
**CHALLENGES DURING ADOLESCENCE FOR PEOPLE WITH AUTISM
SPECTRUM DISORDER**

**DESAFIOS DURANTE A ADOLESCÊNCIA PARA PESSOAS COM TRANSTORNO
DO ESPECTRO AUTISTA**

**DESAFÍOS DURANTE LA ADOLESCENCIA PARA LAS PERSONAS CON
TRASTORNO DEL ESPECTRO AUTISTA**

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ABSTRACT

Adolescence in Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a phase that can present specific challenges, as characteristics of the spectrum — Such as difficulties with social communication, sensitivity to sensory stimuli, and repetitive behavior patterns — can affect adaptation to the environment. The objective of this study on adolescence in ASD is to understand how this developmental phase affects young people with ASD, considering the physical, emotional, social, and cognitive changes characteristic of this period. The study proposes an integrative literature review, based on a search conducted on the SciELO (Scientific Electronic Library Online), BVS (Virtual Health Library), and PePsic (Psychology Journals) platforms. Among the articles selected for the study, it was found that current research on adolescence in ASD has focused on various aspects of the population's development and needs, highlighting specific challenges that arise during this transition phase to adulthood. Current research indicates that adolescence is a critical phase for young people with ASD, presenting unique challenges that require specific interventions and ongoing support. There is a growing emphasis on the importance of multidisciplinary care that takes into account both mental health needs and the development of social and life skills for a successful transition to adulthood.

Keywords: challenges; difficulties; adaptation; transition; support.

RESUMO

A adolescência no Transtorno do Espectro do Autismo (TEA) é uma fase que pode apresentar desafios específicos, pois características do espectro — Como dificuldades com a comunicação social, sensibilidade aos estímulos sensoriais e padrões de comportamento repetitivo — podem afetar a adaptação ao ambiente. O objetivo deste estudo sobre a adolescência em TEA é compreender como essa fase de desenvolvimento afeta jovens com TEA, considerando as alterações físicas, emocionais, sociais e cognitivas características desse período. O estudo propõe uma revisão integrativa da literatura, baseada em uma pesquisa realizada nas plataformas

SciELO (Biblioteca Eletrônica Científica Online), BVS (Biblioteca Virtual de Saúde) e PePsic (Revistas de Psicologia). Entre os artigos selecionados para o estudo, constatou-se que a pesquisa atual sobre a adolescência em TEA tem focado em diversos aspectos do desenvolvimento e das necessidades da população, destacando desafios específicos que surgem durante esta fase de transição para a vida adulta. Pesquisas atuais indicam que a adolescência é uma fase crítica para jovens com TEA, apresentando desafios únicos que exigem intervenções específicas e apoio contínuo. Há uma ênfase crescente na importância de cuidados multidisciplinares que levam em conta tanto as necessidades de saúde mental quanto o desenvolvimento de habilidades sociais e de vida para uma transição bem-sucedida para a vida adulta.

Palavras-chave: desafios; dificuldades; adaptação; transição; apoio.

RESUMEN

La adolescencia en el trastorno del espectro autista (TEA) es una fase que puede presentar desafíos específicos, ya que las características del espectro — Como dificultades con la comunicación social, sensibilidad a los estímulos sensoriales y patrones de comportamiento repetitivos — pueden afectar la adaptación al entorno. El objetivo de este estudio sobre la adolescencia en TEA es entender cómo esta fase del desarrollo afecta a los jóvenes con TEA, considerando los cambios físicos, emocionales, sociales y cognitivos característicos de este período. El estudio propone una revisión integrativa de la literatura, basada en una búsqueda realizada en las plataformas SciELO (Biblioteca Electrónica Científica Online), BVS (Biblioteca Virtual de Salud) y PePsic (Revistas de Psicología). Entre los artículos seleccionados para el estudio, se encontró que la investigación actual sobre la adolescencia en TEA se ha centrado en varios aspectos del desarrollo y las necesidades de la población, destacando los desafíos específicos que surgen durante esta fase de transición a la adultez. La investigación actual indica que la adolescencia es una fase crítica para los jóvenes con TEA, presentando desafíos únicos que requieren intervenciones específicas y apoyo continuo. Cada vez se pone más énfasis en la importancia de una atención multidisciplinaria que tenga en cuenta tanto las necesidades de salud mental como el desarrollo de habilidades sociales y vitales para una transición exitosa a la vida adulta.

