

Social communication difficulties are linked to increased risk of self-harm and suicidal behavior

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Children who have difficulties with social communication have a higher risk of self-harm with suicidal intent by the age of 16 years compared to those without, reports a new study published in the May 2018 issue of the *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (JAACAP)*. The study was designed to understand whether characteristics of Autism Spectrum Disorders in childhood are linked with suicidal thoughts, plans and self-harm at 16 years.

Children with [autism spectrum disorders](#) often have difficulties in social [communication](#) and recent research suggests that suicidality is under-recognized in this population. However, until now, community-based studies on [suicidal thoughts](#) and behaviors among [children](#) with symptoms of Autism have been limited. Factors that could explain the risk of suicide in this population, such as depression, have also not been studied.

Researchers analysed data on 5,031 adolescents from the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children (ALSPAC), to assess whether there were any associations between Autism-like traits (social communication, pragmatic language, sociability, repetitive behavior) and the risk of suicidal self-harm, and suicidal thoughts and plans by the age of 16 years. Depression in early adolescence at 12 years of age was considered as a possible explanatory mechanism.

"Our study suggests that children who have difficulties with social communication are at higher risk for suicidal ideation and behavior in late adolescence," said Dr. Iryna Culpin, Senior Research Associate in the Bristol Medical School (PHS). "Depressive symptoms in early adolescence partially explain this association.

The researchers found that children with difficulties in social communication had a higher risk of suicidal self-harm, suicidal thoughts and suicide plans by the age of 16 years as compared to those without such difficulties. There was no evidence for an association between a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorders and suicidal behaviors, but the sample was not large enough to definitively rule out such an association.

The team found that approximately a third of the association between social communication difficulties and suicidal [self-harm](#) was explained by depression in early adolescence.

"Future studies should focus on identifying other changeable mechanisms to develop preventative interventions for autistic people," Dr. Culpin concluded.

More information: Iryna Culpin et al. Autistic Traits and Suicidal Thoughts, Plans, and Self-Harm in Late Adolescence: Population-Based Cohort Study, *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* (2018). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jaac.2018.01.023](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaac.2018.01.023)

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