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Determining Emotional Perceptions of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Experienced vs. Observed Scenarios

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As children get older, developmental expectations are that they acquire more self- regulation, responsibility, insight, and independence with tasks of daily living, yet children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) clearly lag behind their unaffected counterparts on indices of executive functioning.[1] In fact, recent work demonstrates that, over time, the gap between age *expectations* for such tasks and the abilities of children with ASD to *perform* them actually widens.[2] That individuals with ASD are not maintaining the pace of their peers is concerning, especially as current efforts increasingly focus on transitioning individuals with ASD into more inclusive settings where they are likely to face new social challenges and receive less supervision/direction.

Acquisition of daily-living and social-navigation skills requires that individuals attend to a number of cues and remember relevant information. While parents of some children with ASD describe them as having particularly outstanding memory skills, their memories can be “selective” for details of events that happened well in the past or for factual information related to a special interest. In other words, this skill may be used less *functionally*, and how salient versus trivial information gets filtered is not clear. Emotionally laden experiences tend to be remembered—whether accurately or not—with perceived clarity and may be retained for a longer period of time compared to neutral, everyday experiences.[3] Yet knowledge of how such events influence memory skills of individuals with ASD is complicated by the fact that they (a) have difficulty recognizing and reporting on their own emotions[4] and (b) may misinterpret others' social overtures. For example, Van Roekel and colleagues[5] demonstrated that adolescents with ASD were just as able as typically developing controls to perceive and report accurately on bullying behaviors when they were in the bystander role; however, the more that they were bullied themselves, the more they misinterpreted *non*-bullying situations as bullying. Recent findings, though, suggest that the reverse occurs more often—that children with ASD deny being bullied when parents and teachers endorse its occurrence.[6]

Parents of children with ASD undoubtedly want to keep their children safe, so teaching them how to distinguish "cruel" from "friendly" (e.g., a peer tells a joke or uses sarcasm) and "dangerous" from "acceptable" (e.g., a person in line at the grocery store says hello) can be particularly challenging, especially when it is not clear whether affected children experience the same types of emotional arousal as do others in similar situations (e.g., when they are being teased or when a stranger makes inappropriate advances). Understanding more about memory acquisition, recognition, and recall in individuals with ASD and how their

emotional states factor into this cognitive processing is key to advancing interventions that target adaptive-functioning skills. As the authors point out, this is particularly relevant as larger numbers of individuals with ASD transition into adolescence and adulthood, acquire more autonomy, and have increased and varied social interactions.

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