Palabras clave: desafíos; dificultades; adaptación; transición; apoyo.

1 INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a significant and challenging period for any young person, as it involves major physical, emotional, and social changes. For adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), this phase can present additional challenges. ASD is characterized by difficulties in social communication, repetitive behaviors, and restricted interests, which can make it hard to adapt to the changes typical of this phase (Portes & Vieira, 2022).

During adolescence, young people with ASD may face difficulties with social interaction, which can be exacerbated by increased social demands and the need to form and maintain more complex relationships (Gunty, 2021). In addition, puberty brings physical and emotional changes that can be confusing, especially for adolescents who have difficulty understanding emotional and social nuances (Schmeer et al., 2021).

Another important aspect is that, during adolescence, many young people with ASD become more aware of their differences from their peers, which can impact self-esteem and, in some cases, lead to feelings of isolation or anxiety (Bertoldi & Brzozowski, 2020). In this context, support from family members, educators, and mental health professionals is essential to promote the social, emotional, and academic development of adolescents with ASD, ensuring they are empowered to face the challenges of this phase in a more positive manner and in a way adapted to their needs (Rosa & Borges, 2024).

The objective of this study on adolescence in ASD is to understand how this developmental phase affects young people with ASD, considering the physical, emotional, social, and cognitive changes characteristic of this period. This study covers the diagnosis of ASD in adolescence, issues involving socialization, and the current context of adolescents with autism.

1.1 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1.1 Diagnosis of ASD In adolescence

Diagnosing ASD in adolescence can be somewhat challenging, as signs and symptoms may present differently during this stage compared to childhood. Furthermore, adolescence is a phase marked by major physical, emotional, and social changes, which can make identifying ASD more difficult (Rocha et al., 2019). Adolescents with ASD may exhibit difficulties with social interaction, such as maintaining or understanding conversations, interpreting facial expressions, sarcasm, or irony. They may also have difficulty making friends and maintaining relationships, something that can become more evident at this stage of life (Freire & Cardoso, 2022).

There may be intense interests in specific subjects, a rigid routine, and repetitive behaviors, such as a need to repeat actions or resistance to change.

Adolescents with ASD may feel particularly uncomfortable with changes in the school or family environment (Almeida & Neves, 2020).

Many adolescents diagnosed with ASD were not identified during childhood. This may occur because the signs were mild, masked by compensatory strategies, or confused with other conditions (such as ADHD, social anxiety, etc.) (Líbio & Bosa, 2024). It is common for adolescents with ASD to also present with other associated conditions, such as anxiety, depression, and ADHD. These conditions can confuse or even mask the symptoms of ASD, making diagnosis more complex (Barbosa et al., 2019).

The diagnosis is made by a multidisciplinary team (psychologists, psychiatrists, and speech-language pathologists) through interviews with the adolescent and family members, behavioral observation, and the use of specific instruments to assess ASD. It may also involve reviewing the adolescent's developmental history dating back to childhood (Hentz & Kupermann, 2021).

Following diagnosis, it is important for the adolescent to have access to therapeutic support, which may include behavioral therapy, educational guidance, social support, and, in some cases, medication. Appropriate follow-up can significantly improve the adolescent's quality of life and social adaptation (Iannuzzi et al., 2021).

Receiving a diagnosis during adolescence can be an opportunity to better understand the challenges faced and seek support strategies that aid in the transition to adulthood (Koltermann et al., 2021).

2.1.2 Socialization of adolescents with ASD

The socialization of adolescents with ASD can be challenging, as these young people tend to struggle with social and communication skills, which can affect how they interact with others. However, there are effective strategies and interventions that can help promote more positive socialization and facilitate inclusion (Schmeer et al., 2021).

Some important aspects and strategies to support the socialization of these adolescents include teaching specific social skills, such as initiating a conversation, understanding verbal expressions, maintaining eye contact, and respecting others' personal space (Fernandes et al., 2021).

Use games, simulations, role-playing, and dramatizations that mimic everyday social situations, which can help adolescents with ASD practice and build confidence in interactions. Provide an environment with fewer sensory stimuli and a predictable routine, which can reduce anxiety and help the adolescent focus on social interaction (Lima & Couto, 2020).

