fall far behind in understanding idiom phrases such as ‘it’s raining cats and dogs’, and never fully reach adult levels. The current study measured the effectiveness of a group idiom intervention for 10 children, ages 7 to 12 years, with autism spectrum disorders. This intervention was conducted as part of a community-based social skills
programme. The children were initially very low in idiom understanding, but were able to learn the meaning of idiomatic phrases that they were taught during the two-week long intervention. In addition, they were able to remember the meanings of many of the idioms they learned when tested several weeks after the end of the intervention.

**Title: Fatigue, well-being and parental self-efficacy in mothers of children with an Autism Spectrum Disorder**

**Authors: Giallo, Wood, Jellett and Porter**

DOI: 10.1177/1362361311416830

**Lay abstract:** Raising a child with an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) can be challenging for parents, and may have an impact on their health and wellbeing. We were interested in parents’ experience of exhaustion and how it relates to parenting. We were also interested in understanding what may contribute to parent fatigue. Fifty mothers of young children with an ASD (aged 2–5 years) participated in the study. Mothers of children with an ASD reported more fatigue than mothers of typically developing children. High levels of fatigue were related to stress, anxiety and depression, as well as lower confidence and satisfaction in parenting. Poor sleep quality and physical activity among mothers, and a high need for social support was related to greater fatigue. This paper shares ideas about how mothers can be supported to manage exhaustion and fatigue.

**Title: Friendship characteristics and activity patterns of adolescents with an autism spectrum disorder**

**Authors: Kuo, Ormond, Cohn and Coster**

DOI: 10.1177/1362361311416380

**Lay abstract:** This study had three aims: (1) to compare the perceptions of friendships of teenagers with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) with their parents’ perceptions; (2) to study factors associated with friendship qualities; and (3) to learn about the activities teenagers did with friends and how activity patterns differed between boys and girls. A total of 91 teens with an ASD and their parents completed mail-based surveys during the summer months. Teenagers with an ASD identified more friends than did their parents. Teenagers with an ASD and their parents tended to list friends with similar characteristics. About half of the teenagers spent an average of 4 hours per day with friends during the summer months. Boys with an ASD most frequently played video games with friends, whereas girls most frequently had conversations with friends. The findings suggest that teenagers with an ASD and their parents may have different perceptions of friendships. The findings also suggest similarities and differences in the friendships of teenagers with an ASD and friendships of typically developing teenagers.