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## A comparison of the sensory needs of autistic adults with and without intellectual disabilities: A short report

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**To cite this article:** Jill Bradshaw, Jane Pringle, Damian Milton & Julie Beadle-Brown (2023): A comparison of the sensory needs of autistic adults with and without intellectual disabilities: A short report, Journal of Intellectual & Developmental Disability, DOI: [10.3109/13668250.2023.2231696](https://doi.org/10.3109/13668250.2023.2231696)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.3109/13668250.2023.2231696>



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Published online: 20 Jul 2023.



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## A comparison of the sensory needs of autistic adults with and without intellectual disabilities: A short report

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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** Autistic people commonly report differing sensory experiences. This research aimed to find out about sensory issues and the sensory environments of autistic adults who did and did not have intellectual disabilities.

**Method:** Online questionnaires were designed to identify sensory needs. The survey was completed by 138 autistic adults who self-reported and 58 informants reporting about autistic adults who had intellectual disabilities.

**Results:** Autistic adults self-reported high numbers of sensory needs compared with informant reports of the needs of autistic adults who had intellectual disabilities.

**Interpretation:** It is possible that informants under-reported issues for autistic adults with intellectual disabilities. Some sensory needs are harder to observe and people with intellectual disabilities may find it difficult to communicate such needs.

**Conclusion:** The authors propose that better methods of supporting communication of “harder to observe” sensory needs should be developed. Further research is needed.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 20 October 2022  
Accepted 28 June 2023

### KEYWORDS

Autistic people; autistic people with intellectual disabilities; sensory needs

Autistic people have reported sensory differences since the earliest published autobiographical accounts. Despite the importance of sensory experiences in the lives of autistic people, there is still limited research and consensus on appropriate methods to assess such sensory differences. As little is known, this research aimed to find out about sensory issues and the sensory environments of autistic adults who did and did not have intellectual disabilities.

### Method

An online survey using Qualtrics was distributed via social media. Demographic characteristics were not recorded to reduce participant burden. An informant-based survey with 39 items (Table 1) was adapted from the Sensory Assessment (Autism Education Trust, 2022). An assessment of the environment with 31 items (see Table 2) was further developed by mapping possible adjustments based on the individual checklist items with the aim of evaluating whether or not identified needs were met. Assessments were influenced by both observations and interviews in adult social care.

The survey required people to describe the environment (e.g., home, work, day provision) and then asked

participants to select, from a choice of three options, the statement that best described the environment. Participants could also select “not applicable” or “don’t know”. For each area, the statements were designed to show full, partial and no support for a particular sensory need. Participants identified any sensory issues by indicating whether each item was a sensory need, not a sensory need or unknown.

The research was approved by the Tizard Centre ethics committee. Survey one was designed for informants to complete regarding autistic adults with intellectual disabilities who were unable to self-report. A self-report version of the survey was also made available. This included two new items. The autistic communities were involved in this study, both as members of the research team and as part of the advisory group. Incomplete surveys were treated as withdrawals and only complete surveys were analysed.

### Analysis

The analysis was primarily descriptive and explored the nature of sensory needs recorded. SPSS was used. A “Match” variable was calculated to indicate where identified sensory needs appeared to be met within the

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**Table 1.** Identification of sensory needs for overall sample and for each those with and without intellectual disability.

