Loneliness in autistic and non-autistic children: Associations with social networks in school

Yung-Ting Tsou*, Maedeh Nasri†, Lisa-Maria van Klaveren‡, Els Blijd-Hoogewys§, Mitra Baratchi¶, Alexander Koutamanis‖, Kexin Liu¶, Carolien Rieffe*§,†,‡,¶,‖
1 Developmental Psychology, Leiden University, NL; 2 INTER-PSY, Groningen, NL; 3 LIACS, Leiden University, NL; 4 Architecture & the Built Environment, TU Delft, NL; 5 Human Media Interaction, University of Twente, NL; 6 Institute of Education, UCL, UK.

Introduction

Loneliness: An awareness of mismatch between one’s desired and actual interpersonal relationships
(Asher & Paquette, 2003)

Autistic children experience more loneliness in school than non-autistic peers when entering into adolescence (e.g., Bauminger & Kasari, 2000; Deckers et al., 2017)

Contradict to traditional assumptions that autistic individuals lack the desire and motivation to build social networks

Aim: To examine the associations between loneliness and social networks in school in autistic and non-autistic primary-school pupils, using a multi-method approach

Methods

Participants
47 autistic children & 52 non-autistic classmates from 2 special education primary schools in NL (M_age = 10.84 ± 1.21 years; 34 girls, 65 boys)

Measures
- Loneliness in school – self-report:
  Children’s Loneliness Scale (Maes et al., 2017)

- Social networks – peer nomination:
  Nominate 5 best friends
  a) Reciprocal friendships
  b) Social network centrality (Bonacich, 1987)

- Social networks – wearable proximity sensor:
  Radio Frequency Identification Devices (RFID) on playground during recess
  a) Time spent in face-to-face interaction
  b) Number of interaction partners

Results

Levels of loneliness in school
Autistic < non-autistic children (U = 898.5, p = .975)

Levels of social networks in school
Autistic < non-autistic children on all measures (U = 381.5 – 635.0, p = .002 – .042)

Correlations in all children (autistic / non-autistic)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Autistic</th>
<th>Non-autistic</th>
<th>Correlation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reciprocal friendship</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>-0.03 / -0.08</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centrality</td>
<td>-0.22</td>
<td>-0.19 / -0.30*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time in interaction</td>
<td>-0.12</td>
<td>0.13 / -0.32*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction partners</td>
<td>-0.18</td>
<td>-0.37* / -0.02</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05 for Spearman’s correlation (r)
# Between-group difference in correlation strength (p < .05; Fisher’s r-to-z transformation)

Conclusion

Loneliness can relate to social network differently in autistic and non-autistic children:
- Autistic children: number of contacts
- Non-autistic peers: duration & position in social interaction

Implications:
- Autistic children value having more social contacts → important for feeling socially connected.
- Individual differences are crucial to consider when aiming for a welcoming school climate.

References