

Eating disorders linked with autism in school children

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Although traditionally considered two quite separate conditions, many similarities in characteristics have previously been found in those with a clinical diagnosis of an eating disorder and a clinical diagnosis of autism.

For example, female adults with a diagnosis of [anorexia nervosa](#) have been found to score highly on a questionnaire that measures characteristics associated with [Autism Spectrum Disorders](#) (ASD).

Dr. Mark Brosnan from the University of Bath's Department of Psychology and his team set out to identify if the relationship between eating disorders and ASD existed in a younger, non-clinical population.

The team recruited 132 school children (61 boys, 71 girls) to take part in the study, aged 11 to 14 years, an important age for the onset of eating-related issues.

Dieting behaviors and weight concerns are tentatively considered to be variable risk factors for the development of eating disorders.

The school children completed questionnaire-based assessments of eating disorders and ASD, which found a significant relationship between the two, particularly between [eating disorder](#), attention to detail and communication skills.

Dr. Brosnan said: "The application of one research area to another may contribute to a better understanding of both clinical conditions.

“One of the biggest differences between the disorders is the male domination of ASD diagnoses and the female domination of eating disorder diagnoses and these comparisons may help us to understand why this is the case.

“For example, we found that ‘attention to detail’ was consistently the most significant predictor of eating disorder tendencies, and to a greater degree than gender.

“Poorer social communication skills were also associated with higher eating disorder tendencies in our study. We hope that a better understanding of the relationship between these social cognitive processes and eating disorders may eventually be used clinically to predict prognosis or course of illness in clinical patients.”

More information: This research is due to be published in the *British Journal of Clinical Psychology*.

Provided by University of Bath

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