

"Best Things": Parents Describe Their Children with ASD Over Time

Presenters:

Katherine Cost, Ph.D., The Hospital for Sick Children, Toronto
Anat Zaidman-Zait, Ph.D., Tel Aviv University, Israel
Pat Mirenda, Ph.D., University of British Columbia
on behalf of the Pathways in ASD Study team



pathways
in autism spectrum disorders

UBC Centre for Interdisciplinary Research and
Collaboration in Autism (CIRCA)



October 14, 2020

Land Acknowledgement

I want to begin by acknowledging that the UBC Vancouver campus is located in unceded territory of the Coast Salish Peoples, including the territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̍əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and Səlilwətaʔ/Selilwitulh (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations.

In addition, Katherine is located at the University of Toronto on land that, for thousands of years, has been the traditional land of the Huron-Wendat, the Seneca, and most recently, the Mississaugas of the Credit River. Today, Toronto is still the home to many Indigenous people from across Turtle Island and Katherine is grateful to have the opportunity to work on this land.



Agenda

- 01 | Background and Study Purpose
- 02 | What We Did
- 03 | What We Found
- 04 | Implications

Background and Study Aims



pathways
in autism spectrum disorders



Pathways in ASD, 2004-present

400+

children and their families from 5 Canadian provinces



pathways
in autism spectrum disorders

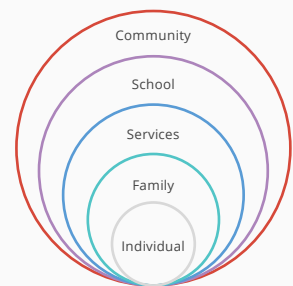
Charting the growth and development of children with ASD from diagnosis at 2-4 years of age to the end of adolescence



Developmental Perspective

Ecological Approach

By identifying the individual, family, community, and services factors that influence development, the study is generating evidence for policies and practices that are tailored to meet individual needs



pathways
in autism spectrum disorders

01 | Pathways in ASD

Positive Psychology

"For more than a century, psychology has been fascinated with the clichéd question, 'what is wrong with you, Johnny?' Since the dawn of this millennium, **positive psychology** has seriously urged psychologists to also probe into a much deeper and a loftier question, 'what are you good at, Johnny?'" (Rashid et al. 2013, p. 81).



 pathways
in autism spectrum disorders

Character Traits

- At the individual level, positive psychology is the study of **positive character traits** and how those traits allow individuals to flourish
- **Character traits** are "positive... capacities for thinking, feeling, and behaving in ways that benefit oneself and others" (Niemiec, Shogren, & Weymeyer, 2017, p. 14)
- Many studies have used the Values in Action (VIA) Classification of Strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) to identify character strengths

 pathways
in autism spectrum disorders

VIA Studies in Neurotypical Populations

- The VIA consists of 24 character traits that are subsumed under six broad categories: **Wisdom and Knowledge**, **Courage**, **Humanity**, **Justice**, **Temperance**, and **Transcendence**
- A VIA study in a sample of 117,676 neurotypical adults found that the most frequently self-endorsed traits (kindness, fairness, honesty, gratitude, and judgment) were **highly similar across 54 nations and all 50 US states** (Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2006)

 pathways
in autism spectrum disorders

Character Traits are Developmental

- Most common VIA traits in neurotypical 3 to 9-year-olds were love, kindness, creativity, and humour (Park & Peterson, 2006a)
- Most common VIA traits in children aged 10 to 13 years were humour, creativity, gratitude, and teamwork (Park & Peterson, 2006b)
- Least common traits in both age groups require some level of cognitive and social maturation
 - Open-mindedness, integrity, leadership, forgiveness, humility, appreciation of beauty and excellence, gratitude, and spirituality (Park & Peterson, 2006a, 2006b)

 pathways
in autism spectrum disorders

VIA Studies in Adults with ASD

- | | |
|--|---|
| Samson & Antonelli, 2013 | Kirchner, Ruch, & Dziobek, 2016 |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• 33 adults with ASD (no intellectual impairment) and 33 neurotypical adults, matched by sex, age, and education• Top 5 traits for both groups: open-mindedness, love of learning, curiosity, fairness, and authenticity | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• 32 pairs of adults with ASD and matched neurotypical adults• Top 5 traits:<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Open-mindedness for both groups• ASD: authenticity, love of learning, creativity, and fairness• Neurotypicals: fairness, humour, kindness, and love |

