

Creating social access for autistic children, what does it take?

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Autistic children have indeed potential: most of their emotional abilities improve with age, concludes Postdoc researcher Boya Li in her second Ph.D. thesis on the emotional development of autistic children.

"The development of social and emotional skills is a totally different type of learning. You can't learn it from books or from your teachers in the classroom, you have to learn it in daily interactions with other people. You can imagine that if you have limited access to social interactions, it is a lot harder to learn these skills. It's very possible that when you walk into a school, you might see an [autistic child](#) sitting in the corner of the classroom, not really playing with other [children](#) or talking to teachers. Possibly, this child prefers to be alone at times, which is fine, but also this child needs friends and other social contacts, and [social learning](#). How can we achieve that, and how does this affect their social-emotional development? For this, and in collaboration with the Center for Autism, we followed autistic and non-autistic children in their pre-school years, during three years."

While Li's Ph.D. confirms the challenges and difficulties many children with autism face in the emotional domain, her research also gives hope. "Most emotional abilities that I examined improved with age in autistic children. Some abilities even grew at a faster rate than in non-autistic children. I am really excited about this outcome, because now I can show that autistic children have the potential and the ability to improve. People often have a stereotypical view that autistic people cannot change, but also autistic children show a learning curve."

Stereotypical view of autism

Li herself is also not unfamiliar with the stereotypical view on autism. When she started her Ph.D., she held a 'medical view' of autism, but her view has changed drastically by the end of the project. "When I look back at the chapters of my thesis, I feel a little ashamed of two chapters when detecting traces of this medical thinking, as if autism is a problem that should be cured. Just as a lot of researchers in this field, before I saw autistic children as children with deficits and impairments. My original goal for my Ph.D. project was therefore to detect these

problems so my findings could help professionals and educators to find a intervention that could help them. But this is not how I look at the issue now."

"Before I focused on how autistic children recognized facial emotions of non-autistic people and how they reacted in empathy provoking situations compared to a non-autistic person. All behavioral outcomes of autistic children were evaluated based on the standards established by non-autistic people. That is like using Dutch standard to evaluate behaviors of a Chinese child, or vice versa. This clearly doesn't work. Maybe autistic children have indeed difficulties in recognizing other non-[autistic people](#)'s emotions or reacting in a non-autistic way, but we never thought of the other side of the story.

NWO Schoolyard Project: The other side of the story

Li brings her vision into practice with the [Bold Cities/ NWO schoolyard project](#) that she recently joined. This project looks at the development of children with autism from a new perspective. "I love this [project](#) because it is a beautiful extension of my Ph.D. research. I want to look at the other side of the story, so not focusing on how autistic children should improve, but on how the other side, the environment of the child, could be improved. For example, we want to see whether there are barriers in the social environment that hinder autistic children from participating, like the attitude of people at school who might not understand autism."

There is room for improvement in the physical environment of autistic children as well. "We know that autistic children have a different sensory experience. As you know most social interactions take place during breaks when children all rush to the corridor or to the playground. However, that time can be very arousing for [autistic children](#). Instead of chatting and laughing with peers, they may experience anxiety or stress that makes them unwilling to participate. So with the Bold Cities/ NWO

Schoolyard Project we want to improve situations like this. As cliché as it sounds, children are the future so we should do our utmost best to facilitate and support them, and to provide all children, with and without [autism](#), the optimal learning environment."

Provided by Leiden University

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