

Autistic children with better motor skills more adept at socializing

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In a new study looking at toddlers and preschoolers with autism, researchers found that children with better motor skills were more adept at socializing and communicating.

Published online today in the journal *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders*, this study adds to the growing evidence of the important link between autism and motor skill deficits.

Lead author Megan MacDonald is an assistant professor in the College of Public Health and Human Sciences at Oregon State University. She is an expert on the movement skills of [children](#) with autism spectrum disorder.

Researchers tested 233 children ages 14 to 49 months diagnosed with autism.

"Even at this early age, we are already seeing [motor skills](#) mapping on to their social and communicative skills," MacDonald said. "Motor skills are embedded in everything we do, and for too long they have been studied separately from social and communication skills in children with autism."

Developing motor skills is crucial for children and can also help develop better social skills. MacDonald said in one study, 12-year-olds with autism were performing physically at the same level as a 6-year-old.

"So they do have some motor skills, and they kind of sneak through the system," she said. "But we have to wonder about the [social implications](#) of a 12-year-old who is running like a much younger child. So that quality piece is missing, and the motor skill deficit gets bigger as they age."

In MacDonald's study, children who tested higher for motor skills were also better at "daily living skills," such as talking, playing, walking, and requesting things from their parents.

"We can teach motor skills and intervene at young ages," MacDonald said. "Motor skills and autism have been separated for too long. This gives us another avenue to consider for early interventions."

MacDonald said some programs run by experts in adaptive physical education focus on both the motor skill development and communicative side. She said because [autism spectrum disorder](#) is a disability that impacts social skills so dramatically, the motor skill deficit tends to be pushed aside.

"We don't quite understand how this link works, but we know it's there," she said. "We know that those children can sit up, walk, play and run seem to also have better [communication skills](#)."

Provided by Oregon State University

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