

# Autistic children exhibit aggression more frequently, study shows

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At least half of all autistic children experience some form of aggression, such as hitting, kicking or name-calling, while their parents are tasked with helping them cope and integrate socially. Yet the prevalence and

characterization of aggressive behaviors across autistic development are poorly understood.

To address this [knowledge gap](#), researchers in the Family and Community Intervention Lab at the University of Arkansas compared autistic children to non-autistic children on different types of aggressive behaviors over three critical developmental periods and found that parents of autistic children reported more frequent [aggression](#) at greater intensities than non-autistic children.

"Aggression represents a pervasive and serious problem faced by autistic youths and their families," said Lauren Quetsch, assistant professor of psychology and lead author of "Understanding aggression in autism across childhood: Comparisons with a non-autistic sample."

"While our knowledge about the unique needs of autistic children has grown exponentially over the last several decades, we still have a long way to go," she said. "And understanding the role aggression plays in autistic youths' lives can help us to better address our gaps in care."

Between December 2020 and March 2021, Quetsch and her colleagues gathered quantitative and qualitative data on 450 autistic and 432 non-autistic children. The data were broken down into three age-matched groups—younger than six, six to 12 and 13 to 17. The children were compared on multiple caregiver-report measures of aggressive and disruptive behavior across these key developmental periods.

The researchers' analysis of the data revealed higher levels of verbal aggression and disruptive behavioral intensity for autistic children across all three stages of development. Autistic children younger than six had more significant levels of physical aggression than their non-autistic peers. However, these levels became equal to non-autistic peers as the children aged.

In the [qualitative study](#), non-autistic children more frequently expressed anger in a controlled manner, according to parents, whereas [autistic children](#) were more apt to quickly lose their temper.

"We surmise that this can be attributed to several factors," Quetsch said. "Frustration from regularly being misunderstood, challenges with recognizing emotions in others or expressing their own emotions to others, sensory overstimulation, and even co-occurring health challenges, such as physical discomfort from gastrointestinal issues and exhaustion due to irregular sleeping patterns, all likely contribute to aggression."

Quetsch's co-authors on the study were Cynthia Brown, assistant professor of psychology at Pacific University; Harlee Onovbiona and Rebecca Bradley, doctoral students in [clinical psychology](#) in Quetsch's lab at the U of A; Lindsey Aloia, associate professor of communication at the U of A; and Stephen Kanne, clinical pediatric neuropsychologist at Weill Cornell Medicine.

The researchers' study was published April 9 in *Autism Research*.

**More information:** Lauren B. Quetsch et al, Understanding aggression in autism across childhood: Comparisons with a non-autistic sample, *Autism Research* (2023). [DOI: 10.1002/aur.2930](https://doi.org/10.1002/aur.2930)

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