

Measuring social networks of young adults with autism

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As many have recently discovered, social connections are vital to a person's wellbeing. While social isolation is a core challenge associated with autism, researchers from Drexel University's A.J. Drexel Autism Institute have laid the groundwork to show how interpersonal relationships, and the resources they provide, could impact autistic youth's adult outcomes.

"Many autistic young adults are disconnected from people, communities and organizations that could provide them with valuable social resources to support their transition to adulthood," said Elizabeth McGhee Hassrick, Ph.D., assistant professor in the Autism Institute and lead author of the study.

The study demonstrated how [social network analysis](#) can be adapted for the field of [autism](#), by measuring the social networks of autistic adults and the resources gained from the [social connections](#).

Researchers had 17 autistic adults during post-high school transition (ages 19 to 27) complete an

online survey about their social connections and the different types of support they gain from those connections. Parents of three of the autistic adults were also surveyed to provide information about the social connections they rely on to help their autistic young adults transition successfully.

"Interpersonal relationships and the resources and support embedded in the social networks of autistic young adults could impact key adult outcomes, including quality of life, mental health, employment and independence," said McGhee Hassrick.

According to the researchers, there is currently very little known about the social networks of young adults on the [autism spectrum](#) and no studies measuring the social capital of youth and their parents together.

This project produced new and useful ways of collecting social network data from young autistic adults that will produce knowledge about how to help young adults on the autism spectrum build networks that will produce social resources needed to support positive outcomes in adulthood.

The study does have limitations, as it was only designed to test the feasibility of the social network measure and does not provide information about how networks might impact outcomes. There is also the possibility of under-reporting the actual size and makeup of autistic young adult networks, due to the social network measure only allowing participants to identify five people.

"Future studies using our social [network](#) measure might provide valuable information about possible interventions that could help autistic youth acquire the social resources needed for successful adult outcomes," said McGhee Hassrick.

The study, "Social Capital and Autism in Young Adulthood: Applying Social Network Methods to Measure the Social Capital of Autistic Young

Adults," will be published in *Autism in Adulthood*.

More information: Elizabeth McGhee Hassrick et al, Social Capital and Autism in Young Adulthood: Applying Social Network Methods to Measure the Social Capital of Autistic Young Adults, *Autism in Adulthood* (2020). [DOI: 10.1089/aut.2019.0058](https://doi.org/10.1089/aut.2019.0058)

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