

Study helps children hit the right note in supporting autistic peers

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Collaborative music lessons in schools improve the attitudes of pupils towards their peers with autism, a new study in the journal *Autism* reports.

Led by Anna Cook, Ph.D. student at the University of Surrey, researchers found that the interactive sessions produced findings that could potentially reduce bullying of autistic students.

The research investigated the impact of school-based music lessons on children aged nine to eleven years old, both with and without [autism](#). Split into two groups, one a combination of those with and without the condition, and the other group consisting of those without, the children received eleven weekly singing classes that were specifically designed to increase social interaction and communication skills. After the completion of the classes, children were asked about their experiences and were presented with a scenario of a child with autism being excluded by their peers.

Researchers found that children without autism who had been in music classes alongside their peers who have the condition displayed greater feelings of anger, pity and sadness and a decrease in antisocial emotions (pride, amusement and satisfaction) when presented with a scenario of a child with autism being excluded, than those who had been in music classes without any children with autism.

Researchers believe that children in the combination group showed a greater increase in positive emotions as they associated the child being excluded in the scenario with their own autistic peers. This could potentially lead to more inclusive behaviour helping to prevent children with autism becoming isolated and more vulnerable to being bullied.

It was also found that children with autism reported feeling less victimised (i.e. feelings of being picked on) with a decrease of nearly 20 per cent on a scale of victimisation after the classes were completed. This positive interaction with fellow pupils and strengthening of relationships with them could prevent outcomes associated with victimisation such as anxiety, depression and low self-esteem, the

research concluded.

Lead author Anna Cook said: "The majority of children with autism are educated in mainstream schools and often, due to a lack of understanding and compassion from their peers, experience bullying. Bullying can have a long term impact on children, and research has found that those with autism often carry the feelings of depression and anxiety into adult life.

"It is important therefore that we tackle this in a school environment and help children build stronger relationships with each other. The use of music is ideal for this purpose since it bonds [children](#) together and increases a sense of cohesion."

More information: Anna Cook et al. The impact of a school-based musical contact intervention on prosocial attitudes, emotions and behaviours: A pilot trial with autistic and neurotypical children, *Autism* (2018). [DOI: 10.1177/1362361318787793](https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361318787793)

Provided by University of Surrey

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