

Understanding Aggression in Children and Teens with Autism

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

■ Study title

Understanding Aggression in Autism Across Childhood: Comparisons with a Non-autistic Sample

■ What was the study about?

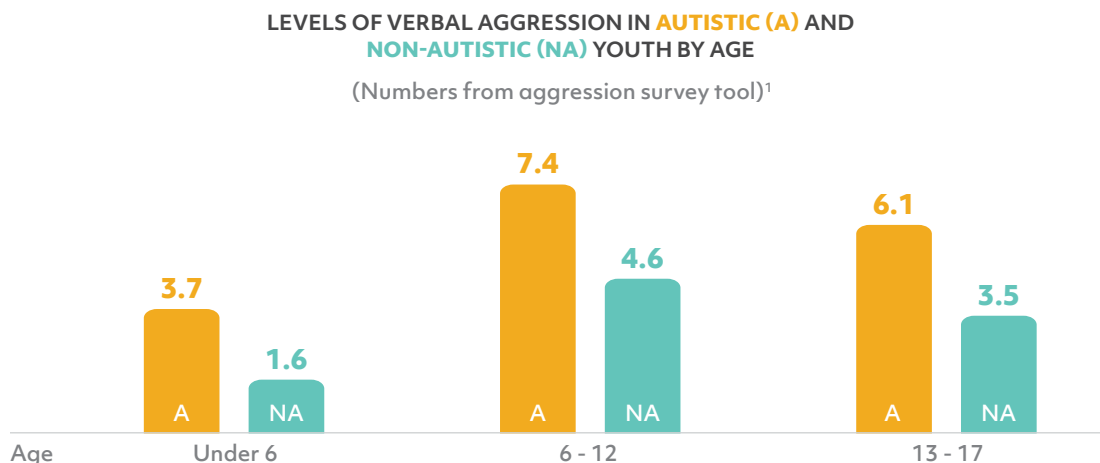
Aggression is fairly common in children with autism, but little is known about how their behavior compares to that of their peers who don't have autism. Researchers measured aggressive and disruptive behaviors in autistic children and teens, and non-autistic youth of the same ages.

■ How was the research done?

Researchers enrolled 450 parents of SPARK children ages 3 to 17, and 432 parents of similar-aged children who do not have autism. The families of non-autistic children were recruited from outside SPARK. Almost 60 percent of the autistic children could speak sentences with more than three words. Families completed online surveys that measured verbal and physical aggression, and disruptive behaviors.

■ What did the researchers learn?

- Autistic children had more verbal aggression than non-autistic children. Verbal aggression included insults, and saying, "I hate you," and other hurtful comments. Verbal aggression was highest among 6- to 12-year-olds with autism.¹



- Autistic children younger than 6 had more physical aggression, such as pinching and scratching, than their non-autistic peers. However, children ages 6 to 17, both with and without autism, had the same amount of physical aggression.
- The autistic youth had more intense disruptive behavior than the comparison group. That behavior included refusing or failing to do an everyday task, problems paying attention, dawdling, and getting angry when they do not get their way.
- The most commonly reported disruptive behaviors were attention problems in autistic children and, in non-autistic children, dawdling and being slow to finish tasks.

- Children with autism were more likely to lose their temper quickly, and have less control over anger, than other children.

■ What was new and innovative about the study?

This study compared aggressive behavior in both autistic and non-autistic youth, which is rarely done. A new finding is that children and teens on the spectrum are verbally aggressive more often than non-autistic youth. It's possible that autistic youth are more likely to express angry feelings, says study researcher Lauren B. Quetsch, Ph.D.

■ What do the findings mean?

A better understanding of the differences in aggressive behavior between autistic and non-autistic youth may help improve treatments for children on the autism spectrum, the researchers say.

■ What are people saying?

STUDY PARTICIPANTS:

- "I appreciate that this is being researched and hope that the outcome provides some help to families like ours."
- "Thank you for working hard to help families. The more we know, the more we try to understand, the better our children's lives and futures can be"
- "Hope this research helps find answers or patterns in behavior. Good luck to you."
- "It was very timely as we are experiencing some of the behaviors and it's good to know that these are not unique to me, especially the dawdling."

STUDY RESEARCHER:

- **Lauren B. Quetsch, Ph.D., clinical psychologist and assistant professor, University of Arkansas:**
"My goal is to shine some light on how these behaviors may look different for families of autistic children versus those who don't have autistic children, and how we can increase understanding and services for these families."

■ What's next?

The researchers hope that future studies will examine factors that contribute to aggressive and disruptive behaviors, along with effective ways to address them, in youth with autism. Potential factors include communication delays and problems with attention, sensory sensitivities, and managing emotions.

■ References

1. Quetsch L.B. *et al. Autism Res.* Epub ahead of print (2023) [PubMed](#)

About SPARK Research Match

This SPARK program matches participants with research studies that 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 participants. SPARK does not endorse or conduct these studies. Participants choose if they want to take part in a particular study.

© Simons Foundation | Published May 2023