

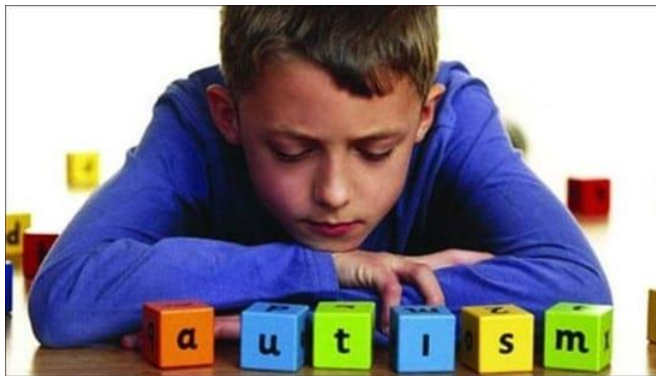
## Changing autism traits are linked to mental health conditions: Study

A long-term study sheds new insights on the connection between characteristics of autism and the mental health of children in their middle years.

A long-term study gives fresh light on the association between autistic features and middle childhood [mental health](#).

According to the study, changes in core autistic traits are associated with whether children develop additional mental health difficulties over their primary school years. The study was published in [Autism](#).

"Our findings suggest that different aspects of a child's development may affect each other over time," explained Einat Waizbard-Bartov, a doctoral researcher in developmental [psychology](#) at the UC Davis MIND Institute in Sacramento, California, USA and the lead author of the paper. "Core autism traits and mental health challenges likely interact throughout development."



**According to study, changes in core autistic traits associated with mental health difficulties in primary school years. (Twitter/curiositygrows1)**

A key finding was that a reduction in restrictive and repetitive behaviours during elementary school was linked to the emergence of mental health challenges, lending support to the idea that these behaviours may benefit autistic individuals. An increase in social-communication difficulties during this time was also linked to anxiety and other mental health challenges. Waizbard-Bartov has published previous research showing autism characteristics can change significantly from ages 3 to 11.

### The current study

The current study included 75 autistic children ages 6 to 11, including 15 girls. All were part of the MIND Institute's Autism Phenome Project, a large, long-term study aimed at identifying different subtypes of autism. Through parental interviews and questionnaires, the research team evaluated the children for mental health symptoms and restricted and repetitive behaviours, which can include seeking sensory stimulation, hand-flapping or sticking to set routines.

They tracked changes in autism characteristics using the Autism Diagnostic Observation Schedule Calibrated Severity Score. About a third of the participants had both decreasing restricted and repetitive behaviours and increased social-communication difficulties.

"We were pleased to see that our results confirmed what has been suspected by other autism researchers and clinicians as well as autistic individuals, that some forms of restricted and repetitive

behaviours can potentially help to self-soothe," said David Amaral, distinguished professor in the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, MIND Institute faculty member and senior author on the paper.

Waizbard-Bartov notes that the findings question the wisdom of therapies that try to eliminate these behaviours. "In light of this, when thinking about interventions, it might be that trying to eliminate repetitive behaviours without providing alternative self-soothing tools is not the ideal way to go," she said. The study is the first, to the authors' knowledge, to demonstrate an association between mental health challenges and increases in the severity of social-communication difficulties for autistic children.

"This occurred in children who showed decreases in core autism traits during early childhood and whose cognitive functioning was in the typical range. We don't currently understand why this happened. One possibility is that due to their relatively high cognitive ability, they became aware of their social challenges, and this may have contributed to increasing anxiety," Amaral explained. "It's definitely an area where we need more research." -[www.hindustantimes.com](http://www.hindustantimes.com), October 14, 2023

*This story has been published from a wire agency feed without modifications to the text. Only the headline has been changed.*