

A feasibility test of an online class to promote healthy dating for autistic youth: Safer Dating for Youth on the Autism Spectrum

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Background

Adolescents and young adults, whether on the autism spectrum or not, experience unacceptably high rates of abuse, coercion and violence in their dating and sexual relationships. Population-based, nationally representative U.S. data suggest that as many as 1 in 11 high school-attending girls and 1 in 15 boys experience physical abuse by a dating partner each year (Kann et al., 2018). The present study was designed to address the gap in research and practice on healthy relationships education for autistic adolescents. The project involved the development of a six-session online class on healthy and unhealthy dating behaviors for autistic adolescents ages 14-18 years old. The class was pilot-tested for feasibility.

The curriculum was developed through a three-part process that involved collecting formative data from a sample of autistic adolescents and their parents, reviewing the content of the Safe Dates curriculum (Foshee et al., 1998), and obtaining feedback on a written draft of the curriculum from the same sample of autistic youth and their parents who had contributed formative data. An advisory board comprising two autistic adults, four professional autism advocates and service providers, two pediatricians, and one dating violence prevention expert also gave input on the draft version of the curriculum before it was pilot-tested. The curriculum was developed to align with the Theory of Planned Behavior, which holds that behavior change can be produced when intervention participants develop a positive attitude toward the behavior, subjective norms that align with the behavior change, and feel that they have behavioral control (Ajzen, 1991).

The class, called Safer Dating for Autistic Youth, was delivered by two co-facilitators one evening per week for six consecutive weeks in May-June 2019. The class was delivered online via the software platform Zoom, which permitted student participants to engage with one another through live-streamed video, audio, and to chat with one another and the entire group using the simultaneous chat function. The software also made it possible for facilitators to share their screen and display a whiteboard for written notes, show worksheets, or present video clips for group discussion.

The advisory board and facilitators made several choices about the composition of the class before recruiting. First, it was decided that the intervention should be open to people of all genders because the rationale for segregating youth by gender for dating violence prevention purposes—that girls may be more comfortable talking only with other girls, and boys may prefer to learn in all-male groups—is not evidence-based and excludes non-binary people. Second, intervention developers made the choice that the class should be geared towards autistic adolescents who had an interest in dating at some time in the next year. Autistic individuals with no interest in dating are less likely to need healthy relationships education. Third, developers decided that the class was most appropriate for autistic adolescents who had a degree of

independence from caretakers that would make engaging in a dating relationship at some time during their young adulthood highly possible. In other words, the subpopulation of autistic youth most appropriate for the class were those who might be described as Level 1, “high functioning,” meeting the criteria for what was formerly called Asperger’s, or needing less support.

Methods

We conducted a longitudinal, mixed methods feasibility study to assess process and outcomes associated with participation in the Safer Dating for Autistic Youth online class with a sample of 11 youth. All participants in the study participated in the intervention. Participants completed self-report surveys at baseline and at 6-9 weeks after baseline. Participants also participated in one-on-one telephone interviews with a research assistant between 1-3 weeks after the intervention concluded.

A convenience sample of 11 youth were recruited over two months. Pre- and post-intervention survey data were collected online via REDCap. One-on-one telephone interviews about the acceptability of the intervention were conducted after the class ended.

Results

Participants were more likely to feel that the unhealthy dating relationship behaviors were abusive at post-test as compared to pre-test. The mean average scale score at baseline was 47.8 and 52.6 at post-test, though the difference was not statistically significant ($p=0.23$). There were substantial rating differences from pre- to post-test on selected items, including “trying to convince them to have sex,” on which average scores increased from 3.7 to 4.5 ($p=0.05$). In addition, there was some substantial change on rating scores of the items “constantly contact them via cell phone, email, instant message, Facebook or text to find out who they are with ,where they are and what they are doing,” and “pressuring them not to break up,” although the p -values for these items were not significant at $p=0.16$ and $p=0.13$, respectively.

Overall, participants were enthusiastic about the intervention. They reported feeling like it was informative and ran smoothly. They commented:

“I think the supplementary material and the discussion between students was very informative.”

“I think the class worked perfectly.”

“I cannot think of anything that needs to be improved.”

Participants also valued the approach used in teaching, including the online format and the option to use the chat function in Zoom as desired.

“I liked the easy access to the video chat.”

“I liked the hands-on activities it really put things into perspective and being over a video call made it easier to talk to everyone.”

“[What worked well?] It's accessibility.”

Participants also offered strengthening comments and critique. The majority of these related to the fact that the material was too basic for some of them. One participant also commented that it was hard to figure out who was supposed to speak when the facilitators asked a question because of the online format. They commented:

“It's content was a little elementary.”

“I..feel like some, but not all, of the stuff we went over I already knew. However, I would not have wanted to skip what is more common knowledge, because if others do not know it, then it is important that they can learn it, and it would sometimes spark interesting discussions.”

“It was hard to figure a talking order.”

Discussion

This feasibility test of a six-session online class for autistic adolescents on healthy and unhealthy dating relationships found that the intervention was feasible to implement, demonstrated excellent acceptability among participants, and preliminary data analyses suggest that it is feasible to collect pre- and post-intervention survey data from autistic youth in the 14-18 year old age group online to evaluate this type of intervention. The results of qualitative interviews with participants about the intervention suggest that the intervention was executed in a way that the participants enjoyed and felt was successful. A particular strength of the intervention was the use of Zoom software for delivering the class, given that participants could use the chat to type thoughts and feelings while simultaneously listening to the conversation and audio content.

The curriculum is now available at no cost to any interested party through the Boston Medical Center Autism Program website at https://www.bmc.org/sites/default/files/Patient_Care/Specialty_Care/Pediatrics%20-%20Autism/resources/Safer-Dating-ASD.PDF