

# USEFUL FOR OTHERS, USEFUL FOR YOURSELF

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**Introduction.** When an adolescent on the autism spectrum completes his educational path his opportunities to spend time with neuro-typical peers decrease terribly. The need to share experiences with other youths, could instead increase in the youth adult. However, meeting peers could be difficult for adolescents with an autism spectrum condition, in part because of the social difficulties they have, in part because of the cultural stereotypes about autism. Socializing and communicating with other people could be challenging for many people on the spectrum. There could be difficulties in reading social cues, knowing when to speak or listen during conversations, reading facial expressions, using language. All these difficulties can result in social isolation. In spite of all these difficulties many people on the spectrum do want to make friends and form relationships but find it hard. From the experiences of many families we know that after finishing high school the possibility to meet peers decrease a lot. School constitutes indeed a favored context where adolescents on the spectrum can find opportunities to interact with peers with the support of teachers and others adults who know their abilities and difficulties. Organizing ad hoc situations could be a way to facilitate adolescents on the autism spectrum to meet neuro-typical peers and vice-versa. The planning of these situations should take into consideration the needs of all participants in order to create an experience useful for everyone.

## METHOD

**Subjects.** A group of 19 students (mean age 17.8 years) participated voluntarily in the project. The students decided to join the project after a first meeting in which we shortly present the autism spectrum condition and the need of volunteers for a project dedicated to adolescents on the autism spectrum, which would take place during the summer holidays. 19 boys with a diagnosis of ASD (mean age 16.8 years) took part in the project too. All these boys received a personalized treatment focused on communication and self-sufficiency abilities in the same centre specialised in ASD. They had different levels of communication impairment but they all were able to communicate through language or images if adequately supported. These subjects were selected to take part in the project based on the kinds of recreational activities they could share with neuro-typical peers (i.e. swimming, play cards, walking, go to the cinema, go to the restaurant, play sports).

**Objectives.** The investigation centred on whether the experience could have a positive effect both for autistic and for neuro-typical participants in the project, considering this condition the basis for the development of productive and favourable relationships between neuro-typical and ASD peers.

**The "Week-long Holidays" Project.** The so-called "Week-long Holidays" are specific holidays for people with ASD since they are thought out in such a way as to respect their needs and characteristics. The Week-long Holiday is planned in order to be a pleasant and educational experience for the participants as well as an opportunity for time-off for the family. During the holiday, recreational activities and trips to the seaside, to the mountains or to cities are organised, with the constant presence of a team of facilitators expert in ASD. The project included a preliminary educational phase for volunteers and a practical phase. The educational phase for volunteers consisted in 4 training meetings each dealing with a particular aspect of ASD: 1) communication, social interaction, restricted and repetitive interests, behaviours and routines, 2) external organizational supports to address challenges with attention and executive function, 3) visual and/or written information to support verbal communication, 4) structured support for social communication.

The practical phase consisted in a week-long holiday organised by a clinical team specialised in ASD, as previously mentioned. The same team supervised the activities during the all period. Volunteers and boys on the spectrum were paired and the assembled couples remained the same for the all week.

## DATA COLLECTION

## RESULTS

### VARIABLE

### MEASURE

Frequency of adequate interventions in a 4 levels scale  
(0: never, 1: sometimes, 2: often, 3: always)

Couple  
interactions

Observation schedule  
filled out by the clinical team on the frequency of  
adequate interventions by the volunteers regarding:

- Communication
- Kind of help provided
- Ability to involve the ASD partner in the activities
- Feedback from the ASD partner

The frequency of adequate interventions results satisfactory for every couple (mean: 2)

### Answer categories and related frequencies

Usefulness  
detected by  
volunteers

Ad hoc questionnaire which investigates the positive  
effects of the experience:  
*Did you find the experience useful for you? Why?*

- Social abilities... 27%
- Expertise acquisition ..... 36%
- Emotional development ..... 30%
- Other ..... 7%

**Conclusions.** In order to increase the opportunities for adolescents on the spectrum to meet peers and to share with them important moments of their life, the planning of ad hoc situations, in which everyone, neuro-typical and autistic, could achieve personalized goals is crucial. The experience presented tested a way to realise this kind of situations. The project we designed took into consideration the needs of each participant and this contributed to make it a useful experience for everyone.

### References

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