Social Functioning in Individuals with a History of Autism Spectrum Disorders Who Achieved Optimal Outcomes

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Autism spectrum disorders (ASDs) were once considered lifelong disorders, but recent findings indicate that some children with ASDs no longer meet diagnostic criteria for any ASD and reach normal cognitive function. The current study examined social functioning in 24 of these individuals (ages 8-21), called ‘optimal outcome’ (OO), who did not differ on age, sex, and nonverbal IQ to 29 individuals with high-functioning autism (HFA) and 26 typically developing (TD) individuals. The groups were compared on a measure of other psychiatric disorders that have symptoms which may result in social difficulties and on a measure of overall likability. Results indicated that the HFA group scored worse than the OO and TD groups on domains of withdrawal/depression, immaturity, attention problems, and self-control problems. The OO group, in turn, displayed more difficulties with immaturity, attention problems, and self-control problems than the TD group. However, the OO group was rated by peers to be at least as likable as the TD participants, and were even rated as friendlier, warmer, and more approachable. The HFA group, on the other hand, was rated by peers to be less likable in all aspects than the OO and TD participants. These data suggest that OO individuals have no readily observable social skill deficits, at least when interacting with a trained adult. However, the presence of more difficulties with immaturity, attention problems, and self-control problems in the OO adolescents indicate that they are exhibiting mild social difficulties which are more consistent with those seen in attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) than in autism spectrum disorders (ASDs).