

JUST SIX
QUESTIONS

RESEARCH
SUMMARY



Thriving in Youth with Autism Spectrum Disorder and Intellectual Disability

Key Details

KEY WORDS

Autism Spectrum Disorder, Intellectual disability, Special Olympics, Thriving, Mental Health, Positive Psychology, Positive Outcomes

POPULATION GROUP

Youth with disabilities or special needs

STEPPING UP THEMES

Health and Wellness; Strong, Supportive Friends and Families

RESEARCH ORIGIN

Ontario, Canada

SOURCE

Academic

1. What is the research about?

Most research on youth with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and Intellectual Disabilities (ID) has focused on addressing problems and challenges associated with these conditions. Positive psychology and positive youth development frames shift the conversation toward building on assets and strengths. The idea of ‘thriving’ refers to the achievement of a positive state that is built through the positive interaction of internal and external assets. Thriving is positively related to school, extra-curricular and parental engagement, and negatively related to anti-social behaviours.

This research aims to identify interventions that support ‘thriving’ for youth with ASD and ID. Rather than focusing on deficits in these individuals, this research explored the individual life skills related to ‘thriving’ in relation to contextual factors such as the home, school and community.

2. Where did the research take place?

This research took place in Ontario, Canada.

3. Who is this research about?

This research is about youth between the ages of 11-22 years who were clinically diagnosed with ID. One-third of the youth in this study were also diagnosed with ASD. These youth were participants in a Special Olympics program in Ontario, Canada.

4. How was the research done?

Families and caregivers of youth with ASD or ID between the ages of 11-22 years were contacted and invited to participate in an online or paper-pencil survey about their experiences with the Special Olympics program.

Different aspects of individual skills related to ‘thriving,’ such as adaptive behavior, socio-communicative ability, functional cognitive abilities, and youth involvement in home, school, community environments were measured using rating scales. Thriving was specifically measured using a parent report scale that looked at the 6 C’s of positive youth development: Competence, Confidence, Compassion, Character, Connection and Contribution.

“Research has largely focused on problem behaviors and the remediation of negative outcomes, and we know far less about these youths’ strengths or how to promote positive outcomes, such as happiness, satisfaction, or resilience.”

5. What are the key findings?

The key findings of the study were:

1. Youth with both ASD and ID have similar functional competencies as youth with ID alone.
2. Youth with both ASD and ID need more supports than youth with ID alone to enhance their social and communication skills, and to increase their participation in home and school activities.
3. Overall, youth with both ASD and ID were reported to have significantly less overall thriving than youth with ID alone.

6. Why does this research matter for youth work?

In order to help youth with ID and ASD, support systems need to be put in place not only for these youth, but also for their caregivers and families. Interventions are needed to encourage and strengthen the environmental influences that surround these youth.

Social inclusion practices and positive remediation measures that promote acceptance and integration of youth with ASD and ID into the mainstream are important for their wellbeing. Youth workers can create educational and awareness programs for young people who form the peer network of youth with ASD and ID to help them be more accepting and encouraging towards their social inclusion.

Educational and support programs for families and caregivers could enhance awareness about the emotional, psychological, and behavioral challenges and potential supports for youth diagnosed with ASD and ID. These programs could also help families and caregivers cope with the stress and emotional and physical strain that often result from caring for youth with ASD and ID.



Weiss, J. A., & Riosa, P. B. (2015). Thriving in youth with Autism Spectrum Disorder and intellectual disability. *Journal of autism and developmental disorders*, 45(8), 2474-2486.

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