Why Can't We Be Friends?: The Effects of Disclosure and Severity on Typical Students' Attitudes Toward Peers with Autism Spectrum Disorders

Jacqueline Dowjotas, '10
Illinois Wesleyan University

Linda Kunce, Faculty Advisor
Illinois Wesleyan University

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/jwprc


This is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by Digital Commons @ IWU with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this material in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself. This material has been accepted for inclusion by faculty at Illinois Wesleyan University. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@iwu.edu. 
©Copyright is owned by the author of this document.
WHY CAN'T WE BE FRIENDS?: THE EFFECTS OF DISCLOSURE AND SEVERITY ON TYPICAL STUDENTS’ ATTITUDES TOWARD PEERS WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS

Jacqueline Dowjotas and Linda Kunce*
Psychology Department, Illinois Wesleyan University

The autism spectrum disorders (ASDs) are characterized by deficits in social interaction, communication, and restrictive and repetitive behaviors and interests. Although many children with autism desire social interaction, they tend to have a difficult time mastering conversation skills and socially appropriate behavior. In addition, they have fewer and lower quality friendships when compared to typical peers, and they often face negative stigma from their typical peers. The current study was used to investigate typical students’ attitudes toward hypothetical peers with varying degrees of ASDs. Participants (N = 61) read and responded to vignettes that depicted adolescents, in which severity of ASD symptoms and disclosure of autism were manipulated. There was a significant main effect for severity, such that as symptoms of the condition became more severe, peer attitudes decreased. There was also a significant interaction effect between severity and disclosure, suggesting that disclosure increased attitudes toward individuals with relatively moderate or severe conditions but had no apparent impact toward the individual with a mild condition. Overall, these findings suggest that middle school students are less accepting of children with more severe autism characteristics and that disclosing one’s condition is beneficial, at least for persons with moderate or severe characteristics.