PEERS® for Young Adults: Predictors of Social Skills Treatment Outcome in Young Adults with ASD


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BACKGROUND

Young adults with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) present with difficulties in sustaining interpersonal relationships, romantic relationships, and navigating social environments as a result of social skills deficits (Kanne et al., 2009).

The Program for the Education and Enrichment of Relational Skills (PEERS®) is an evidence-based and caregiver-assisted intervention that targets the core social deficits of ASD. In addition, the PEERS® intervention fosters essential relationship skills for high-functioning young adults with ASD through instruction in the rules and steps of social behavior needed for making and keeping friends.

Research examining the effectiveness of PEERS® for Young Adults has revealed significant enhancements in social responsiveness, engagement, communication, and overall social functioning (Gantman et al., 2012).

While social skills training is an important method of treatment, identifying factors that predict treatment outcome is also essential to the development and evolution of social skills interventions designed for young adults with ASD. However, predictors of treatment outcome among young adults with ASD, such as the impact of baseline social functioning and empathy on treatment outcomes, has yet to be investigated with respect to the PEERS intervention.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

To examine the impact of baseline social responsiveness and empathy on the frequency of social interactions with peers and romantic partners.

PARTICIPANTS

- N = 27 young adults with confirmed ASD diagnosis
- Age: M = 20.9, SD = 2.35; Range = 18 to 28 years of age
- Gender: 85% male (n = 23); 15% female (n = 4)
- Ethnicity: 74% Caucasian (n = 20); 7% Hispanic (n = 2); 4% African American (n = 1); 11% Asian (n = 3); 4% Unspecified (n = 1)
- SRS Total T-Score: M = 69.1, SD = 9.56

METHODS

Outcome data was collected at pre- and post-treatment to include:

Caregiver-Report Measures:

- Social Responsiveness Scale – Parent Report (SRS-P: Constantino, 2005)
  - Measures the severity of autism spectrum symptoms per parent report.
  - Examines the domains of social responsiveness related to social awareness, social communication, social cognition, social motivation, and autistic mannerisms.

Young Adult Self-Report Measures:

- Empathy Quotient (EQ: Baron-Cohen & Wheelwright, 2004)
  - An assessment of young adult empathy per self-report, with subscales targeting cognitive and affective empathy.
- Quality of Socialization Questionnaire-Young Adult (QSQ-YA: Frankel & Mintz, 2008)
  - Assesses the frequency of social interactions including initiated and invited get-togethers with peers and romantic dates in the previous month.

RESULTS

Results indicate that baseline social responsiveness on the SRS-P significantly predicts:

- Increased frequency in the total number of peer social interactions post treatment (p < .002)
- Increased frequency of young adult initiated get-togethers (p < .01)
- Increased frequency of young adult initiated romantic dates (p < .03)
- Increased frequency of invited romantic dates (p < .03)

Results reveal that baseline social responsiveness did not significantly predict change in young adult invited get-togethers.

DISCUSSION

Results suggest that following the completion of the PEERS® for Young Adults intervention, baseline caregiver-reported social responsiveness predicted treatment outcome for frequency of social interactions among young adults with ASD, including both platonic and romantic relationships. In particular, social responsiveness significantly predicted increased frequency of both initiated and invited get-togethers among peers, and hosted romantic dates.

Furthermore, baseline young adult self-reported empathy appears to predict treatment outcome specific to the frequency of romantic interactions post-intervention. It appears that young adult empathy robustly predicts increased frequency of both initiated and invited romantic dates.

These findings highlight the benefit of identifying predictors of treatment outcome to promote the development and evolution of targeted social skills interventions designed for young adults with ASD.

Understanding factors associated with treatment outcome will also enable us to identify those most likely to benefit from the PEERS intervention.

REFERENCES


CONTACT INFORMATION

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For further information about PEERS, please visit our website at: http://www.semel.ucla.edu/peers