



STUDY SUMMARY

Beyond Friendship: The Spectrum of Meaningful Social Participation of Autistic Adults

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR

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PURPOSE

The purpose of this research study was to describe meaningful social participation in autistic adults. Having a broad network of social contacts is important for healthy aging and mental health in neurotypical populations, but studies have reported autistic adults have lower rates of social participation, friendships or close relationships, and more reported isolation. Yet measuring the number of friendships, frequency of activities with friends, or whether one participates in specific activities in other studies may not best describe how much autistic adults are socially involved with others in the community. This study describes the range of social participation activities and contacts to better understand, from the individual's perspective, where and how meaningful social interactions occur.

PARTICIPANTS

A total of 40 autistic adults between the ages of 24 and 62 years old completed the study, with an average age 38 years. Twenty-seven males and 13 females completed the study. Each participant carried a GPS tracker with them for 1-week and completed an interview before and after the 1-week study period. Questions in these interviews asked about activities that occurred that week, the importance of different locations they visited, and feelings of belonging and social support in the community from the autistic adult's point of view.

RESULTS

The autistic adults in the study described meaningful social participation beyond typical friendships in various contexts that contributed to their feelings of community and belonging. Places where social participation occurred for these individuals centered on 5 main areas: 1) Vocational contexts (work and volunteering), 2) Neighborhoods, 3) Autistic support services and inclusive environments, 4) Common interests, and 5) Online networks and apps. Participants reported experiences across the spectrum of social participation ranging from casual encounters, such as greeting a neighbor or stranger, to having acquaintances of those who are familiar but not known well, all the way to close friendships and relationships where individuals feel known and accepted. Participants used some of these contexts to practice social interactions for use in other situations. More details about these connections, and example quotes from our participants are included below.

Vocational activities. Participants described **employment, volunteering and pursuing education** as a means for social participation. For some participants, work or volunteering offered a sense of belonging. For others, it served as an important avenue for practicing social interactions.

"It's work. It's my practice ground. Social interaction practice."

"When I usher, I interact with a lot of people. So, it's just-- talking to people I don't know. I have people that are season ticket holders, so they come back every year. So, it's nice just to see."

Neighborhoods. Participants described visiting with friends and acquaintances within their local neighborhood communities, as well as feeling connected to neighbors which provided a sense of safety.

Walking pets promoted social interaction within neighborhoods, which contributed to feeling part of the community.



"I guess I am part of a neighborhood community. I wouldn't be if I didn't walk the dog. But you meet a lot of people."

Support services and inclusive environments. Some participants used formalize support services to create meaningful social relationships and also described specific service organizations as often offering a sense of safety and acceptance.

Autistic adult support groups, organizations, and autistic camps were described as a means of providing social connection and comfort. Therapists, support staff, and service animals were also specifically described as important forms of social support.

"And then they had an autism adult support group there too, monthly, and I would go there. Originally, I would go there by myself, and there would be a few other guys with autism that I got friendly with there too."

Common interests. Common interests such as **church, gaming (card games, board games, role playing games), and improv** offered opportunities for social engagement or practice.



For some participants, attending church fellowship provided a sense of belonging and place of connection to others through shared faith. Other participants described gaming such as card games, board games, and Dungeons and Dragon role playing games as a common interest that increased social engagement.

"Playing cards – like I will be gone to board games multiple times a week, regularly."

Online networks and apps. Online platforms of Meetup and dating apps were used to facilitate in-person gatherings, while Facebook, online groups, and Twitter provided important connection with others or valued engagement in on-line communities. Participants also described using many different social networking platforms to communicate with individuals, ranging from casual encounters, acquaintances, and close personal friends.



"Meetup's a pretty good way to go out to do something without, you don't need too many social skills to at least sign up and get there, and I guess you're on your own after that."

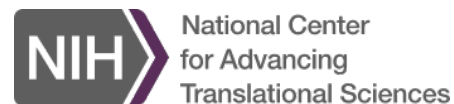
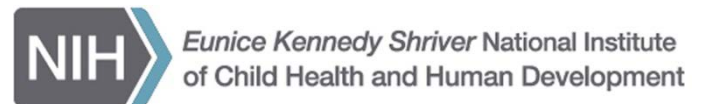
"Now I'm on Facebook groups a lot—autism AS groups communicating with people and I get to know people and it's just, yeah, I'm really happy."

In this study, autistic adults engaged in a range of social participation experiences in a variety of contexts, and used different settings to intentionally practice social skills. It was also notable that reports of casual encounters with neighbors or acquaintances were meaningful and contributed to individuals feeling part of their communities. Autistic adults also used specific apps to facilitate in-person meet ups, at times merging the preference for online communication with the desire for in-person connection.

With a focus on loneliness, isolation, and friendship quality in autistic adults, these findings provide initial support to think more broadly about where social participation and meaningful interactions take place.

If you would like more details regarding this research and more quotes from our participants, these findings were recently published in the *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, and you can access this article for free in the link [here](#).

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