Lay Abstracts

Title: Psychopharmacology of autism spectrum disorders: A selective review

Authors: Mohiuddin and Ghaziuddin

DOI: 10.1177/1362361313508671

Lay abstract: While there is no cure for autism spectrum disorders, medications are often used with behavioral and educational approaches to treat its additional symptoms of hyperactivity, irritability, and aggression. Studies suggest that at least 50% of persons with autism spectrum disorder receive medications during their life span. This selective review examines recent studies about the use of psychotropic medications in persons with autism spectrum disorder. The aim was to focus on randomized controlled trials conducted from 1990 to 2010 on this topic. A comprehensive literature search was performed using PubMed and Cochrane databases. Out of 105 studies identified for the review, only 24 were randomized controlled trials. This suggests that very few studies used randomized controlled trials or established methods for examining effectiveness of treatments. Thus, more controlled studies are needed to determine their long-term efficacy and safety.

Title: Social cognition, social skill, and the broad autism phenotype

Authors: Sasson, Nowlin and Pinkham

DOI: 10.1177/1362361312455704

Lay abstract: Over the past two decades, research has accumulated indicating that the characteristics associated with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) can also be found at lower levels in the ‘broad autism phenotype’ (BAP), a term referring to the presence of milder autism symptoms in individuals who do not meet threshold for diagnosis. The current study examined whether two robust features of ASD, reduced social skill and difficulties with social cognition (i.e. the perception and interpretation of social information), extend to individuals in the general population who have high levels of traits related to autism. Seventy-four undergraduates completed the Broad Autism Phenotype-Questionnaire (BAPQ), as well social cognitive tasks of face perception, emotion recognition and theory of mind. To assess social skill, they also participated in a live social interaction with an unfamiliar research assistant. Findings indicated that higher levels of autism-related social traits on the BAPQ were associated with reduced social skill during the live social
interaction and also poorer performance on the social cognitive tasks. Further analyses revealed that the reduced interpersonal ability associated with the BAP occurred in part because of poorer social cognitive ability. Together, these findings indicate that the impairments in social cognition and social skill that characterize ASD extend in milder forms to the BAP in the general population, and suggest a framework for understanding how social BAP traits may manifest in diminished social ability.

**Title:** Reduced accuracy and sensitivity in the perception of emotional facial expressions in individuals with high autism spectrum traits

**Authors:** Poljac, Poljac and Wagemans

DOI: 10.1177/1362361312455703

**Lay abstract:** Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is, among other things, characterized by difficulties in processing of emotions. It is not clear, however, to what extent these difficulties are related to specific autistic traits. To address this question, we used a self-report questionnaire that assesses levels of autistic traits (called the Autism Spectrum-Quotient or AQ). This allowed us to quantify levels of autistic traits in a group of 500 university students. We were then able to test whether difficulties in perceiving emotional expressions (a characteristic that is often reported in individuals with ASD) also exist in typically developing individuals with a relatively high level of autistic features (a group known as the ‘broader autistic phenotype’). The participants with high scores on the AQ were found to be less accurate at perceiving emotions than those with low AQ scores; they needed a higher degree of emotional content to recognize emotions of anger, disgust, and sadness. Our findings demonstrate a particular impairment in the identification of emotional facial expressions in the broader autistic phenotype, which is related to the extent of their autistic traits.

**Title:** Examining the Screen for Child Anxiety-Related Emotional Disorder-71 as an assessment tool for anxiety in children with high-functioning autism spectrum disorders

**Authors:** van Steensel, Deutschman and Bögels

DOI: 10.1177/1362361312455875

**Lay Abstract:** The psychometric properties of a questionnaire developed to assess symptoms of anxiety disorders (SCARED-71) were compared between two groups of children: children with high-functioning autism spectrum disorder and comorbid anxiety disorders (ASD-group; \(n = 115\)), and children with anxiety disorders (AD-group; \(n = 122\)). Anxiety disorders were established with a semi-structured interview (ADIS-C/P), using child- as well as parent-report. Psychometric properties of the SCARED-71 were investigated. Results revealed that the psychometric properties of the SCARED-71 for the ASD-group were quite similar to the AD-group, however, differences between the ASD and anxiety groups were found. Our results suggest that research should focus more on establishing alternative cutoffs for the ASD-population.
Title: Brief report: Service implementation and maternal distress surrounding evaluation recommendations for young children diagnosed with autism

Authors: Warren, Vehorn, Dohrmann, Newsom and Taylor

DOI: 10.1177/1362361312453881

Lay abstract: There is limited evidence surrounding the ability of families of children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) to access and implement recommended interventions following diagnosis. There is also limited information on how successes or challenges regarding access to recommended services impacts families. In this study, we present preliminary data regarding implementation of clinical recommendations following ASD diagnosis, as well as associations of implementation with maternal functioning. A total of 75 mothers of young children diagnosed with ASD through a preschool autism clinic returned surveys regarding access to recommended services as well as maternal mental health and distress. Results indicate that while families were able to implement numerous recommendations, specific categories of intervention were less likely to be received. Challenges implementing recommended services were not related to increased maternal distress. These results suggest that despite potential barriers toward accessing some specific recommended services following diagnosis of ASD, many families may be quite successful in implementing many other core recommended service and that access challenges may not necessarily be tied to increased maternal distress.