 pathways
in autism spectrum disorders

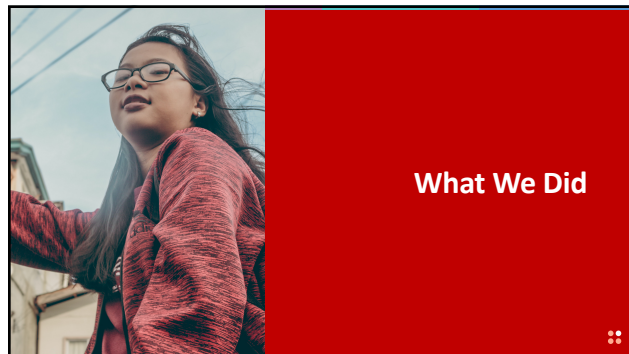
Studies in Children with ASD

- Only one to date!
- Sabapathy et al. (2017) asked parents to "Describe your child's strengths" during a multidisciplinary diagnostic assessment
 - Parental responses for 98 children diagnosed with ASD (aged 3-8 years) were reviewed retrospectively and coded independently by two raters
 - On average, parents reported **four strengths**
 - **Top 5** were loving/caring/affectionate, various academic skills (e.g., good reader, good at math), good memory, intelligent/smart, and specific interests (e.g., loves music and dancing)

 pathways
in autism spectrum disorders

Study Aims

1. To examine character traits identified by parents of children with ASD at ages 3-4 (Time 1, T1), 7-8 (Time 2, T2), and 10-11 (Time 3, T3);
2. To examine the stability and evolution of parental trait endorsement over time;
3. To identify associations between trait endorsement and autism symptom severity or behavior problems; and
4. To identify any differences related to sex assigned at birth



Parent Participants

- *Pathways* children and parents are assessed annually
 - 402 families completed assessments at Time 1, within 4 months post-ASD diagnosis at age 2-5
- At each time point, parents complete a version of the *Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL)*; Achenbach & Rescorla, 2000, 2001) that asks them to **"Please describe the best things about your child"**
- We used data from, parents who responded to this request at
 - Time 1 (T1): *M* age = 3.4 years, n = 153; 129 boys, 24 girls; and at
 - Time 2 (T2): *M* child age = 7.8 years, n = 112, 92 boys, 20 girls and/or
 - Time 3 (T3): *M* child age = 10.6 years, n = 129, 108 boys, 21 girls



