

Describing Outcomes in Autistic Young Adults One Year After High School Graduation

Publication citation: Orsmond, G. I., Krishnan, S. G., Munsell, E. G. S., Cohn, E. S., & Coster, W. J. (2024). Describing Outcomes in Autistic Young Adults One Year After High School Graduation. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-023-06152-x>

The goal of the study

We wanted to describe the outcomes of autistic young adults in the year after they graduated high school. By understanding autistic young adults' experiences as they move out of high school, we can look into areas we should focus on to prepare students for life as adults.

Who participated in the study?

36 autistic young adults and their parents. All young adults had recently graduated with a regular high school diploma.

Why was the research done?

In most research, outcomes in adulthood have been measured by observable actions, like whether someone is employed, living alone without support, or has many friends. These outcomes, however, might not show the experiences or preferences of autistic young adults.

We developed a new way to describe outcomes of young adulthood based on the experiences and preferences of autistic people and the changing societal expectations for young adults in general. For example, many young adults continue to live with their family, so it might not make sense to measure whether autistic young adults are living alone. We measured outcomes related to productivity, social well-being, and autonomy in one's living situation, and included:

- **Objective** observable actions that are relevant to young adults.
- **Subjective** outcomes that ask how satisfied young adults are in different areas in their transition to adulthood.

Study methods

Young adults and their parents completed online surveys asking questions about different areas of young adults' lives. We used the responses to these questions to create our measure of young adult outcomes.

We used the data from the young adult when it was available. If the young adult's data was unavailable, we used parents' responses to similar questions.



How did we measure outcomes?

We measured outcomes in three places of young adult life: **productivity, social well-being, and autonomy in living situation**. For each area, we made an objective outcome that could be seen, along with a subjective outcome about how satisfied the young adult was in that area of becoming an adult.

Overall, we measured three observable outcomes and three subjective outcomes. For each participant, we counted the total number of positive outcomes (out of 6). These six measures are defined on the next page.



6 Outcome Measures & Definitions

Objective Goal

Subjective Satisfaction



Productivity

Positive productivity:

Engaged in at least one of the following productive roles: college, paid employment, post-secondary transition programs, or an internship

Limited productivity:

Not engaged in a productive role

Positive productivity satisfaction:

Somewhat satisfied or very satisfied with work and/or school

Limited productivity satisfaction:

Not at all satisfied with work and/or school



Social Well-Being

Positive social well-being:

Contact with friends at least 3 times per month

Limited social well-being:

Contact friends less than 3 times per month

Positive social satisfaction:

Somewhat satisfied or very satisfied with social life

Limited social satisfaction:

Not at all satisfied with social life



Autonomy in Living Situation

Positive Autonomy:

Autonomy in at least 4 out of 8 areas of autonomy in their living situation (e.g., I can come and go whenever I want throughout the day)

Limited Autonomy:

Autonomy in 3 or fewer areas

Positive Autonomy:

Living situation is working out very well or moderately well

Limited Autonomy:

Living situation is not working out well

What did we find?



75% of our participants reported positive outcomes across at least five out of six areas.

>90%

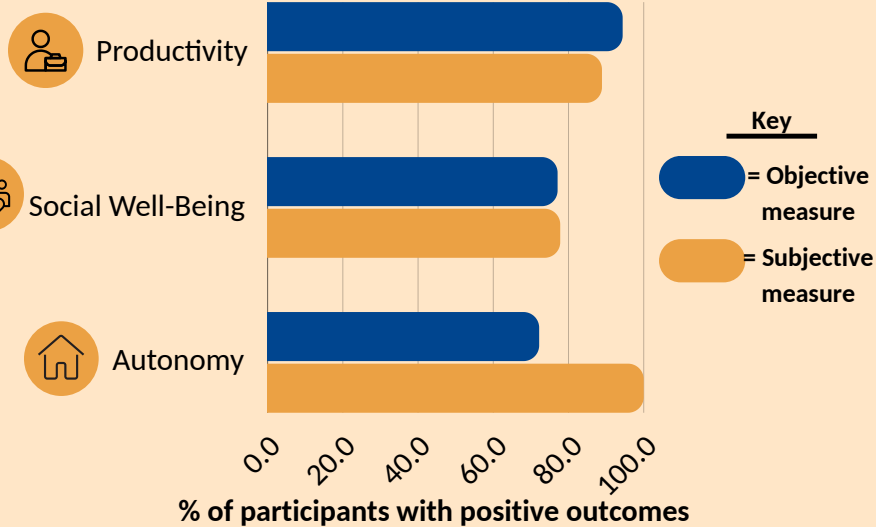
of participants were engaged in work or college, and most felt satisfied with what they were doing.

>75%

of participants had contact with close friends at least 3 times a month and felt satisfied with their social lives.

>70%

of participants reported they had considerable autonomy in their living situation. All participants were satisfied with their living situation.



What does this mean?

We found that many autistic young adults in our study experienced positive outcomes when moving into adulthood. This might be because the new outcomes we chose are updated to reflect the experiences of young adulthood better. For example:

- Instead of focusing only on whether young adults were employed or not, we included other options like going to college.
- We chose to measure the number of interactions with friends instead of the number of friends, which showed that autistic young people were satisfied with how often they chose to be in contact with friends no matter how many they had.
- Since young adults one year out of high school often live at home or college, we focused on how much autonomy young adults had instead of focusing on if they lived away from home independently.

We can support autistic young adults as they take steps to enter adulthood if we better understand what choices they are making and how satisfied they are with their productivity, autonomy, and social well-being.