Item on sensory checklist	Percentage of whole sample identifying as an issue	Informant responses for autistic adults with intellectual disabilities %			Self-report responses for autistic adults with no intellectual disabilities %			Chi-square analysis – number reporting sensory issue * significant at $p < 0.0013$ (Bonferroni adjustment)
		Yes	No	Don't know	Yes	No	Don't know	
<i>Finds crowded areas difficult</i>	93	86	14	0	96	3	1	Not sig
<i>Distressed by certain sounds</i>	86	69	21	10	93	4	3	$\chi^2 = 20.997^*$
<i>Prefers to sit at back or front of group</i>	83	67	16	17	89	6	5	$\chi^2 = 13.788^*$
<i>Is startled when approached by others</i>	81	60	36	3	89	9	2	$\chi^2 = 22.815^*$
<i>Dislikes bright lights</i>	80	N/A			80	16	4	N/A
<i>Likes a hug if chosen to do so</i>	79	65	33	2	84	15	1	Not sig
<i>Enjoys feel of certain materials</i>	79	54	16	30	90	9	2	$\chi^2 = 37.125^*$
<i>Resist change to routine</i>	79	78	19	3	79	15	6	Not Sig.
<i>Dislikes feel of certain fabrics and substance</i>	78	59	12	29	86	11	3	$\chi^2 = 30.628^*$
<i>Dislikes certain food and drink</i>	78	79	19	2	78	17	5	Not Sig.
<i>Covers ears when hears certain sounds</i>	76	67	29	4	79	18	3	Not Sig.
<i>Finds it easier to listen when not looking at a person</i>	75	57	29	14	82	9	9	$\chi^2 = 13.794^*$
<i>Can hear sounds that others do not hear</i>	72	57	9	34	78	9	12	$\chi^2 = 13.050^*$
<i>Quite clumsy, bumps into objects and people</i>	70	45	53	2	80	13	7	$\chi^2 = 35.917^*$
<i>Dislikes untidy or cluttered environments</i>	67	62	29	9	70	24	7	Not Sig.
<i>Dislikes everyday smells</i>	63	21	24	55	80	17	4	$\chi^2 = 84.845^*$
<i>Dislikes fluorescent lights</i>	63	25	40	35	78	17	5	$\chi^2 = 54.431^*$
<i>Does not like shaking hands or being hugged</i>	58	62	36	2	57	32	12	Not Sig.
<i>Needs additional cue to recognise people</i>	58	N/A			58	33	9	N/A
<i>Enjoys certain patterns, e.g., brickwork, strips</i>	54	22	50	28	67	29	4	$\chi^2 = 39.698^*$
<i>Does not know where body is in space</i>	53	48	41	10	55	33	12	Not Sig.
<i>Poor balance</i>	53	42	58	0	57	36	7	$\chi^2 = 9.916^*$
<i>Likes to have food presented in a certain way</i>	52	60	34	9	35	32	4	Not Sig.
<i>Seeks pressure</i>	43	22	74	3	52	41	7	$\chi^2 = 17.656^*$
<i>Needs purpose or function of areas to be clearly communicated</i>	39	38	48	14	40	51	9	Not Sig.
<i>Is fascinated by shiny objects</i>	38	31	53	16	41	50	9	Not Sig.
<i>Is attracted to sound and noise</i>	37	60	31	9	27	64	9	$\chi^2 = 19.893^*$
<i>Seeks out certain smells</i>	37	16	32	52	46	51	3	$\chi^2 = 68.181^*$
<i>Eats and chews materials which are not edible</i>	37	43	55	2	34	61	5	Not Sig.
<i>Hugs very tightly</i>	36	28	67	5	39	51	9	Not Sig.
<i>Licks and taps objects and people</i>	36	42	58	0	33	60	7	Not Sig.
<i>Bangs objects and doors</i>	33	64	34	2	20	64	16	$\chi^2 = 36.695^*$
<i>Will attempt to avoid bright colours</i>	31	12	60	28	38	55	7	$\chi^2 = 22.659^*$
<i>Seems unaware of temperature</i>	29	67	19	14	13	80	87	$\chi^2 = 66.129^*$
<i>Has a fear of heights, lifts, stairs, escalators</i>	28	30	51	19	27	70	3	$\chi^2 = 16.589^*$
<i>Is attracted to light</i>	24	21	55	24	25	67	8	Not Sig.
<i>Has a strong preference for seeking colour</i>	22	3	67	30	30	61	10	$\chi^2 = 23.678^*$
<i>Dislikes crunchy or chewy food</i>	19	36	60	3	12	80	8	$\chi^2 = 16.577^*$
<i>Appears not to see certain colours</i>	7	5	42	53	8	82	10	$\chi^2 = 41.768^*$

environment. Where the environmental element was in place for an identified need, this was coded as a “full match”. If the environmental element was partially in place, this was coded as a “partial match”. “No match” was coded when a need had been identified but the environment did not appear to accommodate this need.

Associations between the respondent group and sensory need variables or the environment-need match variables were analysed using chi-square analysis as the data was independent and categorical. Mann–Whitney U tests were used to explore the differences between the two respondent groups on (a) the total number of needs

identified, (b) the number of don't know responses, (c) and the number of Full matches. Mann–Whitney U tests were also used to look at differences in the number of matches by environment. Bonferroni adjustments were used in interpretation of statistical significance.

