

# The association between alexithymia and peer relationship difficulties in children and adolescents on the autism spectrum

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## Background

- Alexithymia (difficulty in identifying, describing and expressing emotional states) appears to be more common in autistic than non-autistic population (Kinnaird et al., 2019).
- The ability to identify and articulate one's emotional states can be considered an important factor in forming and maintaining peer relationships.

## Methods

Parents of **350** children and adolescents **aged 5 to 17 years**

- **56** children with formal diagnosis of autism (39 boys,  $M_{age} = 12.17$ ,  $SD_{age} = 2.81$ )
- **16** children with autistic traits confirmed by healthcare professionals (8 boys,  $M_{age} = 11.61$ ,  $SD_{age} = 3.63$ )

Parents completed an **online questionnaire**

- **Children's Alexithymia Measure (CAM)**
- The peer problems subscale of the **Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ)**

## Results

In the **hierarchical regression analysis**, children with a formal diagnosis of autism and children with autistic traits were analyzed as distinct groups

- **Autism** ( $\beta = 0.46$ ,  $p < .001$ ), **autistic traits** ( $\beta = 0.15$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and **higher levels of alexithymia** ( $\beta = 0.46$ ,  $p < .001$ ) were associated with increased difficulties in peer relationships
- The regression model's overall coefficient of determination was 44%

In the **mediation analysis**, children with a formal diagnosis of autism and children with autistic traits were combined into a single group of autism spectrum

- **Alexithymia partially mediated the association between autism and difficulties in peer relationships** ( $p < .001$ , Figure 1)
- **Autism spectrum was also directly associated with both peer relationship difficulties** ( $p < .0001$ ) and **alexithymia** ( $p < .0001$ )
- **Alexithymia was also directly associated with peer relationship difficulties** ( $p < .0001$ ).

## References

Kinnaird, E., Stewart, C., & Tchanturia, K. (2019). Investigating alexithymia in autism: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *European Psychiatry*, 55, 80–89. doi:10.1016/j.eurpsy.2018.09.004

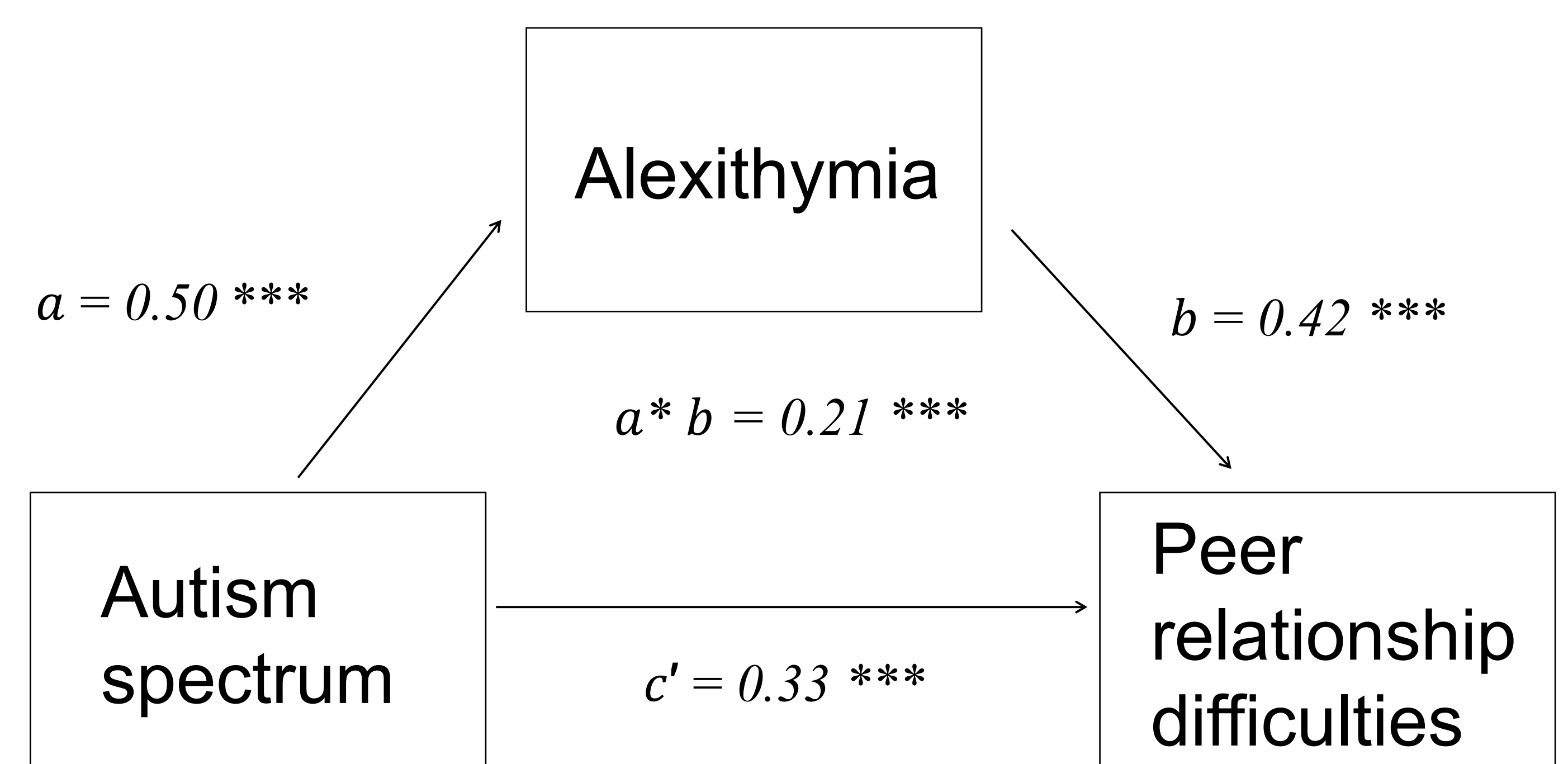
## Objectives

The aim was to investigate:

- whether **alexithymia** is associated with **difficulties in peer relationships** in autistic and non-autistic children and adolescents
- whether **alexithymia** mediates the association of **autism** and **difficulties in peer relationships**

Figure 1

Mediation model illustrating the mediating role of alexithymia in the association between autism spectrum and peer relationship difficulties



Note. Values represent standardized coefficients. \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

## Conclusions

- Alexithymia might be a relevant contributor to peer relationship difficulties in children and adolescents on the autism spectrum.
- The results highlight the importance of assessing alexithymia in individuals on the autism spectrum, and the need for further research into the mechanisms through which alexithymia influences peer relationships.
- Future research is needed to explore effective strategies for supporting autistic children who experience co-occurring alexithymia.