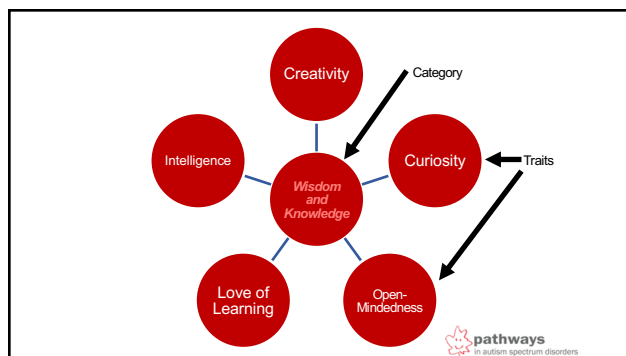
Parent Participants

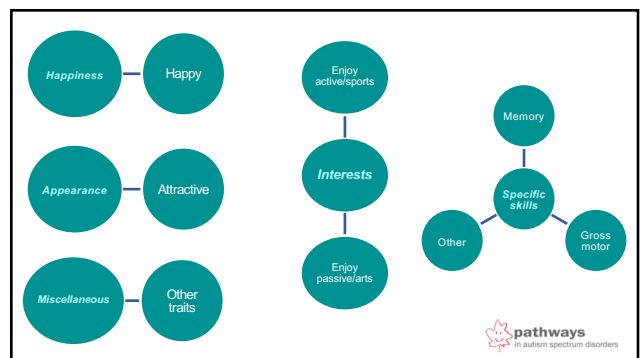
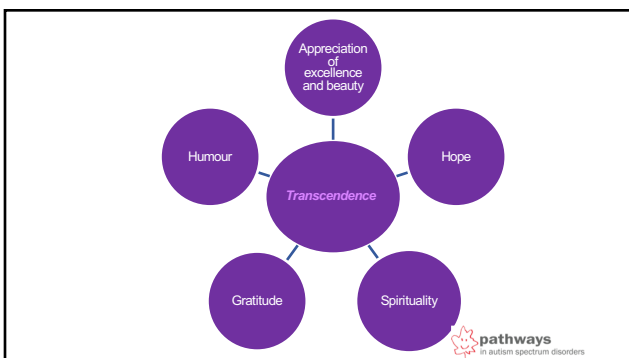
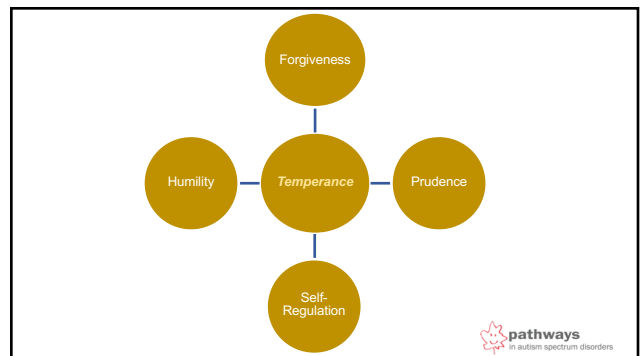
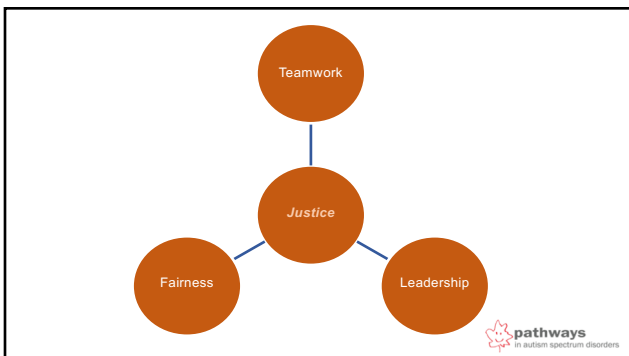
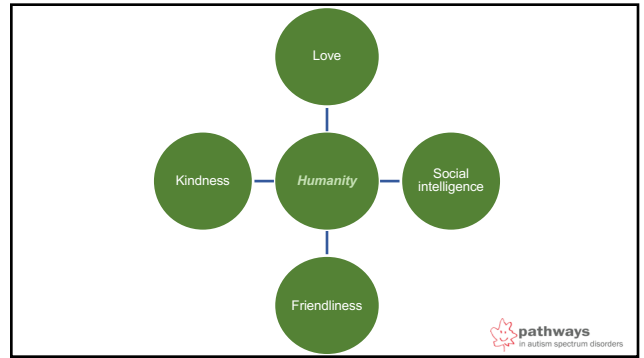
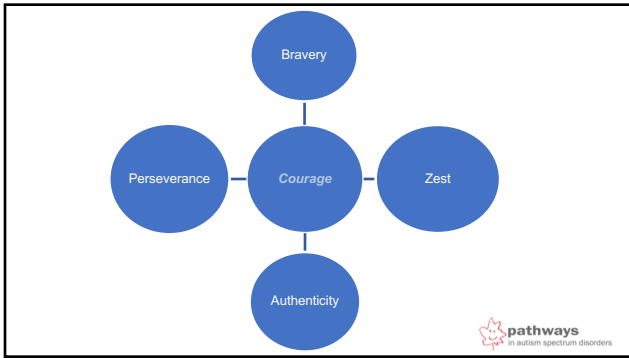
- Compared to *Pathways* parents who did not provide "best things," parents in the sample
 - Did not have children with "less severe" autism
 - Were not more depressed
 - Were at higher socio-economic risk
- So, results are likely generalizable to *Pathways* families at low socio-economic risk



Response Coding

- We used the VIA framework of 24 character traits to code parents' responses
- We added two additional traits from Park & Peterson, 2006a: attractiveness and intelligence
- We also added categories or traits that were mentioned frequently but were not in the VIA (e.g., Happiness as a category, friendliness as a Humanity trait)
- Three authors coded parents' responses independently and then compared codes, discussed disagreements, made final decisions, and reviewed codes for consistency





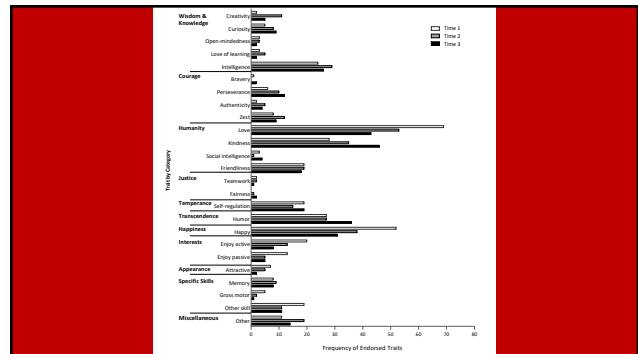
Associations

- We wanted to know if category endorsement was associated with the severity of behaviour problems and/or autism symptoms
- The CBCL includes 99 items that describe internalizing (e.g., depression, anxiety) and externalizing behaviours (e.g., aggression, self-injury)
 - Parents rate each item on a 3-point scale (0 = *not true*, 1 = *somewhat/sometimes true*, and 2 = *very/often true*; higher scores = more severe behaviour problems)
- The Autism Diagnostic Observation Schedule (ADOS) was also administered at T1, T2, and T3
 - Produces scores between 1-10 for autism symptom severity; higher scores = more severe symptoms



“Best things”

- At each time point, parents identified an average of **three positive character traits**
- The **Top 5** traits were:



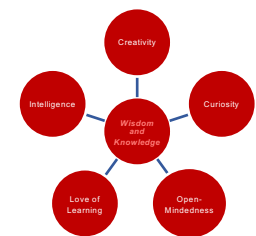
Consistency Over Time?