## Results

### Participants

Forty five percent of participants ( $n = 196$ ) of the 434 people who accessed the survey went on to complete

**Table 2.** Match between identified needs and the support provided in the environment.

Environmental item	Whole sample		Autistic with intellectual disabilities		Autistic adult Without intellectual disabilities		Chi-square on number with full-match <i>* significant at p &lt; 0.0016 (Bonferroni adjustment)</i>	% in place where no need recorded		
	% Full match with need	% Partial match with need	% Full match with need	% Partial match with need	% Full match with need	% Partial match with need		Whole sample	With intellectual disabilities	No intellectual disabilities
Enough lighting	73	27	75	25	72	28	Not sig.	63	32	70
Staff clearly identified	67	0	N/A	N/A	67	0	N/A	38	N/A	38
Can avoid higher areas/lifts etc	60	35	76	16	33	6	Not sig.	45	34	69
Opportunities to make noise and sound	56	36	75	25	39	45	$\chi^2 = 14.990^*$	33	19	47
Opportunities to touch	54	35	48	48	55	32	Not sig.	8	11	6
Preferred food and drinks always available	50	39	67	30	41	43	Not sig.	15	18	12
Clear signage	47	31	48	24	47	35	Not sig.	34	41	31
Can use preferred way of greeting	47	39	78	20	34	47	$\chi^2 = 31.409^*$	2	2	2
Food presented as preferred	46	30	67	27	31	31	$\chi^2 = 13.172^*$	32	27	39
Opportunities to smell	43	40	57	33	41	41	Not sig.	36	17	41
Predictability in environment	41	53	56	42	35	57	Not sig.	14	16	14
People understand re eye contact	40	43	64	33	32	46	Not sig.	16	28	3
Many different colours	40	51	5	0	37	54	Not sig.	57	64	52
Environment organised to be easy to move around	40	48	71	29	30	54	$\chi^2 = 19.554^*$	17	35	0
No flickering lights	39	35	71	29	34	36	Not sig.	29	42	19
Can avoid disliked fabric etc.	38	29	37	59	38	20	$\chi^2 = 19.589^*$	9	7	10
Can avoid crowded areas	38	38	67	33	26	41	$\chi^2 = 32.743^*$	8	8	8
Can choose where to sit	38	49	59	41	32	51	Not sig.	10	17	5
Many patterns	37	41	77	23	31	44	Not Sig.	26	42	18
No bright colours	32	53	57	43	28	55	Not sig.	47	57	38
Opportunities to chew	29	33	46	41	20	29	Not Sig.	37	33	40
Environment tidy	27	53	58	39	15	58	$\chi^2 = 28.328^*$	20	19	22
Enough shiny or colourful objects	27	55	44	50	21	57	Not sig.	46	44	48
Colours adjusted to help people see edges	25	38	33	33	20	40	Not sig.	75	50	88
Quiet areas available and warnings re noise	25	47	54	44	15	48	$\chi^2 = 32.287^*$	4	7	0
People aware of startling	21	26	44	47	14	20	$\chi^2 = 31.6^*$	18	32	0
Lighting adjustable	20	40	N/A	N/A	20	40	N/A	19	N/A	19
Opportunities for deep pressure	18	31	56	31	11	31	$\chi^2 = 20.669^*$	25	36	10
Opportunities to tap, lick, etc	16	47	17	78	16	25	$\chi^2 = 19.199^*$	61	67	55
Can avoid smells	15	33	25	75	14	30	Not sig.	13	17	11
Can control temperature	11	26	11	29	11	22	Not sig.	71	38	88

the survey. This included 58 family carers or paid support staff of autistic people who had intellectual disabilities (54.7% of the 106 people who opened the survey) and 138 autistic people who self-reported (42% of the 328 people who opened the survey).

### Sensory issues

For participants with an intellectual disability, the mean number of issues identified by informants was 17 (range 6–32, max score 37). The mean percentage of items identified as an issue was 46% (range 16–85%). For those who did not have an intellectual disability, the mean number of self-reported issues was 21 (range 0–32, max score 39). The mean percentage of items identified as an issue was 54% (0–82%). Informants completing the questionnaire for autistic adults with intellectual disabilities were less likely to report sensory issues ( $Z = 4.576$   $p < 0.001$ ). They were more likely to respond “don’t know” (mean average of 45% “don’t know”) in comparison with a mean average of 16% of “don’t know” responses in the sample completing self-reports ( $z = 5.395$   $p < 0.001$ ). Table 1 presents the item-by-item descriptive statistics and chi-square results for comparison between those with and without intellectual disabilities.

### The environment

Family carers and paid support staff of autistic people with intellectual disabilities completed the survey about a variety of environments, including home (64%), day provision (24%), short breaks (10%) and other (2%). For self-reports, 28% of participants answered about their home environment, 40% about work, 10% about education and 18% about other environments.

The match between identified sensory needs and the support provided in the environment.