Choose environments with fewer distractions and organize activities so the adolescent knows what to expect, such as game groups or small-group activities. Use the adolescent's specific interests as a point of connection with other young people, promoting a more comfortable and engaging interaction (Jerônimo et al., 2023).

Identify activities or topics of interest and integrate them into social groups, such as school clubs, art groups, or workshops, which can stimulate conversations and connections. Encourage support and understanding from peers, which can help the adolescent feel more at ease in social situations. Train peers to serve as "social buddies" or mentors and create opportunities for adolescents with ASD to practice social skills with peer support in a safe environment (Silva et al., 2018).

Facilitate communication and social interaction using technologies that can complement or support difficulties with verbal communication. Alternative and Augmentative Communication (AAC) apps and assistive devices can help express thoughts and emotions, reducing communication barriers.

Ensure that parents understand the socialization process and can support their children in everyday situations. Involve parents and caregivers in training and guidance to promote the development of social skills at home and support the adolescent in their interactions (Almeida et al., 2023).

Socialization can help adolescents with ASD develop autonomy, emotional coping skills, and a sense of belonging, which improves their quality of life. Social inclusion also fosters a more diverse and welcoming environment, which benefits both adolescents with ASD and their peers (Nascimento et al., 2021).

These strategies and approaches can be tailored to the adolescent's individual needs and preferences and should always consider the level of support required for each young person on the spectrum (Chaim et al., 2020).

2.1.3 The role of the family in the context of ASD during adolescence

The family's role is crucial to the development and well-being of adolescents with autism. Adolescence is a period of significant change, which can be even more challenging for adolescents with ASD, as it brings new social, emotional, and autonomy-related demands. The family serves as a fundamental source of support in various areas (Aguiar & Morais, 2022).

The family can be a safe haven for the adolescent, offering emotional support during a time of intense change. Adolescents with ASD may face communication difficulties, which can lead to stress and anxiety. The family's emotional support helps foster an environment of accessibility and safety (Anjos & Morais, 2021).

Adolescents with ASD often have difficulties with communication and social skills, making socialization more complex. The family can support the development of these skills by helping to create opportunities for safe and inclusive social interactions, whether within the family unit or in external environments, such as school (Faro et al., 2019).

Adolescence is a crucial period for developing independence. Families can help adolescents with ASD learn practical and self-care skills, preparing them for everyday situations and adult life. This support should be provided gradually and in accordance with the adolescent's pace, in order to foster self-confidence (Fong et al., 2021).

It is common for adolescents with ASD to need extra support at school and during appointments with healthcare professionals, such as psychologists and therapists. The family generally acts as a mediator between adolescents and these professionals, coordinating efforts to ensure that the young people's needs are met in an integrated manner (Gunty, 2021).

The family's understanding of ASD contributes to adjusting expectations and accommodating the adolescent's specific needs. Educating family members about ASD helps reduce stigma and enhances their ability to provide appropriate support (Leedham et al., 2020).

During adolescence, it is common for young people to build their identity and self-confidence. For adolescents with ASD, who may face social and communication barriers, the family's role is essential in fostering a positive self-image and recognizing their unique skills and talents (Pavlopoulou & Dimitriou, 2020).

The family is an essential element in helping adolescents with ASD face the challenges typical of this stage and develop a more balanced and fulfilling life. It acts as an emotional, social, and educational support, promoting the adolescent's holistic development and social inclusion (Portes & Vieira, 2020).

2.1.4 The educational environment for adolescents with Autism

The educational environment for adolescents with autism is a complex and challenging topic, as these students have specific learning and social interaction needs. Generally, adolescents with autism benefit from environments that provide structured routines, social support, and a flexible, personalized pedagogical approach (Freitas & Gonçalves, 2021)

Many adolescents with autism feel more comfortable in environments where activities are organized and follow a predictable routine. This helps reduce anxiety, as they know what to expect and when. Visual aids, such as daily schedules, task boards, and visual cues, help these students understand the flow of activities and organize themselves (Gesser et al., 2020).

Sensory issues are very common among individuals with autism and may include sensitivities to bright lights, loud noises, textures, or smells. Classrooms with soft lighting, study materials of different textures, noise-canceling headphones, and access to quieter spaces are important for preventing sensory overload (Andrade et al., 2024).

