

Research Summary

2014 OAR Applied Research Award

Inclusion of Typical Peers in a Social Skills Intervention for Adolescents with ASD: A  
Longitudinal Examination of the Generalizability of Acquired Skills to Real-World Settings

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Adolescents with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) without intellectual disability (sometimes referred to as high functioning autism) often have difficulty with the social skills necessary for making and keeping friends. The PEERS program developed by Elizabeth Laugeson and Fred Frankel (Laugeson & Frankel, 2010) was designed to teach adolescents the social skills necessary to make and keep friends using a parent-assisted, group format model. PEERS is a 14-week social skills intervention that was designed to be administered to small groups of adolescents with ASD. Each week, teens learn nuanced social skills like finding common interests, entering and exiting conversations, appropriate use of electronic communication, choosing appropriate friends, being a good sport, and handling teasing and bullying. Parents meet weekly in a separate group and learn strategies to coach their teens during homework assignments. Previous research indicates that adolescents who complete the PEERS program demonstrate reductions in autism symptoms, problem behaviors, social anxiety, and/or increases in social skills, and social contact with peers. However, prior to the current study funded by the Organization for Autism Research, the potential for increasing the effectiveness of the intervention by including typically developing peer mentors had not been examined. We predicted that the opportunity to practice new social skills with a typically developing peer mentor might be more effective than practicing with another adolescent with ASD. Also, little was known about whether adolescents who completed PEERS were using the skills they learned during the program in real-world settings.

The current study had two primary goals. The first was to compare the effectiveness of the original PEERS program to PEERS with Peers, an adapted model of the program that included one typically developing peer mentor for every participant with ASD. Both versions of the program were also compared to a control group that included participants on a waitlist to

participate in the program. The second goal was to examine whether participants who completed either version of the PEERS program were more socially centralized in their classrooms at school (i.e., belonging to one or more social groups within their classrooms) compared to the control group.

To examine these research questions, 34 adolescents with ASD and at least one parent of each adolescent were randomly assigned to the PEERS group, PEERS with Peers group, or the control group. Adolescents and their parents were asked to complete questionnaires about the adolescents' social skills, social skills knowledge, social anxiety, and loneliness prior to beginning their program or their wait period. After completing PEERS, PEERS with Peers, or the 14-week wait period, adolescents and their parents completed the same questionnaires. Approximately four months later, adolescents and parents completed the same questionnaires again. To examine social centrality of participants in their classrooms at school, the research team interviewed every student in one classroom of each participant with ASD about their friendships and social groups in the classroom. Students were told that the study was about friendship during high school and were unaware that the study was about a particular student in the classroom.

Results for the first goal indicated that participants with ASD in the PEERS and PEERS with Peers groups demonstrated greater improvements in social skills knowledge and loneliness compared to the control group. Only the PEERS with Peers group demonstrated greater improvements in parent-reported social skills and problem behaviors compared to the control group, whereas only the PEERS group demonstrated significant gains in get-togethers compared to the control group. Many of the skills developed by participants in PEERS and PEERS with Peers were maintained at the 4-month follow-up. Although not included as a primary goal of the

study, outcome data were also collected for typically developing peer mentors. Findings suggested that peer mentors demonstrated increases in social skills knowledge, parent-reported get-togethers, and autism knowledge, and a decrease in adolescent-reported loneliness. Together, findings indicate modest benefits of including typically developing peer mentors in the PEERS program for both adolescents with ASD and peer mentors.

Results for the second goal indicated that participants who completed either version of the PEERS program were more centralized in their classrooms than control group participants immediately after completing the PEERS program. However, there was no difference between PEERS participants and the control group at the 4-month follow-up, which may indicate a reduction over time in the use of skills learned during PEERS at school. Importantly, social centrality data were only collected from half of the study participants. Some of the participants' schools would not allow the research team to collect data in their classrooms. Future research should examine this question with a larger sample of students to better understand whether the skills learned during PEERS translate to increased social centrality at school.