Title: Priorities for autism spectrum disorders risk communication and ethics

Authors: Yudell, Tabor, Dawson, Rossi, Newschaffer and the Working Group in Autism Risk Communication and Ethics

DOI: 10.1177/1362361312453511

Lay abstract: Autism spectrum disorders are an issue of increasing public health impact. The occurrence of autism spectrum disorders has been increasing in recent years, and they are associated with noteworthy personal and financial impacts for affected persons and their families. In recent years, a large number of scientific studies have been undertaken, which investigate genetic and environmental risk factors for autism, with more studies underway. At present, much remains unknown regarding autism spectrum disorder risk factors, but the emerging picture of causation is in many cases complex, with multiple genes and gene-environment interactions being at play. The complexity and uncertainty surrounding autism spectrum disorder risk factors raise a number of questions regarding the ethical considerations that should be taken into account when undertaking autism spectrum disorder risk communication. Little has been written regarding autism spectrum disorder risk communication and ethics. This article summarizes the findings of a recent conference discussing ethical considerations and policy recommendations in autism spectrum disorder risk communication. Here, the authors discuss a number of issues, including uncertainty; understanding; unintentional harm; justice; and the appropriate roles of clinicians, scientists, and the media in autism spectrum disorder risk communication.
**Title: The association of quality of social relations, symptom severity and intelligence with anxiety in children with autism spectrum disorders**

*Authors: Eussen, Van Gool, Verheij, De Nijs, Verhulst and Greaves-Lord*

DOI: 10.1177/1362361312453882

**Lay abstract:** Anxiety is very common among children and adolescents with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) and it has a large impact on the everyday functioning and the suffering of these children. Treating anxiety in ASD can therefore be a fruitful approach to help them. This study investigated three factors that contribute to anxiety in ASD, according to previous research. These factors are: quality of social relations, severity of ASD symptoms and intelligence. It is assumed that anxiety in ASD amplifies when the quality of social relations is bad, when the symptoms of ASD are less severe and when intelligence is higher. Studies up till now investigated the impact of each of these factors separately. The current study combined these three factors in one study. We studied 134 school aged children with ASD. We found that children with a low quality of social relations and children with a lower ASD symptom severity had more anxiety. Intelligence was not related to anxiety. Intelligence, quality of social relations and ASD symptom severity did not influence each other. The practical implications of these findings are twofold. (1) Lower quality of social relations goes along with more anxiety. Therefore therapeutic interventions should be aimed at improving social relations as an important approach to reduce anxiety. (2) Children with lower ASD symptom severity are more anxious and therefore these children will probably benefit most from therapeutic interventions aimed at reducing anxiety.

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**Title: Assessing adolescent social competence using the Social Responsiveness Scale: Should we ask both parents or will just one do?**

*Authors: Pearl, Murray, Smith and Arnold*

DOI: 10.1177/1362361312453349

**Lay abstract:** The Social Responsiveness Scale (SRS) is one of a few questionnaires that can be used to measure social skills in people with autism spectrum disorders (ASDs). This study compared mother and father reports of social skills in adolescents who participated in a social skills group. Information was collected from both parents of 50 adolescents with and without an ASD diagnosis between the ages of 12 and 17 years old. It was found that the SRS is a useful tool for people to measure social skills. More importantly, there were no differences found between mother’s and father’s report of social skills. Therefore, asking either parent about his/her child’s social skills is adequate to provide an accurate view of social skills in the home.
Title: Adaptive function in preschoolers in relation to developmental delay and diagnosis of autism spectrum disorders: Insights from a clinical sample
Authors: Milne, McDonald and Comino
DOI: 10.1177/1362361312453091

Lay abstract: This study aimed to explore the relationship between developmental ability, autism and adaptive skills in preschoolers. Adaptive function (i.e. how well a person copes with common demands) was assessed in 152 preschoolers with autism (with and without developmental delay) and without autism (with and without developmental delay). Adaptive function was assessed using the Adaptive Behaviour Assessment System (ABAS-II), a parent questionnaire filled out before the assessment. Results showed that children with autism performed significantly less well on measures of both adaptive function and development. In addition, their overall adaptive function was closely related to their developmental ability. Children with average development, both with and without autism, had lower adaptive skills than expected for their developmental level. This study also examined subtypes of adaptive functioning and found that children performed less well on both the social and practical domain scores, even when taking into account the effects of development. The social domain score included subscales relating to other people and play skills, while the practical domain score included subscales such as: community living, home living, understanding health and safety and self care skills. The importance of considering subtypes of adaptive skills, as well as overall levels of adaptive functioning, when determining support needs is emphasized.

Title: Spontaneous attention to faces in Asperger syndrome using ecologically valid static stimuli
Authors: Hanley, McPhillips, Mulhern and Riby
DOI: 10.1177/1362361312456746

Lay abstract: Numerous studies have used eye tracking methods to study attention to social information in individuals with ASD. These studies, however, have yielded mixed results perhaps owing to variability in the social information presented. The current study explored attention to faces, and within faces, by individuals with Asperger syndrome using a range of stationary stimuli where faces were either viewed alone or in a social scene. Results showed that faces were viewed typically by the individuals with Asperger syndrome when presented in isolation, but attention to the eyes was significantly diminished in comparison to age and IQ-matched typical viewers when faces were viewed as part of social scenes. We show that individuals with Asperger’s view stationary stimuli in the same way typically developing individuals do. Our findings shed light on the importance of consideration of the realistic portrayal of social information for future studies.
Title: The relationship between emotion recognition ability and social skills in young children with autism

Authors: Williams and Gray

DOI: 10.1177/1362361312465355

Lay Abstract: This study assessed the relationship between emotion recognition ability and social skills in 42 young children with autistic disorder aged 4–7 years. Analyses revealed that accuracy in recognition of sadness, but not happiness, anger or fear, was associated with higher ratings on the Vineland-II Socialization domain, above and beyond the influence of chronological age, cognitive ability and autism symptom severity. These findings extend previous research with adolescents and adults with ASDs, suggesting that sadness recognition is also associated with social skills in children with autism.