Calm spaces within schools can also be very helpful, offering students a refuge when they need a moment to regulate their emotions and senses. Social interactions can be challenging for adolescents with autism. Social-emotional support programs, such as social skills sessions and support groups, can help them develop communication, empathy, and conflict resolution skills (Barokova & Tager-Flusberg, 2020).

Teachers and mediators trained in communication strategies, such as the use of direct language and clear instructions, are essential to help build a welcoming environment. Differentiated teaching methods are crucial to accommodate the unique learning styles of adolescents with autism. Strategies such as project-based learning, hands-on activities, and the use of technology can help keep these students engaged.

Visual and multimedia tools, such as videos, illustrations, and mind maps, are often helpful, as many autistic students have a more visual learning style (Lucas et al., 2020).

The inclusion of autistic adolescents in school activities, including regular classes and extracurricular activities, is essential for fostering a sense of belonging and reducing isolation. Teachers and the school community must foster a culture of respect for differences, combating prejudice and promoting genuine inclusion (Nyrenius & Billstedt, 2020).

Partnerships between schools, families, and healthcare professionals, such as occupational therapists and speech-language pathologists, contribute to a holistic approach that addresses the specific needs of each adolescent with autism. Regular meetings and Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) are valuable tools for ensuring that everyone involved is aligned and committed to the student's development (Oliveira et al., 2024).

Creating an appropriate educational environment for adolescents with autism requires understanding, flexibility, and an inclusive approach. With adequate support and a qualified team, it is possible to foster a space where these young people can explore their interests, develop their skills, and prepare for a fulfilling and independent adult life (Araújo et al., 2021).

3 METHODOLOGY

This study was an integrative review of Brazilian literature. This review employed a broad methodological approach typical of synthesis reviews, as it allowed for the combination of data from studies that used diverse methodologies (Lycarião et al., 2023; Souza et al., 2010).

3.1 ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA

A literature review was conducted, including retrospective and prospective studies conducted in Brazil that addressed affectivity in the learning process, published in Portuguese, available electronically in full, and covering the time period from 2018 to 2024.

3.2 SAMPLE SELECTION

The articles used in this study were published between 2018 and 2024 and indexed in the following databases: Medical Literature Analysis and Retrieval System Online (MEDLINE), Scientific Electronic Library Online (SCIELO), Latin American and Caribbean Health Sciences Literature (LILACS), the US National Library of Medicine National Institutes of Health (PUBMED), Google Scholar, and the websites of the Federal Council of Psychology. The PUBMED search strategy was created and adapted for use in other databases.

The specific search terms (in Portuguese) investigated were: autistic, adolescence, socialization, linked to the Boolean operators (AND and OR).

3.3 STUDY SELECTION

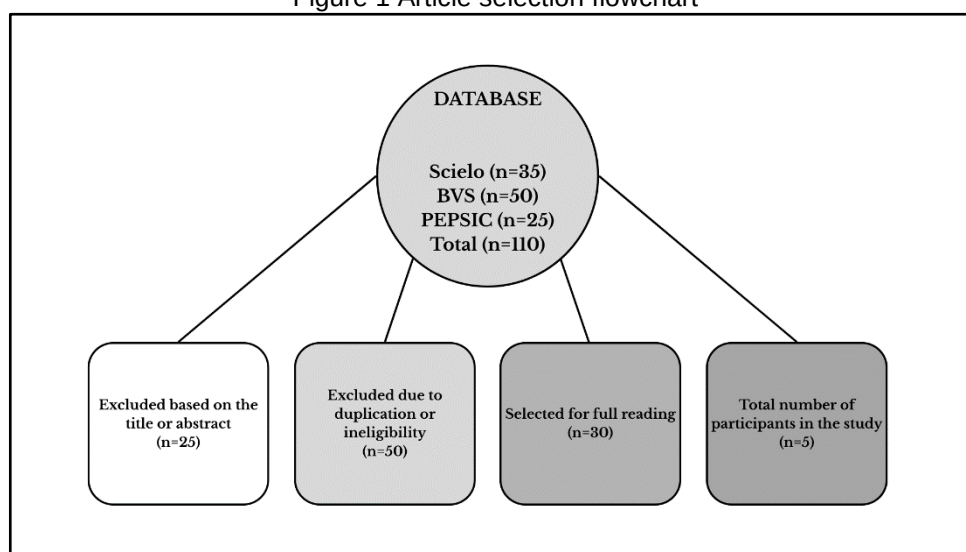
All articles that met the inclusion criteria were thoroughly examined through extensive reading. Articles that did not meet the study's objective were excluded.

