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The “Best Things” About Autism

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Thanks to approaches such as positive psychology, which pushed researchers to study human qualities, for example, perceptions regarding autistic individuals have been changing in recent years. This change is partly due to innovative co-design research that captures perspectives from autistic individuals, and allows recording of the autistic person's, their families', and other stakeholders' points of view. Despite this change and neurodiversity frameworks (see our paper on this subject in the 7th issue of Sur le Spectre), most published research focuses on deficits in autism rather than adopting a strengths-based approach.

Character traits are an important part of an individual's personality, which guides their behaviours. Until recently, there was a dearth of literature on the stability and evolution of character traits in young autistic children.

To further research in this area, two studies published in the Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders documented how positive character traits evolve in autistic children, and how these trait endorsements vary as a function of educational placement. Both

studies used data from the Pathways in ASD longitudinal study.

The “Best Things” According to Parents

In the first study, parents answered an open response question, “What is best about your child?” at three instances where their autistic child was between 2-4, then 7-8, and then between 10-11 years old. The responses were then categorized using the Values in Action (VIA) Classification of Strengths model, which consists of 24-character traits across six domains: Wisdom and Knowledge, Courage, Humanity, Justice, Temperance, and Transcendence.

Authors found that parent-endorsed traits were consistent across time, and that most endorsements occurred in the humanity category. More specifically, parents most endorsed the following traits: love, happiness, kindness, humour and intelligence. Further analysis showed that from ages 2-4 and 7-8, the presence of internalized child behaviours (those directed internally like fear and anxiety) and externalized child behaviours (those directed externally like

aggression) reduced the likelihood of parents endorsing humanity traits. From 7-8 years old, researchers found that more severe autism symptomatology was associated with the increased parent endorsement of specific skills from the open question.

The “Best Things” According to Teachers

In the second study, the same methodology was used with teachers as respondents instead of parents, and at two time points (instead of 3): 7-8 and 10-11 years old.

Many of the teacher participants were female regular class teachers, and approximately 2/3 of the autistic students were in the regular curriculum. Over both time points, most endorsements were in the humanity category. At 7-8 years old, traits most frequently endorsed by teachers were kindness, specific skills, happiness, self-regulation, and perseverance. At the second time point, when the children were 10-11 years old, most-endorsed traits were similar, but

friendliness emerged among the most endorsed, rather than happiness.

No differences in trait endorsement were found at 7-8-year-olds between regular-class and specialized-class students, nor between those following a regular versus a modified curriculum, but as of ages 10-11, regular-class educators endorsed perseverance, wisdom and knowledge significantly more. Teachers endorsed more intelligence ratings for students likely to participate in general education or adapted curriculum compared to modified or life skills curriculum. At 7-8 years old, higher externalizing and internalizing behaviour, and higher autism severity scores, were associated with the decreased likelihood of teachers endorsing perseverance. Furthermore, at 10-11 years old, increased externalizing and internalizing behaviour reduced the likelihood of teachers endorsing happiness when asked the open question: what is best about this child?

Kind/care about people

Hard working

Works quietly and independently

Well-behaved

*“A bundle of joy
and a ball of energy,”*

He has a super great heart

Always in a good mood

What did we learn and what should be the takeaway?

In line with other research with neurotypical children, happiness and kindness were most frequently identified by both teachers and parents of autistic children. Teachers most often endorsed traits pertaining to self-regulation, and least often endorsed traits relating to cognitive ability. Furthermore, as the child aged, parents were more likely to describe their child by true character traits rather than their specific skills and abilities. These results could be due to the development of these

traits as the child ages as they progress in the school system.

Thus, the educational system would gain by leaning more on a strength-based approach. By identifying the child’s strengths, both cognitive and in terms of personal qualities, relationships between the parent, teacher, and the child can be improved. Following positive psychology, learning could therefore be geared to improving quality of life compared to “fixing” deficits.

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Original References

Mirenda, P., Zaidman-Zait, A., Cost, K. T., Smith, I. M., Zwaigenbaum, L., Duku, E., ... & Szatmari, P. (2022). Educators Describe the “Best Things” About Students with Autism at School. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 1-17.

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