

Devon Bacso

Northern Arizona University/ArizonaLEND

Introduction

Within Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), there is an overrepresentation of gender-dysphoria (George & Stokes, 2017), but very little research has been done on the intersection of transgender identities and ASD. Both populations have specific challenges to acceptance and functioning within the general population. The particular needs of children who are both transgender and diagnosed with ASD has not been explored, leaving this population at risk. This research proposal aims to shed light on how social transitioning impacts transgender children with ASD.

Aims

Aim 1: Provide direct support for social transitioning to transgender children with autism, with the support of their families.

Aim 2: Track symptoms of autism in three areas (social skills, communication abilities, and rates of repetitive behaviors) for these children before, during, and after transition using quantitative (survey measures of parents and child) and qualitative (interviews with parents and child) measures.

Aim 3: Determine if social transition has an impact on symptoms of autism for transgender children with ASD through an analysis of the collected data.

Proposed Research Question

Does social transition reduce symptoms of ASD among transgender children with autism?

Approach

Population: transgender children with ASD, ages 18 and younger

- Found through support groups and snowball sampling
- Seek five children who can remain in the study for a three-year-period

Parents supported in helping their child transition socially

- Social transition: changing one's appearance, using correct terminology, and/or using the appropriate facilities and engaging in desired activities
- Support: providing family and individual child therapy, reference materials about transgender children and transitioning, and virtual or in-person group support meetings, as well as the parental approval that is a prerequisite to participation

Track social skills, communication abilities, and rates of repetitive behaviors

- Parents will complete the Autism Spectrum Rating Scale (ASRS) before social transition and will continue completing the ASRS at six-month intervals
 - The results of the rating scale will provide information on where the child places in domains of social/communication, socialization, and stereotypy
 - Chosen for its ability to quantify symptoms of autism, its ease of completion, and its use by clinicians to provide information on children's symptoms and how they respond to interventions
- Expanded with qualitative information from parent and children interviews

Quasi-experimental design

- Unethical to bar children from social transition
- Children whose families were already planning on allowing for social transition will be selected and supported in this choice
- Results will be compared to existing literature about the progression of ASD over time, to see if allowing for social transition has any impact on typical rates of autism symptoms.

Conclusion

Transgender youth face increased rates of mental illness and mental health challenges when compared to their cisgender peers; these mental health difficulties were reduced when transgender youth were allowed to socially transition (Olson, 2016; Olson, Durwood, DeMeules, & McLaughlin, 2016; Russo, 2015).

Could social transition therefore also alleviate symptoms of ASD in children who are both transgender and who have a diagnosis of ASD?

This study would:

- Expand the limited available research about transgender youth with ASD
- Shed light on how social transitioning impacts transgender youth with ASD
- Determine how to best serve this population

References

DeMeules, M., Durwood, L., Olson, K. R., & McLaughlin, K. A. (2016). Mental health of transgender children who are supported in their identities. *Pediatrics*, 137(3), 1-8.

Ehrensaft, D. (2016). *The gender creative child: Pathways for nurturing and supporting children who live outside gender boxes*. New York, NY: The Experiment.

Malpas, J. (2011). Between pink and blue: A multi-dimensional family approach to gender-nonconforming children and their families. *Family Process*, 50(4), 453-470.

Olson, K. R. (2016). Prepubescent transgender children: What we do and do not know. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 55(3), 155-156.

Russo, F. (2016). Debate is growing about how to meet the urgent needs of transgender kids. *Scientific American Mind*, 27(1), 26-35.

Stathatos, M. E., Sulkowski, M. L., & Watson, R. J. (2016). Peer victimization and resilience among LGBT youth. *Communique*, 45(2), 1, 32-33.