Loneliness and friendship were examined in 22 high-functioning children with autism and 19 typically developing children equated with autistic children for IQ, CA, gender, mother’s education and ethnicity. Children between the ages of 8 and 14 were asked to report on both their understanding and feelings of loneliness and the quality of their friendship. Compared to typically developing children, children with autism were both lonelier and had less complete understandings of loneliness. Although all children with autism reported having at least one friend, the quality of their friendships were poorer in terms of companionship, security, and help. Fewer associations were found between loneliness and friendship for the autistic than for the non-autistic children, suggesting less understanding of the relation between loneliness and friendship. Implications of these results are discussed for conceptualising the social deficits in autism.

Our findings suggest that autistic children do indeed feel lonely. That children with autism want to be involved in social relationships is also supported by the finding that all of the autistic children reported having at least one friend. Still, even though children reported having a best friend, this knowledge did not lessen feelings of loneliness. Indeed, loneliness was experienced by autistic children more intensely and more frequently than it was by typical children.

Whereas typical children define and understand loneliness as being alone (with no one to play with) and feelings of sadness, the majority of autistic children define loneliness as only one dimension of being alone. They tend to not attribute an emotional feeling (e.g. sadness) to their loneliness.

Another explanation for why having friends does not lessen feelings of loneliness in autism concerns how the children themselves perceive the meaning of a friend. Typical children generally define a friend in terms of companionship, affection and intimacy.

In contrast, autistic children include these dimensions less often. Thus, autistic children may not perceive the role of a friend in the same way as do typical children.

Specifically autistic children rated their friend as lower in quality terms in terms of companionship, security, trust, and helpfulness. Autistic children may be lonely then, because their friendships are of a poor quality, thus, not providing them with the security and companionship necessary to lessen feelings of loneliness.

Children with autism demonstrated understandings of friendship, but these understandings were utilised to reduce feelings of loneliness. Children with autism may lack the “affective glue” to connect these two closely related concepts.

These findings support the view that children with autism lack understanding of the emotional aspects of both loneliness and friendship.

The finding that autistic children report greater loneliness and less satisfaction with their friendships is cause for concern. Autistic children may benefit from specific treatment programs aimed at teaching social knowledge and understanding rather than on efforts aimed at motivating social involvement.