

# Study suggests fresh approach to autism research

January 18 2016, by Wendy Skene

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The more expressive people are, the better they are at understanding the feelings of others according to a study by researchers at The University of Aberdeen published in *Cognitive, Affective & Behavioral*

*Neuroscience.*

The results of this study may help to develop ways to improve social communication skills in children with autism.

A new questionnaire was devised to find out how expressive [actions](#) used to communicate are related to how good we are at understanding other people's feelings. Results showed that people who use a lot of expression and gesture in their social communication are more empathic than those who are less expressive.

Dr Justin Williams who led the research said: "We all use imitation of others as a way of understanding each other and by putting ourselves in other people's shoes, we can relate and understand, or empathise with others. Autism is characterised by a problem in the development of this ability to imitate others.

"Empathising is a skill associated with the experience and expression of actions such as gesture and facial expression. Children with autism have difficulties in these kinds of social communication. The results of this study suggest that it may be possible to promote empathic ability using drama-type activities that teach social actions like facial expressions and gestures.

"Imitation and ultimately, empathy is a pivotal mechanism that is a fundamental component in understanding others – without it, it can be very difficult to develop and maintain social relationships so it is important that we find ways to help those who have difficulties with these skills, such as those with autism.

"Empathy is about not just appreciating feelings of others but actually understanding them as well. People with autism are often very empathic in terms of picking up emotions of others but the difficulty is in

understanding other peoples' feelings and also in expressing their [feelings](#) to others.

"Our study supports the view that being empathic is heavily reliant on having an awareness of bodily sensations and being able to express emotion in actions such as gesture and facial [expression](#). Being empathic really is about being "touchy-feely."

Provided by University of Aberdeen

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