



## Extended Research Article

# Improving outcomes for people with autism spectrum disorders by reducing mental health problems: the IAMHealth research programme including one RCT

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Published May 2025  
DOI: 10.3310/YRKP9867

## Plain language summary

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Programme Grants for Applied Research 2025; Vol. 13: No. 5  
DOI: 10.3310/YRKP9867

NIHR Journals Library [www.journalslibrary.nihr.ac.uk](http://www.journalslibrary.nihr.ac.uk)

# Plain language summary

## Background

Two-thirds of autistic people have mental health disorders. These disorders are distressing to autistic people and their families/caretakers, may limit access to education and reduce employment opportunities and community participation. Autistic people and their families prioritise research that will improve their mental health.

## Methods

We wanted to better understand how autistic people and their families recognise and seek help for mental health problems. To identify early risk factors for ongoing health problems, we followed a group of young autistic children to adolescence. To reduce distressing mental health and behavioural problems, we undertook a small pilot feasibility randomised controlled trial of a novel parent-mediated group intervention for young autistic children to see whether parents were interested and could take part in the intervention.

## Results

We discovered that autistic young adults found it difficult to distinguish between autism and mental health. They were less likely to seek help for their mental health problems. Our new measure of mental health and concerning behaviours, co-produced with autistic people and parents, shows good reliability and validity. From childhood to adolescence, mental health and behaviour problems are likely to persist rather than go away on their own. Parents' accounts indicate that many factors may affect an autistic child or teenager's mental health – both in positive and negative ways. Our novel intervention showed high rates of completion and satisfaction.

## Conclusions

Mental health and behaviour problems in autistic people are common and persist over time. Better identification and effective, targeted interventions are required to improve outcomes. These should start in early childhood. It is important to ensure autistic people and their families know about mental health problems. Mental health questionnaires that are easy for autistic people to complete could improve recognition by autistic people, parents/caretakers and professionals alike.

# Programme Grants for Applied Research

ISSN 2050-4330 (Online)

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## This article

The research reported in this issue of the journal was funded by PGfAR as award number RP-PG-1211-20016. The contractual start date was in June 2014. The draft manuscript began editorial review in October 2021 and was accepted for publication in July 2024. As the funder, the PGfAR programme agreed the research questions and study designs in advance with the investigators. The authors have been wholly responsible for all data collection, analysis and interpretation, and for writing up their work. The PGfAR editors and production house have tried to ensure the accuracy of the authors' manuscript and would like to thank the reviewers for their constructive comments on the draft document. However, they do not accept liability for damages or losses arising from material published in this article.

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