Family carers/paid support staff for autistic people with an intellectual disability reported support for an issue being in place for significantly more items (Mann whitney  $z = 5.720$   $p < 0.001$ ). Those without intellectual disabilities had significantly more items scored as not in place (Mann Whitney  $z = 6.249$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). There were no differences in terms of the numbers who responded “not sure” or “don’t know”, “partially in place” or “not applicable”.

The number of full matches (where a sensory need was fully met in the environment) was different between the two groups. For participants with intellectual disabilities, the average number of full matches was 7.6 (range 1–21, SD 4.15). For those who were autistic, the average number of full matches was 5.1 (range 0–12, SD 4.47). Family carers/paid support staff for autistic

people with an intellectual disability reported that the person they supported/cared for were more likely to have their needs met (i.e., there was a full match between environment and individual need) (Mann Whitney  $z = 4.177$ ,  $n = 196$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

For autistic adults who did not have intellectual disabilities, identified needs were significantly less likely to be met in a work environment than in a home environment. This was not accounted for by respondents who reported about a work environment having a different number of identified needs at home (average number 22) than at work (average number 21).

On 17 items, the environment was rated as having support for an area in place even though a need in that area had not been identified for 25% or more of the sample of people with intellectual disability. For those without intellectual disabilities, the same was true for 14 items (See Table 2). Table 2 also presents the item-by-item descriptives for percentage match and the chi-square results for the comparison of full-matches for those with and without intellectual disabilities.

### Discussion

The trend of higher reporting of sensory issues amongst autistic adults compared with carer proxy observations were found across multiple sensory domains. Proxy reports from carers contained more “don’t know” responses in terms of whether or not each item was an issue. Informants reported more “matches” between identified needs and the sensory environment than those who self-reported, though caution is needed here as issues may have been under-reported. Those who self-reported were less likely to report needs having been met in a work environment. For some items, support was described as being in place despite that need not having been identified. For both groups, many identified sensory needs remained unmet.

### Limitations

Having fewer autistic participants with intellectual disability within the sample, influenced by lockdown procedures and the impact on services and families, limits the extent to which differences can be analysed. Using informant responses for people with intellectual disability could be considered a limitation but given the limited and contradictory findings related to the sensory issues and differences of people with intellectual disabilities (Werkman et al., 2022), attempting to do so was felt to be important.

The questionnaire was inclusive of those self-identifying as well as those who were formally diagnosed.

However, it is acknowledged that the sample may not have included autistic people who don't have an intellectual disability but who don't use social media. It is possible that those recruited this way may be a distinct group.

To aid ease of completion and reduce participant burden, no further information was requested, no independent checks were made of the data and space was given for participants to elaborate on their responses. It is not possible to know whether the data accurately reflects practice. Many people were living in different ways during the pandemic (altered work environments, restrictions on number of people etc.) and so environments may have been atypical.

### Differences in sensory needs?

Significant differences were found on some items between informant and self-report responses. For some items, self-reports were higher than informant reports (e.g., "Distressed by certain sounds" was reported by 93% of autistic adults compared to 69% of proxy reports of autistic adults with intellectual disability). Similarly large differences were found in proximity issues ("Prefers to sit at back or front of group": 89%–67%), tactile issues ("Enjoys feel of certain material's": 90%–54%), sensory integration differences ("Finds it easier to listen when no looking at a person": 82%–57%) and issues relating to smell ("Dislikes everyday smells": 80%–21% with 55% of proxy accounts reporting "don't know"). This general trend was reversed however on three questions, two of which related to sensory seeking ("Bangs objects and doors": 20%–64% and "Is attracted to sound and noise": 27%–60%) and one related to awareness of temperature ("Seems unaware of temperature": 13%–67%).

### Implications

Further research is needed to look at these differences in further depth. Some sensory issues may be more pronounced for autistic people with intellectual disabilities but more difficult to assess from the perspective of an onlooker unless clearly indicated through the autistic person's actions. Such differences could have serious implications for practice, when interventions are largely based upon behavioural observation, and non-autistic people may struggle to empathise with autistic ways of being in the world (Milton, 2012). Exploration alternative methods of supporting communication of these harder to observe sensory needs is an important area for future research.

It may be the case that autistic adults without intellectual disability might mask particular sensory seeking behaviour in fear of social sanction and stigma (Pearson

& Rose, 2021). Whilst these findings can only indicate potential issues in these areas, further research is needed to address how autistic people experience the sensorium and how best to adjust environments to support such needs.

### Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the John and Lorna Wing Foundation.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

### Funding

This work was supported by The John and Lorna Wing Foundation.

### Declaration of competing interest

The authors report that there are no competing interests to declare.

### Data availability statement

Anonymised data is available from the first author on reasonable request.

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