

OPINION

# Adult focus

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About 700,000 **people with autism** are expected to reach age 65 in less than 20 years, but surprisingly little is known about the disorder's effects on adults. In preparation for the coming surge, some research groups have begun to study autism in people born between the 1950s and the 1990s.

One new study focused on people who are **often overlooked in research**: 30- to 59-year-old adults who have intellectual disability with or without autism. The study, published 25 September in the *Journal of Neurodevelopmental Disorders*, found that those who have both autism and intellectual disability **act more aggressively and need more medications** than those with intellectual disability alone.

Another study, published 3 October in *Autism*, examined the relationship between **loneliness, friendships and well-being** in 108 adults with autism aged 18 to 62 years. The study found that people with autism who have a group of good friends are less likely to feel lonely, depressed and anxious than those without many close friends.

The results may not be surprising, but they could help therapists work with people who have autism. A heartening 60 percent of the participants in this survey reported having close friends.

In the first study, researchers examined a 2009 survey from the **National Core Indicators**, a multi-state program that gathers information about people with developmental disabilities. They looked at 4,551 adults with intellectual disability and 438 who have both autism and intellectual disability.

About 40 percent of those with autism and intellectual disability take medications for behavioral problems, compared with 25 percent of those with just intellectual disability, the survey found. Predictably, these individuals also cope with severe behavioral problems, such as biting

themselves or lashing out and throwing things.

A survey from the following year of 3,963 people with intellectual disability and 298 who have both autism and intellectual disability found the same trend. The autism group in this survey has about twice the number of severe behavioral problems as those with intellectual disability alone.

Interestingly, the severity of intellectual disability also seems to affect behavior, but not in adults who have both disorders.

It appears that an unknown feature of autism, but not of intellectual disability, may add to the behavioral problems in older adults with both conditions, the researchers say. It's also possible that the caregivers of adults with autism are not well-equipped to handle their charges.