

CAPHRI School for Public Health and Primary Care

**Riding a tram, visiting a library and serving at the fish market: an environment – focused view on participation of adolescents with autism spectrum disorder in Zurich**

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**Introduction**

Participation of adolescents with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) hardly occurs in settings out of school and home<sup>1,2</sup>, which includes public areas, leisure places<sup>3</sup>, sport events or places of friends or extended family<sup>4</sup>. In a developmental stage, where other adolescents experience peers, community and own strengths and preferences, these adolescents face challenges because of their vulnerabilities and environments.

**Objective**

To get in-depth insight how and why adolescents with ASD perceive environment in the actual moments of participation as facilitators or barriers or tension<sup>5</sup>, the following research questions were formulated:

*How and why do adolescents with ASD experience facilitators, barriers or tension in their environments during their participation?*

**Participants and Methods**

Six adolescents with ASD (age 15-21), all diagnosed with ASD according to ICD-10 standards, participated in this single-case-study<sup>6</sup> design located in Zurich (Switzerland). All could participate at least in one activity outside of home and school without being accompanied.

Data were collected by a combination of three methods:

- documentation of the socio-political context
- photo-elicitation
- in-depth interviews

Data was analysed using a 7-step iterative analysis.

**References**

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<sup>2</sup> Kuo M., Orsmond G., Cohn E. et al. (2011) Friendship characteristics and activity patterns of adolescents with an autism spectrum disorder. *Autism: the international journal of research and practice* 17(4): 481-500.  
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<sup>6</sup> Yin R.K. (2014) *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*. 5.ed. London: SAGE Publications Inc.  
<sup>7</sup> Imms, C., Granlund, M., Wilson, P., Steenbergen, B., Rosenbaum, P. & Gordon, A. (2017). Participation, both a means and an end: a conceptual analysis of processes and outcomes in childhood disability. *Developmental Medicine and Child Neurology*, 59(1), 16-25.

Using public bathrooms



**Adolescents attend, when their environment provides**

- company
- knowledge
- a nudging drive
- positive vibes
- agent to the physical environment

«Accompany me»

«Speak to me and ask me»

**Adolescents engage, when they**

- are approached
- become group members
- receive positive feedback

Attending a gym



Travelling with a tram



**Results**

The six male adolescents with ASD indicated they participated in a variety of activities outside of home and school in a regular and consistent manner. Their overall favorite activity was the use of public transport. All participants perceived participation as a social act.

The preliminary findings showed two consecutive patterns<sup>7</sup> that were essential to support participation of adolescents with ASD.

(1) Environmental based pre-requisites to overcome inhibitions and withdraw and start and thus attend participation. The environment needed to provide company, a nudging drive and the ensurance of savviness. The presence of positive vibes and a design of the environment they could control was also central.

(2) Strategies of the social environment to support reciprocity and social interchange and thus involvement in participation. Being approached, becoming a group member and receiving positive feedback and smooth guidance were essential strategies we found.

Overall, social encounters that were combined with engaging in participation were strenuous for adolescents with ASD. They struggled to understand the social processes that occurred during participation.

**Conclusion**

The influence of trusted persons for the participation of adolescents with ASD is highlighted, combined with the need to extend the support network for these adolescents to other individuals, services and society in general so that their participation in activities can be encouraged

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