- Across children**, at all time-points, the largest proportion of endorsements (70.5%-78.4%) was in the **Humanity** category and the second largest proportion (31%-51.6%) was the **Happiness** category
- Within-child endorsements** for **Wisdom and Knowledge**, **Happiness**, and **Interests** categories were stable across two of three time point comparisons
 - Lack of stability suggests that traits are developmental in children with ASD, as they are in neurotypical children



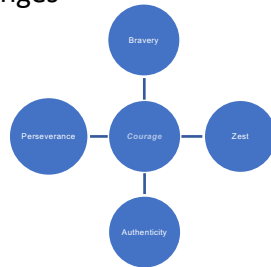
Developmental Changes

- 32% of parents endorsed traits in the **Wisdom/Knowledge** category at T1 (when children were preschoolers), while 45.5% endorsed this category at T2 (after the children had entered school)



Developmental Changes

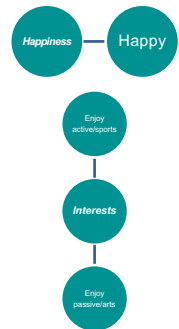
- Parents increasingly endorsed traits in the **Courage** category (especially perseverance) from T1 (15.7%) to T2 (21.4%) to T3 (24.8%)



pathways
in autism spectrum disorders

Developmental Changes

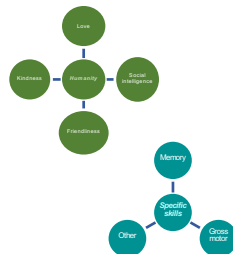
- Happiness** and **Interests** were both stable within children from T1-T2 and T1-T3 but not T2-T3
- Between ages 7/8-10/11, children may be exploring new interests and activities (e.g., taking piano or dance lessons, learning to play a new sport) and experiencing novel stressors that affect their overall happiness or their parents' perceptions of happiness



pathways
in autism spectrum disorders

Variables Associated with Category Endorsement

- At both T1 and T2, children with more externalizing and internalizing behaviours were less likely to be endorsed for **Humanity** traits
- At T2, children with more severe autism symptoms were more likely to be endorsed for **Specific Skills**

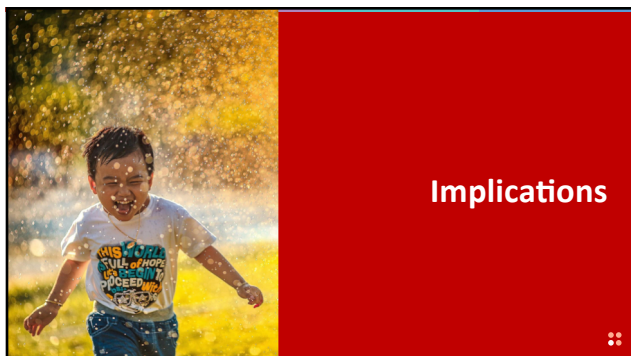


pathways
in autism spectrum disorders

Sex Assigned at Birth

- Only 24 girls in the sample (15.6%), so we examined this descriptively only
- Using a criteria of >10% difference between males and females, four categories favoured boys:
 - Wisdom and Knowledge** at T1 (34.9%_m and 16.7%_f)
 - Humanity** at T1 (82.9%_m and 54.2%_f)
 - Happiness** at T1 (54.3%_m and 37.5%_f)
 - Temperance** at T3 (18.6%_m and 4.6%_f)
- Two categories favoured girls:
 - Specific Skills** at T2 (25%_f and 11.6%_m)
 - Courage** at T3 (33.3%_f and 18.6%_m)

pathways
in autism spectrum disorders



Implications



Implications for Service Delivery

Children with ASD have **diverse strengths** that change over time (as with all children)

Our policies & services need to:



pathways
in autism spectrum disorders

Person-Centred Planning



pathways
in autism spectrum disorders

“Best things”

These findings are a reminder of the importance of looking past diagnostic labels, test scores, and behavioural challenges **to focus on individual strengths**, toward the goal of supporting people with ASD to live the lives that they define as both meaningful and fulfilling



pathways
in autism spectrum disorders

pathways
in autism spectrum disorders

Thank you to the parents and children in *Pathways* and to the many research assistants who have been involved in *Pathways* since 2004

Pathways investigators, 2020:

Ontario: Peter Szatmari, Tracy Vaillancourt, Wendy Ungar, Theresa Bennett, Eric Duku, Stelios Georgiades
Montreal: Mayada Elsabbagh
BC: Charlotte Waddell, Connor Kerns
Nova Scotia: Isabel Smith
Alberta: Lonnie Zwaigenbaum



pathways
in autism spectrum disorders