3.4 DATA ANALYSIS

The information extracted from the articles included: article title, author, objective, and main results; this information was organized into tables.

The article search yielded 120 articles in the selected databases; of these, a total of 110 were excluded following the analyses. Ultimately, a total of ten articles were selected for full-text reading and to form the basis of the review on the topic. The following illustration (Figure 1) presents the search strategy and the selection process for the articles used.

Figure 1 Article selection flowchart



Source: The authors (2026).

Five (5) studies from the period 2021 to 2023 were selected and deemed relevant for the creation of the discussion tables, while those published prior to 2010 were excluded. Following the search and selection process, the material underwent a comprehensive review and descriptive analysis, which informed the development of this study. The main authors who contributed to this study were: Montenegro et al. (2023), Nascimento et al. (2023), Oliveira and Schmidt (2023), Brilhante et al. (2021), Serbai and Priotto (2021).

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Tables 1, 2, and 3 provide an overview of the key information from the five articles selected for this study. All studies were published between 2021 and 2023 and were conducted in Brazil. All articles reviewed the current state of research on pedagogical practices applied to individuals with autism.

Table 1. Authors and titles of the reviewed articles.

Author	Article Title
Montenegro et al. (2023)	Development of communication skills in an adolescent with autism using alternative communication: a case report.
Nascimento et al. (2023)	Gender and Sexuality Among Young People with ASD: A Brief Analysis Based on the "Introvert" Podcast.
Oliveira & Schmidt (2023)	Bullying and Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD): What Do Autobiographies Tell Us?
Brilhante et al. (2021)	"I'm Not a Blue Angel": Sexuality from the Perspective of Adolescents with Autism.
Serbai and Priotto (2021)	Autism in adolescence: an integrative literature review.

Source: The authors (2026).

Montenegro and colleagues (2023) demonstrated in their study that the use of alternative communication facilitated the development of communication skills in adolescents with ASD who received assistance. Among the main findings presented, progress in communicative intent stands out, promoting the development of functional communication, as evidenced by an increase in receptive and expressive communication skills. It is emphasized that the use of a robust system and modeling strategies by communication partners, with sentence constructions in natural contexts and diverse situations, enabled not only the learning of new concepts but also expressive and receptive development in pragmatic and morphosyntactic aspects.

Nascimento and his colleagues (2023) emphasize that these young people may be at risk of suffering abuse and/or violence because they are not provided with emotional and sexual education as a protective factor for this youth. It is considered important to provide both autistic and non-autistic youth with emotional and sexual education grounded in diversity, to value the choices of different individuals, their ways of thinking about and experiencing sexuality, as well as to acknowledge multiple sexual identities. Sexuality education, for those with ASD and for everyone, helps to deconstruct oppressive and stigmatizing norms regarding the sexuality of people with disabilities, contributing to a more inclusive, just, and equitable world.

Table 2. Authors and objectives of the reviewed articles.

Author	Article Title
Montenegro et al. (2023)	To demonstrate the impact of using an alternative communication system on the development of communication skills in a nonverbal adolescent with ASD
Nascimento et al. (2023)	Analyze the accounts of young people with autism regarding issues of gender and sexuality on the podcast <i>Introvertendo</i> .
Oliveira & Schmidt (2023)	Identify instances of bullying reported by people with ASD, based on the autobiographical accounts of Temple Grandin and Donna Williams
Brilhante et al. (2021)	Identify the needs of autistic individuals regarding their sexuality, in line with the neurodiversity paradigm.
Serbai and Priotto (2021)	To conduct a comprehensive review of ASD in adolescence, analyzing national and international scientific publications

Source: The authors (2026).

In the study by Oliveira and Schmidt (2023), the autobiographical accounts of Williams and Grandin highlight a series of bullying incidents experienced in the school environment. Indeed, the authors' narratives indicate that both were victims of direct verbal abuse, in the form of constant teasing, ridicule, and the use of nicknames and derogatory terms. Direct bullying involving physical acts was also a reality in the authors' lives, revealing a scenario of physical aggression and intimidation, with the

teacher herself among the perpetrators. Indirect aggression was revealed in the autobiographical narratives, especially when the authors recount moments of loneliness experienced at school, exposing a pattern of social isolation marked by the withdrawal of their classmates and their own perception of loneliness.

