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

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Poster Presentation P12

**WHY CAN'T WE BE FRIENDS?: THE EFFECTS OF DISCLOSURE AND SEVERITY
ON TYPICAL STUDENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARD PEERS WITH AUTISM
SPECTRUM DISORDERS**

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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.