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Exploring the roles of diagnosis and sex in the severity and type of depression symptoms in early adolescents with and without autism spectrum disorder

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Prevalence rates of depression are higher in youth with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) than typically-developing (TD) youth, yet the effects of ASD diagnosis and sex on depressive symptom severity remain incompletely understood, particularly in specific age groups. Using the Children's Depression Inventory, Second Edition (CDI-2), the present study explored diagnostic- and sex-based differences in depressive symptom severity in a sample of 212 early adolescents (10:0-13:5 years) with and without ASD. Significant group differences were found according to ASD diagnosis (d=0.587, 95% CI [0.308,0.867]) and sex (d=0.365 [0.089,0.641]), with more depressive symptoms endorsed in the ASD and female groups. However, the interaction of diagnosis and sex was not significant, suggesting an additive risk of ASD status and female sex. Item-level analyses showed diagnostic differences on nearly half of the CDI-2 items with higher severity in the ASD group (Probability of Superiority range = 0.42-0.65), differences within sexes, and differences by diagnosis persisted when limiting analyses to children with high levels of depressive symptoms. A more nuanced understanding of symptom endorsement and the roles of diagnosis and sex may uncover salient intervention targets for depression in the unique context of ASD.