

# Autistic communication and peer engagement

## What We Found

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*Autistic people share information with other autistic people as well as non-autistic people do with other non-autistic people.*

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## What We Suggest

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*Autistic people might benefit from the chance to spend time with other autistic people. Peer support and mentoring models might be a good way to achieve this.*

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We found that autistic people share information with other autistic people as well as non-autistic people do with other non-autistic people. However, when there are mixed groups of autistic and non-autistic people, much less information is shared<sup>1</sup>.

We also found that autistic people feel more comfortable around other autistic people than around non-autistic people<sup>2</sup>.

This finding is important as it shows that autistic people have the skills to share information well with one another and experience good rapport, and that there are selective problems when autistic and non-autistic people are interacting.

The number of autistic pupils in mainstream school is increasing, however the successful inclusion of autistic children in mainstream school is a complex process. Autistic children are at a high risk of negative outcomes: many experience low levels of peer social support, high levels of bullying, and feel disconnected from their school community. This, in turn, may negatively impact their educational engagement.

Our data suggest that one solution to these problems might be to create more opportunities for autistic young people to be together.

The Salvesen Mindroom Research Centre has funded an exciting new research project to design and evaluate a neurodiversity-informed peer support model for use in mainstream secondary schools, drawing on models already developed by the LGBTQ+ community and working with neurodivergent young people. It is intended to nurture a positive outlook on neurodivergent identity, a sense of belonging and self-advocacy skills. This model will be trialled in three schools, and results are expected in 2023.

In the meantime, schools wanting to provide support to their autistic pupils might consider

- a book or film club exploring stories of neurodiversity
- placing multiple autistic young people in the same class at intake
- leadership of new innovations by autistic teachers, and consultation with pupils themselves

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## What We Did

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*Autistic and non-autistic participants were asked to share information, and then asked how they felt they had got on with the other person in the interaction.*

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## Why We Did It

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*Autistic children are at a high risk of negative outcomes, including bullying, but they understand and want friendships. Anecdotal reports from the autistic community suggest it might be easier to get on with other autistic people.*

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## Thank you

*This research could not have happened without the generosity of all the people who took part.*

We conducted this research using two studies.

For the first study<sup>1</sup> we recruited nine groups, each with eight people. In three of the groups, everyone was autistic; in three of the groups everyone was non-autistic; and three of the groups were mixed groups where half the group was autistic and half the group was non-autistic. We told one person in each group a story and asked them to share it with another person, and for that person to share it again and so on, until everyone in the group had heard the story. We then looked at how many details of the story had been shared at each stage. Participants were also asked how they felt they had got on with the other person in the interaction.

In the second study<sup>2</sup>, we recruited twelve autistic adults who completed in-depth interviews reflecting on their relationships with autistic and non-autistic family and friends.

While autism is characterised by differences in social communication, autistic young people understand the concept of friendship and want to have friends. To facilitate this, social support for autistic young people often focuses on teaching neurotypical social skills. As the social skills of neurotypical people are considered unimpaired, it is commonly perceived that they will provide the best support to autistic people, thus in mainstream settings autistic pupils are often paired with neurotypical pupils.

However, many first-hand accounts from autistic people suggest that autistic people experienced increased feelings of comfort and ease around other autistic people. In addition, teaching neurotypical social skills can minimise autistic behaviours, driving them “underground” and causing distress and mental health issues.

We wanted to examine autistic interaction to see if there’s a better way to support autistic people’s desire for friendship.

1. Crompton, C. J., Ropar, D., Evans-Williams, C. V., Flynn, E. G., & Fletcher-Watson, S. (2020). Autistic peer-to-peer information transfer is highly effective. *Autism*, 24(7), 1704-1712.
2. Crompton, C. J., Hallett, S., Ropar, D., Flynn, E., & Fletcher-Watson, S. (2020). ‘I never realised everybody felt as happy as I do when I am around autistic people’: A thematic analysis of autistic adults’ relationships with autistic and neurotypical friends and family. *Autism*, 24(6), 1438-1448.

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