

## Camouflaging Autism: Do Autistic Teenagers Hide Their Autism Traits?

Summary Reports describe results from newly published research using data from SPARK participants.

### ■ Study Title

Social Camouflaging in Autistic and Neurotypical Adolescents: A Pilot Study of Differences by Sex and Diagnosis

### ■ What was the study about?

Researchers compared the ways that teenagers who have autism, and teens who don't, try to fit in socially. They wanted to know if autistic teenagers, particularly girls, hide or "camouflage" their autism traits more often than other teens in social situations.

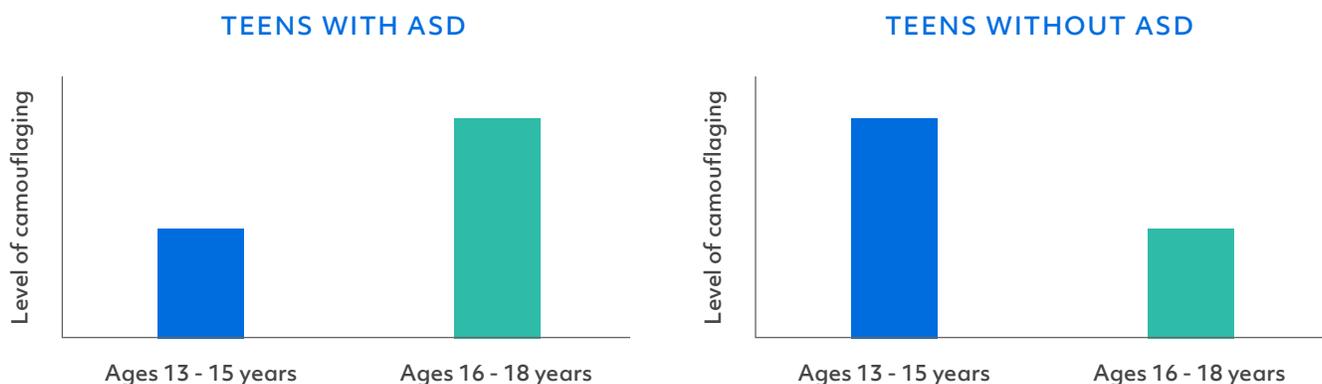
### ■ How was the study done?

A total of 140 teens aged 13 to 18 took two online surveys. One survey asked if they had certain traits common to autism. The other survey measured whether they try to hide those traits to fit in socially. All teens took the same surveys whether or not they have autism. The participants were:

- 78 teens who have autism (55 males and 23 females) and who don't have intellectual disability. Most of these teens are members of SPARK.
- 62 typically developing teens (27 males and 35 females) who don't have autism and don't receive special education services.

### ■ What did the researchers learn?

- Camouflaging is associated with autism, but teens who don't have autism also camouflage, although perhaps for different reasons.



- When researchers compared scores across all ages, girls camouflaged more than boys regardless of diagnosis. But when they compared scores based on age, the differences between girls and boys were not significant. The researchers say a larger study should be done to look at the importance of age and sex in camouflaging.
- Typically developing teens were more likely to “mask,” which is a part of camouflaging that involves trying to appear interested in others and focusing on the social impressions they make. In their masking behaviors, teen girls who have autism looked more like the typically developing teens.

### ■ What was new and innovative about the study?

Past studies of adults have shown that in social situations, women who have autism hide their autism traits more than men who have autism. This camouflaging has been described as emotionally draining. This is believed to be the first study to look at sex and age differences in camouflaging in teens who have autism, and teens who don't.

### ■ What do the findings mean?

There may be differences in the social development of autistic teenagers as they get older compared with their peers who don't have autism.

### ■ What are scientists and participants saying?

**Participant:** “It was very nice to participate and provide my comments and feelings.”

**Researcher Courtney Jorgenson, Ph.D., who led the study:** “We are grateful to the SPARK participants who took part in this study. Our hope is that this line of research looking at social behaviors in girls on the spectrum and boys on the spectrum is going to help us better understand their social lives, and the positive and negative consequences of their social interactions,”

### ■ What's next?

This was a small, test study that will help researchers plan for a larger study. A future study, with many more participants, could shed more light on how boys and girls with autism develop socially during their teens compared with their typically developing peers.

### ■ Reference

Jorgenson C. et al. J. Autism. Dev. Disord. Epub ahead of print (2020) [PubMed](#)

#### About SPARK Research Match

This SPARK program matches families with research studies they may want to join. These studies have been evaluated for scientific merit and approved by a scientific committee at SPARK. The program is free to researchers and families. SPARK does not endorse or conduct these studies. Families choose if they want to participate in a particular study.