



Executive Director
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Peer Responses to Autism-Related Behaviors in a Postsecondary Class

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Abstract

These two studies examined college students' attitudes towards other students who display autism-related behaviors in one of their classes. Using a 2x2 balanced design, 288 (Study 1) and 1,468 (Study 2) college students reviewed vignettes that varied in two ways.

- A. Levels of required interaction with the student displaying autistic behaviors
- B. "Priming" to consider ASD as an explanation for the displayed behaviors

Results indicate that students responded more positively 1) when primed to consider ASD, and 2) when required interaction is lower.

Vignette #1

Quiet Classmate

A student who often sits near you in one of your classes is typically quiet in class, often seeming to pay more attention to their pencil than the lecture. The student never says "hi" to you, and doesn't even make eye contact when you try to initiate a conversation. [You wonder if the student is on the autism spectrum.]

Vignette #2

Group Gamer

In class, a professor randomly assigned you to work with two other students on a group project. When dividing project tasks among members of your group, one of the students in your group makes repeated reference to their favorite video game. That same student volunteers to write the introductory section of the assignment.

At your next team meeting, you discover the student wrote the introduction about video games. The student remains adamant that the introduction should focus on video games even though you and the other member of your group disagree. [You wonder if this student is on the autism spectrum.]

Participants & Procedure

Study #1: 288 Education Undergrads
Study #2: 1,468 Diverse College Students

Using a 2x2 balanced design, 288 (Study 1) and 1,468 (Study 2) college students reviewed written vignettes that varied in two ways.

- A. Levels of required interaction with the student displaying autistic behaviors [Quiet Classmate vs. Group Gamer]
- B. "Priming" to consider ASD as an explanation for the displayed behaviors [Primed to consider ASD vs. not primed]

Respondents' attitudes toward the students depicted in the vignettes were assessed using Likert-scale items adapted from Nevill & White (2011) and White et al. (2016) (e.g., "I would not mind this student in my classroom" and "I like this student.")

Results

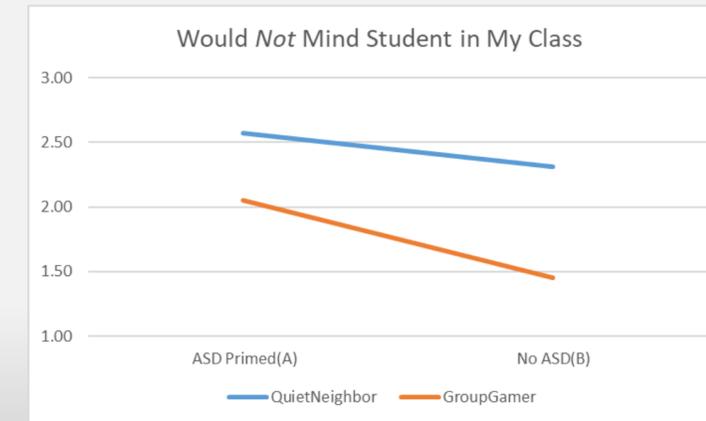
Across all six questions measuring attitudes toward their autistic peers, visual comparison of marginal means indicates the presence of main effects for both the vignettes and the priming conditions.

Participants consistently responded more positively to a student displaying autism-related characteristics in the *Quiet Neighbor* (low required interaction) scenario than in the *Group Gamer* (high required interaction) scenario.

Moreover, participants who were primed to think the behaviors were related to autism reported more positive attitudes toward the students displaying those behaviors.

Percent (%) of respondents who "agree" or "strongly agree" they would not mind student displaying autism-related behaviors in their class.

Study #1 (n=288)	Quiet Classmate	Group Gamer	Study #2 (n=1,468)	Quiet Classmate	Group Gamer
ASD "Primed"	86.8%	81.9%	ASD "Primed"	95.5%	79.9%
No Priming	83.3%	59.0%	No Priming	90.3%	46.2%



Conclusion

Classroom peers are more accepting of and friendly toward college students with autism when they 1) don't have to interact with the autistic student directly, or 2) can attribute some autism-related behaviors to a diagnosis.

Thus, students with autism may benefit from disclosure to peers if their autism-related behaviors are likely noticeable to other students, particularly if they have to work with peers on group assignments.

By the year 2020, roughly **400,000 students** with autism will be enrolled in college. But current statistics suggest **fewer than 1/2 will graduate.**

The College Autism Network is working to change that statistic through advocacy, research, and training.

**We CAN do better.
We CAN make change.
We CAN improve lives.**

TOGETHER WE CAN.

College Autism Network
https://www.CollegeAutismNetwork.org

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