

Report by:

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Attending the 2009 International Meeting for Autism Research (IMFAR) was a great opportunity to gain a better understanding of the vast range of international research related to developmental disabilities and Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) being conducted. Of particular interest to me was a series of oral presentations discussing the emotional and social skills training and intervention in individuals with an ASD. In particular, Dr. David Williams' presentation on "What Is Wrong with Emotion Processing in Autism?" examined the ability of individuals with and without autism to recognize the emotions of others as well as to report their own previous experiences of these emotions. Participant's awareness of three different types of emotions was examined: 1) simple (e.g., happiness, sadness, fear); 2) complex (e.g., disappointment, surprise, disgust); and 3) social/self-conscious (e.g., pride, embarrassment, guilt).

Twenty-one individuals with an ASD and 21 age and ability-matched developmentally delayed participants took part in the present study. Participants watched nine different five-second video clips, with an actor expressing a different emotion in each. After each movie clip, participants were asked what emotion they thought the actor was expressing. For the second part of the study, participants were asked to

first define each of the nine emotions and then to describe a time in which they had experienced these emotions. These descriptions were then rated on a scale of 0 to 2 according to the appropriateness of the emotion in each experience.

Results indicated that both groups had more difficulty accurately identifying social/self-conscious emotions, compared to simple or complex emotions. Additionally, in the ASD group the ability to report experiences of these social emotions was significantly related to their ability to accurately recognize social emotions in others. Lastly, groups did not differ in either their ability to recognize or describe all three types of emotions.

Williams and Happé (2009) concluded that the nature and severity of individuals with autism's emotion processing deficits may not be as pronounced as previous research has indicated. Specifically, children with autism may have developed coping strategies which allow them to accurately process and identify other's emotion in experimental settings.

Overall, this oral presentation reveals that although individual's with an ASD may have difficulty processing social emotions, they are able to accurately identify and

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describe simple and complex emotions. Furthermore, individuals' with autism are able to learn strategies that will aid in enhancing their social-emotional skills. These presentations, as well as all the

others at IMFAR, provided me with invaluable knowledge and I would like to thank Autism Ontario for enabling me to attend and I look forward to next year.