**Title:** *A Peer-Facilitated, Multi-Component Social Skill Intervention for Adolescents with ASD*

**Topic:** Social Skills **Grant Year:** 2013

**Principal Investigator(s):** Robert Koegel, Ph.D. **Funding:** $29,759

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**Institution:** University of California, Santa Barbara **Duration:** Two Years

**Purpose:** To improve the social skills of “higher-functioning” adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

**Objectives:** To improve the social skills (e.g. conversational exchanges and expression of empathy) of adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) through a peer-facilitated group intervention with “typical” same-age peers.

**Study:** Each week, 36 adolescents (ages 12-17) with a diagnosis of ASD participated in a two-hour session. Adolescents completed an individual check-in session with a college-aged social facilitator and then joined the group free socialization time with the facilitators and high-school peers. This time was allowed to unfold without an agenda and was intended to create a natural, comfortable social environment. While conversing with one another, the participants and social facilitators kept track of their use of individual target skills through self-management. After approximately 20 minutes, the group transitioned into a group social activity that typically used team-building activities. This phase was intended to foster sharing of personal information, encourage learning about peer interests, increase comfort in the group, and promote cooperation and teamwork. After the activity phase, the social facilitators then introduced the week’s social skill topic, which was discussed for the remaining time of the group session. After a brief introduction of the target skill, the topic was then modeled by the social facilitators in a series of two brief role-plays — one “bad” example demonstrating poor implementation of the skill and a follow-up “good” example depicting proper use of that particular skill. Finally, for the last five minutes of the group, all participants practiced the related skill with a partner. This portion was intended to increase understanding of a social skills topic and provide opportunities to both observe and practice the skill. One parent per adolescent also participated in the last 10 minutes of the sessions and completed measures of social progress.

**Results:** Adolescents in the immediate treatment group experienced significant increases in parent and self-report ratings of social competence and a significant decrease in ratings of social impairment. Follow-up surveys administered 20 weeks later indicated that their social skills continued to improve with time.

**Significance and Implications:** Both parents and the adolescents indicated that the program was highly effective in rapidly increasing social skill use and comfort in social situations. Because the follow-up surveys revealed that the socialization scores continued to increase, it suggests that the program provided the adolescents with the necessary foundation of skills to be able to seek out new social experiences and learning opportunities on their own.

**Practical Relevance:** This program helps to maximize an adolescent’s ability to feel confident and competent in a variety of social situations to ensure that their social vulnerabilities do not hold them back from the tremendous potential that each of them possess. This type of intervention could also have an impact on parents and caregivers that are looking for ways to help their children develop important social skills. By utilizing high school students as trained facilitators, it’s possible that the intervention could be carried out in more places (e.g. schools and other community-based settings) and for a lower cost than other programs that involve more interaction.