Adults with Autism: A Systematic Review of Community Participation
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Abstract
A systematic review of the literature was conducted to investigate what is currently known about community participation, social functioning, support, independence, and inclusion for adults with autism spectrum disorders (ASD). Twelve studies were identified, evaluated, for strength of evidence and organized into topical themes. These studies discussed community participation from the perspectives of support, social functioning, and quality of life (QoL).

Background
The symptom profile in autism spectrum disorders (ASD) changes across the lifespan, with most individuals showing modest to significant improvements across core and associated symptom areas. However, deficits in language, communication, and social interaction skills generally linger and can have significant effects on adult outcomes (Broida, Gillhary, & Gillberg, 2007).

Even high functioning individuals with ASD often seem to “function well below the potential implied by their normal range intelligence” (Marriage, Wolverson, & Marriage, 2009, p. 320).

• Patterns of unemployment or underemployment, limited friendships and romantic relationships, and relatively low levels of independence have been seen across outcome studies (e.g., Farley et al., 2009; Hovell, Gudza, Hutton, & Rutter, 2004; Marriage, Wolverson, & Marriage, 2009).

Adults with ASD tend to show lower levels of community participation:
• Participation in social and recreational activities is related to individual characteristics (e.g., lower levels of impairment in social skills, greater independence) and environmental characteristics (e.g., family support; e.g., Liptak, Kennedy, & Doss, 2011; Donnellen, Krauskopf, & Seidler, 2006).

The purpose of this review was to identify levels of independence in social functioning and community participation for adults with ASD and to identify supports facilitating improved participation and social functioning that are currently effective or may be shown to be effective in the future.

Search Strategy and Analysis
• A comprehensive search of peer-reviewed journals using electronic databases (PsychINFO, PsycARTICLES, PubMed, and ERIC) was completed using the following search terms: adult and/or adult, ASD, Asperger OR pervasive developmental disorder-nofinal. In combination with “social,” “formal,” “informal,” OR friend AND independence OR support,” and excluding articles that included the terms “empidy” OR “vocal.” In the title and were published after 1996.

• The identified studies were appraised for quality and analyzed for typical themes revealing two main constructs: quality of life (QoL), and social functioning.

Participants
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Number of Studies Reporting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender: Male:Female:Female</td>
<td>50:44:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age: Overall: 17-19: Average: 19.43:52</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diagnosis: Autism: PDD-NOS: ADHD</td>
<td>25:26:18</td>
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Important Findings:

Quality of Life

• Young adults with ASD appeared to have QoL that was lower than their normative (NT) peers, with particular impact deriving from deficits related to the social domain. Unmet basic formal support needs were related to poorer QoL. Personalized informal social support emerged as a highly important predictor of QoL.

• Intervention efforts should take a holistic approach, using person-centered planning processes and assessment of need and related need and existing environmental supports (Jenness-Cousins et al., 2006; Renty and Rovers, 2006).

Social Functioning

• For adults with ASD, informal social supports (e.g., family, friends, neighbors) and the ability of adults with ASD to work together to generate the complex, abstract, and flexible solutions that can help enhance social functioning should be explored.

Conclusions

Participation in social and recreational activities in the community can help an individual build communication skills, form friendships and other relationships, and establish natural support networks. Social skills deficits are related to poorer than expected functioning across a variety of areas for adults with ASD, and provision of supports for community participation and social skills instruction into adulthood should be more comprehensive. As Hovell and Yolles (1999) discuss, running social skills groups and informal support groups is neither expensive nor very time-consuming and could make a significant difference for adults with ASD. Adults with ASD can benefit from interventions targeting skill development at the individual level, development of environmental supports, formal social skills instruction, and informal support groups, as well as community-level interventions designed to increase knowledge about autism and acceptance and understanding of individuals with disabilities. Greater attention to tailoring generalization of social skills across settings should be an area of focus for the future.