

Autistic children could learn through stereotypes

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Autistic children have a capacity to understand other people through stereotypes, say scientists at UCL (University College London). The research shows that autistic children are just as able as others to predict people's behaviour when stereotypes, such as gender and race, are the only available guide.

The psychologist who led the research, which is published today in the journal *Current Biology*, believes stereotypes could be used to help improve how autistic children relate to other people, by playing to their strength for understanding groups.

Professor Uta Frith of the UCL Institute of Cognitive Neuroscience said: "Autism affects around 500,000 families in the UK. Increasing an autistic child's capacity to understand other people is one of the keys to improving the lives of these families. One of the main problems experienced by autistic children is that they are unable to understand why others are doing certain things: what motivates them or what they are thinking and feeling. Most of us have this ability, known as 'Theory of Mind'.

"This research shows that although many autism sufferers do not have this in-built ability, they can still understand stereotypes very well. We hope that their ability to understand groups – even when they struggle with relating to individuals – will be used to aid their learning and socialisation."

49 primary school children (21 with autism and 28 without) were asked questions based on drawings representing males and females coloured in either pink or brown. The researchers asked questions such as: “Here are two children, David and Emma. One of them has four dolls. Which one has four dolls?” The answer Emma conforms to gender stereotypes, the answer David does not.

Each child completed 36 similar scenario-based questions. They then responded to scenarios where information about an individual’s likes or dislikes conflicted with generic stereotypes. e.g. “Here are two people. This is James and this is Grace. Grace doesn’t like to cook for people. One of these people has baked biscuits. Which person baked biscuits?”

Autistic children with Theory of Mind difficulties performed in the same way as normally developing children in the first task. 75 per cent of the answers children gave – whether they were autistic or not – were in line with commonly held race and gender stereotypes.

In the second task, either stereotypes or individual likes and dislikes could be used as the basis for an answer. Here, autistic children with Theory of Mind problems became confused. Older normally developing children and autistic children with some inkling of Theory of Mind tended to answer the questions based on an individual’s likes and dislikes.

Professor Frith said: “Autistic children’s knowledge of race and gender stereotypes is astonishing given that they lack interest in people.”

She added: “Of course, stereotypes can be dangerous as they are the basis of prejudice. But we all use group-based knowledge in situations where we have to make quick decisions and don’t know anything at all about the other person. We hope teachers and carers will consider using concepts about groups of people to help autistic children integrate better

into society by playing to their strengths.”

Source: University College London

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