

Title: Teaching Social Skills to Teens with Autism in the Classroom: The PEERS[®] School-Based Curriculum

Authors: Elizabeth A. Laugeson, Ruth Ellingsen, Lara Tucci, Shannon Bates, & Alexander Gantman

Paper presentation

Subject Index Terms: autism, adolescents

Division 33

Statement of the problem:

Impaired social skills and lack of friendship quality are known to negatively impact individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) across the lifespan. Social skills training is a common treatment method for youth with ASD, yet very few evidence-based interventions exist to improve friendship skills for adolescents on the spectrum. Furthermore, little to no research has examined the effectiveness of teaching social skills in the classroom – arguably the most natural social setting of all.

Subjects Used:

Participants included 146 middle and high school students with ASD and their parents. Adolescent participants attended Village Glen School, a nonpublic school for adolescents with ASD and ranged in age from 11-18 ($M=15.08$; $SD=1.82$).

Procedures:

The purpose of this study was to examine changes in social functioning following the implementation of a school-based, teacher-facilitated, and parent-assisted social skills intervention known as PEERS (Program for the Education and Enrichment of Relational Skills; Laugeson & Frankel, 2010). Adolescent self-reports, teacher reports, and parent reports were examined to detect change in social functioning following the implementation of PEERS in the classroom.

Adolescent participants received daily social skills instruction in the classroom for 20-30 minutes, five days per week, for 14 weeks. Instruction was provided by classroom teachers and teacher aides trained and supervised on the intervention. Skills focusing on friendship development and maintenance were targeted. Parents were invited to participate in after-school parent groups held once a week for 90-minutes over the course of the semester. Parent groups were lead by a licensed clinical psychologist, certified in the PEERS intervention. Parents were given didactic instruction on the skills being taught to their teens, strategies for providing social coaching in the home and community, and guidance on how to help expand the social networks of their teens.

Results:

Results of pre- to post-test comparisons reveal significant treatment effects. Teen self-reports show significant improvements in self-esteem on the Piers-Harris Self-Concept Scale (PHS; Piers, Harris, & Herzberg, 2002; $p < 0.01$) and knowledge of social skills on the Test of Adolescent Social Skills Knowledge (TASSK; Laugeson & Frankel, 2010; $p < 0.01$). Teacher-reports reveal a significant decrease in internalizing behavior ($p < 0.01$) on the Social Skills Improvement System (SSIS; Gresham & Elliot, 2008). Parent reports of social functioning indicate improvement in overall social skills on the SSIS ($p < 0.01$), decreased social anxiety on the Social Anxiety Scale (SAS; La Greca & Stone, 1993; $p < 0.01$), overall improvement in social responsiveness on the Social Responsiveness Scale (SRS; Constantino, 2005; $p < 0.05$), and increased frequency of get-togethers with friends on the Quality of Socialization Questionnaire (QSQ; Laugeson & Frankel, 2010; $p < 0.05$).

Conclusions:

Results suggest the use of PEERS, a manualized school-based, teacher-facilitated, and parent-assisted social skills program for adolescents, is effective in improving the social functioning of youth with ASD. This research represents one of the few treatment intervention studies aimed at improving the friendship skills of adolescents with ASD in the classroom.