

Social Participation Patterns and Preferences of Children on the Autism Spectrum

Lisa Crabtree^{1,2}, Janet DeLany¹, Rachele Dorne², Sandee Dunbar²

¹Towson University, Towson, MD, United States, ²Nova Southeastern University, Ft Lauderdale, FL, United States

Introduction: During childhood, key developmental tasks learned through participation in social occupations include getting along with others, acquiring value systems, and formulating healthy routines. However, children on the autism spectrum struggle with developing social competency at a time when their peers are perfecting these skills, causing them to be socially isolated. What is not understood is the social participation patterns and preferences of children on the autism spectrum, information necessary to develop programs that promote their social competency.

- Objectives:**
1. Identify the social participation patterns of children on the autism spectrum.
 2. Discuss preferences for social participation from the perspective of children on the autism spectrum

Methods: A concurrent triangulation mixed methods research design was used to explore the social participation patterns and preferences of thirty-two 8 to 12 year-old children on the autism spectrum as measured by the Children's Assessment of Participation and Enjoyment and Preferences for Activities of Children. Concurrently, researchers used a qualitative case study design to describe self-perceptions of social participation from the perspective of a subset of 6 children in the study.

Results: Children on the autism spectrum primarily participated in activities alone or with family members within their homes. They expressed comfort in participating in familiar activities with familiar people in familiar places. They also expressed greater preferences for social activities than their current level of participation, although younger children preferred social activities more than the older children. Despite indicating a high preference for social participation, children had difficulty identifying with whom they would do social activities.

Conclusion: Discrepancies between patterns and preferences for social participation may contribute to poor outcomes for individuals on the autism spectrum. Variability in patterns and preferences were related to experiences children had; repeated failures or lack of experience with social experiences may create barriers for developing social competence.

Contribution to the practice/evidence base of OT: Results will assist practitioners in understanding the social needs of children on the autism spectrum. By documenting children's perceptions and evidence related to their preferences for social activities, programs can address their social needs and reduce barriers to learning and healthy development.