OPINION

Leisure activities

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The right to spend your leisure hours any way you like is one of the joys of adulthood.

Sadly, many adults with autism never get the chance to enjoy that fundamental freedom. They have less independence than other adults do and spend more time either in **solitary pursuits**, or in activities planned for them.

A new study suggests that, in fact, these individuals benefit in many ways from choosing their own activities: they get better at decision-making and their social skills improve.

Researchers tested the effects of a year-long recreational program on 20 people with autism, aged 27 to 38 years, at the **Nuevo Horizante Association**, a residential community for people with autism in Madrid, Spain. A similar group of 20 adults on the spectrum served as controls.

Before the program began, the participants completed a battery of tests that measured their daily living skills, their ability to recognize emotions in faces, and deficits in executive functioning — higher-order abilities to solve problems and make decisions.

Over the following year, the 11 men and 9 women in the experimental group chose freely among activities ranging from swimming, hiking, bowling, playing catch and Frisbee, to crafts and

attending parties, fairs, movies and concerts. They could also visit museums, play computer games, listen to CDs or read magazines.

In essence, they were offered the chance to choose from a smorgasbord of the kinds of activities most adults take for granted, with staff members checking in regularly to see which things they liked and wanted to continue doing.

The control group, meanwhile, participated in some recreational activities such as gardening, ceramics and walking, but fewer in number and not freely chosen.

At the close of the year, mean scores for those who chose their own activities improved across all of the social measures. They scored higher on emotion-processing tasks than their own baseline scores and that of controls. They also got better at planning and at making decisions.

It's no surprise that mixing it up with peers and staff members in the context of an enjoyable activity would lead people with autism to become more sociable and communicative.

And dressing and undressing yourself is undoubtedly more fun when you are putting on a bathing suit to go swimming — but only if you like the water.

There is a lot of emphasis on the value of **early intervention** in young children with autism. As this study makes clear, adults with autism too can benefit from the kinds of activities that make life a little more pleasant for us all.