Social Motivation as a Predictor of Decreased Problem Behaviors in Adolescents with ASD following the UCLA PEERS® Program


University of California, Los Angeles

INTRODUCTION

- Adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) show an array of poor social skills as well as problem behaviors (Gresham & Elliot, 2008), which may include:
  - Aggression
  - Hyperactivity
  - Depression
  - Anxiety
  - Perseveration

- These problem behaviors often contribute to difficulties initiating and maintaining social interactions and meaningful relationships (Gresham, Elliot, & Kettler, 2010).

- Despite these social skills obstacles, studies have shown that many adolescents with ASD are eager to increase and enrich their peer interactions and relationships (Bauminger & Kasari, 2000).

- Previous research with socially motivated adolescents with ASD has shown improvements in social skills and decreases in problem behaviors (Laugeson et al., 2000; Laugeson et al., 2012) following an evidence-based social skills program known as PEERS®, but the extent to which social motivation influences treatment outcome has yet to be explored.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

- To examine the extent to which social motivation predicts decreased problem behaviors following the implementation of the PEERS® program.

PARTICIPANTS

- N = 74 adolescents with ASD
- Age: M=14.04, SD=1.80; Range: 11-18 years of age
- Grade: M=9th grade, SD=1.8, Range 9th to 12th grade
- Gender: 76% male (n=57), 22% female (n=17)
- Ethnicity: Caucasian 61% (n=45); Latino/Hispanic 9% (n=7); African American 11% (n=8); Asian 11% (n=8); Native American 1% (n=1); Middle Eastern 1% (n=1); Other 6% (n=4)
- Social Responsiveness Scale (SRS-P; Constantino & Gruber, 2005) Total Score: M=76.58, SD=10.95

PARENT MEASURES

- Social Responsiveness Scale (SRS-P; Constantino & Gruber, 2005)
- Social Skills Improvement System (SSIS-P; Gresham & Elliot, 2008)

PROCEDURE

- Treatment: UCLA PEERS® Program:
  - Evidence-based social skills intervention
  - Manualized
  - Parent-assisted
  - For teens with ASD
  - 90-minute group treatment sessions
  - Once a week for 14 weeks

- Measures were collected pre- and post-intervention to assess changes in problem behaviors following treatment.
- Pearson correlations were calculated to examine the relationship between SRS-P Social Motivation Subscale baseline scores and the SSIS-P Problem Behavior subscales, which include:
  - Externalizing
  - Bullying
  - Hyperactivity/Inattention
  - Internalizing
  - Autism Spectrum

RESULTS

Relationship Between Social Motivation and Changes in Problem Behaviors following the UCLA PEERS® Program

- Results reveal that higher parent-reported baseline scores on the SRS Social Motivation Scale predict decreased problem behaviors on the SSIS-P Autism Spectrum Scale (p<.03) and at a trend for the Hyperactivity/Inattention Scale (p<.10) following treatment.
- Social Motivation on the SRS-P was not significantly correlated with other SSIS-P Problem Behavior subscales.

CONCLUSIONS

These findings suggest that adolescents with ASD who demonstrate greater social motivation and drive to interact with peers prior to treatment are less likely to display autism spectrum behaviors, such as preoccupation with objects, repetitive use of language, and poor eye contact, following an evidence-based social skills intervention.

Findings also suggest that socially motivated adolescents with ASD may exhibit less impulsivity and temper tantrums following PEERS®, but perhaps not to a significant degree.

Future studies might include:
- Independent ratings and behavioral observations to assess changes in problem behaviors following treatment.
- Changes in problem behaviors in other settings, such as the school environment, would provide greater understanding of decreases in problem behaviors.
- The use of a control group would contribute to a better understanding of treatment effects.
- Long-term follow-up assessments of social functioning would provide useful information about maintenance of treatment gains.

REFERENCES


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CONTACT INFORMATION

UCLA PEERS Clinic
(310) 267-3377
peersclinic@ucla.edu

Visit the UCLA PEERS® website at www.semel.ucla.edu/peers