

research snapshot

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Positive Characteristics in Youth with Intellectual Disability with and without Autism

What is this research about?

Most research on mental health in individuals with autism and intellectual disability has focused on impairments and problems. A theory called “Positive Youth Development” looks at how positive characteristics (i.e., the 6 C’s: confidence, competence, character, compassion, connection, and contribution) develop through the right fit of individual characteristics and environmental supports among youth in the general population. In this study, the research team examined individual and environmental factors related to positive characteristics in youth with intellectual disability, with and without autism.

What did the researchers do?

The researchers surveyed 330 family caregivers of youth and young adults registered with Special Olympics Ontario. To be included in this study, youth needed to be between the ages of 11 and 22 years. Caregivers were asked questions about their child’s individual (i.e., social and communication skills, daily living skills, functional thinking skills) and contextual characteristics (i.e., home, school, and community participation). They were also asked to rate their level of agreement about statements that referenced their child’s positive characteristics (i.e., the 6 C’s).

What you need to know:

Youth with both autism and intellectual disability were reported to have lower levels of positive characteristics than youth with intellectual disability only. Differences in both individual skills (i.e., social communication) and environmental characteristics (i.e., school and home participation) accounted for a large part of the relationship between autism and lower levels of positive characteristics.

What did the researchers find?

Youth with autism and intellectual disability were reported to have lower levels of positive characteristics than youth with intellectual disability only. Differences in social communication skills and home and school participation accounted for a large part of why those with autism had lower levels of positive characteristics.

The researchers caution that their sample only included individuals involved in Special Olympics and may not represent the experiences of all youth with autism and intellectual disability. They also relied on brief caregiver report surveys, which may not have fully captured youths’ positive characteristics. Future work should use different research methods (e.g., face-to-face interviews with youth and their family members) to include



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multiple perspectives of strengths and positive characteristics among youth with intellectual disability with and without autism.

How can you use this research?

It is important to address individual characteristics, like social communication challenges, in youth with autism and intellectual disability through evidence-based treatments to increase their wellbeing. However, it is also important to address environmental characteristics that will increase youth participation in the home and school settings. Future research is needed to better understand how other environmental factors, like family social support, community acceptance, and socioeconomic status may also impact positive outcomes in youth with autism and intellectual disability.

About the Researchers

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