Brilhante and other researchers (2021) emphasize that some autistic individuals require greater educational and therapeutic support than others; neurodiversity refutes the binary that dichotomizes them into high- or low-functioning. It is not ignored that certain behaviors may expose autistic individuals to critical situations, making them both potential victims and aggressors. Nor does the neurodiversity paradigm presuppose a lack of therapeutic support. However, it is based on the assumption that limitations stem from a combination of subjective and environmental factors. Thus, therapies must be individualized, grounded in educational strategies, and aimed at helping each person develop the necessary skills to understand, control, and explore their own body. On the other hand, even autistic individuals with more subtle deficits may experience socialization difficulties and require support, including adapted sex education.

Table 3. Authors and main findings presented in the selected articles.

Author	Article Title
Montenegro et al. (2023)	The use of alternative communication with a robust communication system provided evidence of the development of communication skills as well as social behavior in the adolescent with ASD who received assistance.
Nascimento et al. (2023)	Despite the topic's invisibility, the podcast in question serves as a form of cultural education, (re)educating young people with autism in numerous areas, including gender and sexuality.
Oliveira & Schmidt (2023)	The autobiographical accounts analyzed reveal a series of bullying incidents experienced in the school environment, indicating that both individuals with ASD were victims of direct verbal abuse, in the form of constant teasing, ridicule, and the use of derogatory nicknames and names. Direct bullying involving physical acts was also a reality in the lives of the autistic authors, revealing a scenario of physical aggression and intimidation, with the teacher herself among the perpetrators
Brilhante et al. (2021)	Although people with autism develop physically and sexually in accordance with typical developmental stages, there are unique characteristics that should not be overlooked. However, the perpetuation of false beliefs fosters a denial of the sexuality of people with autism. Establishing effective sex education and support for the sexuality of people with autism requires a paradigm shift grounded in the social model of disability.
Serbai and Priotto (2021)	There are different perspectives on autism in adolescence, and a common thread among them is concern about issues related to behavior, communication skills, and independence.

Source: The authors (2026).

Serbai and Priotto (2021) assert that, for a comprehensive approach to children and adolescents with autism, there is a need to develop appropriate tools and methodologies for assessing these individuals and gauging their subjective perceptions regarding personal satisfaction with ASD and the identification of compulsive symptoms. The authors emphasize the importance of programs that improve social, communication, emotion regulation, and problem-solving skills, as well as the creation of support groups for parents and individuals with ASD.

Educational practices are fundamental for understanding how autistic students function and addressing their emotional, family, and educational challenges. Prioritizing the development of self-awareness and autonomy fosters personal competencies in individuals with ASD. Interventions that engage various systems through rhythm and dance contribute to the behavioral and motor development of these individuals. Thus, it is of great importance that experienced clinicians guide their patients with ASD and ADHD toward healthy lifestyle habits.

More than 50 keywords were identified in the articles analyzed. A word cloud was then developed based on the frequency of terms used in the titles of the consulted publications, highlighting two main terms: “adolescence” and “autism,” which constitute the subject of the research (Figure 2).

Figure 2. A word cloud highlighting the most frequently used terms related to current research on adolescence in Autism Spectrum Disorder.



Source: The authors (2026).

The most frequently occurring words shed light on the topic under study, “Adolescence in Autism Spectrum Disorder,” and they are: family, resilience, disorder, education, and autism

5 CONCLUSION

Autism in adolescence presents challenges and opportunities for adolescents, their families, and healthcare professionals alike. During adolescence, the physical, emotional, and social changes typical of this stage are amplified for adolescents with autism, who may face additional difficulties in areas such as social communication, emotional regulation, and adapting to the new demands of school life.

For many adolescents with autism, increased social and academic expectations can intensify stress and anxiety, leading to challenges in managing their emotions and adapting to more complex social environments. The understanding and support of family members, friends, and educators are essential to the well-being of these adolescents. Specific therapeutic interventions, such as occupational therapy, cognitive-behavioral therapy, and skills training programs are fundamental to promote autonomy, emotional well-being, and social inclusion.

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