

Study views happiness through the lens of autism

April 7 2016, by Mandi O'garretty

An Australian first study is exploring what happiness looks like through the lens of autism.

Wellbeing and [autism](#) researchers in Deakin University's School of Psychology have come together to investigate how the happiness of Australians with autism compares with the [general population](#).

Professor Nicole Rinehart, head of the Deakin Child Study Centre, said this study would fill a gap in our understanding of the experiences of people with [autism spectrum disorder](#) (ASD).

"It is surprising that the happiness of people with autism has not been studied before in Australia," Professor Rinehart said.

"This could reflect the developmental stage we are at with [autism research](#), with the last two decades focussing on understanding and developing positive, early solutions for the difficulties faced by those with ASD.

"While these studies continue to be important, it is time to also pay attention to the overall wellbeing of people with ASD so that we can address any support and resources that are missing."

The study will focus on [adolescents](#) (aged 13 to 18 years) with ASD and the things that they consider important to their wellbeing, such as relationships, health and safety.

"Previous research has shown that 13 year olds have the highest levels of happiness while 15 and 16 year olds have the lowest levels, with happiness returning to 'normal' at around 18/19 years," said Professor Bob Cummins, the head of the Australian Centre of Quality of Life at Deakin University who has been researching happiness for more than 20 years.

"The dip in happiness in the mid-teens suggests that this would be an optimal time to provide support to maintain wellbeing. While this is the case for the general population, we do not yet know if the developmental trajectory of happiness is the same for adolescents with autism."

An important feature of the study is hearing directly from the adolescents as to their levels of happiness.

"It is human nature to view other people as being worse off than ourselves, so when it comes to people with a disability or autism they tend to be judged as being unhappy. Yet when people with a disability are asked directly, they report similar levels of happiness to the general Australian population," Professor Cummins explained.

"The limited research there is on autism and happiness reports that parents view their children with ASD as less happy than typically developing children. Therefore, the only way to get a true picture of the [happiness](#) of adolescents with autism is to ask them."

Provided by Deakin University

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