Predictors of Companionship for Adolescents with ASD Following the School-Based PEERS® Curriculum

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INTRODUCTION

- Adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) often suffer from impairment in social interactions which may lead to a greater feeling of loneliness, less companionship, and poor friendship quality (Locke et al. 2010; Bauminger & Kasari 2000).
- Social skills training during adolescence may support positive social skills and improve social competence for youth with ASD (Sigman et al. 1999).
- The Program for the Education and Enrichment of Relational Skills (PEERS®) is an evidence-based, teacher-facilitated social skills intervention for adolescents with ASD, which targets the development and maintenance of friendships (Laugeson 2014) and has been shown to improve friendship quality and companionship in adolescents with ASD (Laugeson et al. 2014).
- Previous research with adolescents with ASD has shown improvements in social skills and decreases in problem behaviors (Laugeson et al. 2009; Laugeson et al. 2012; Laugeson et al. 2014).
- Predictors of treatment outcome in parent-assisted programs using PEERS® have been investigated (Chang et al. 2014); however, predictors of treatment outcome have yet to be examined in school-based PEERS® programs using teacher-facilitation.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

- The authors would like to thank the dedicated program staff, research assistants, and families who participated in this study.

PARTICIPANTS

- N = 146 students attending The Help Group’s Village Glen School, a nonpublic school for adolescents with ASD
- Age: M=15.15, SD=1.81; Range: 11-18 years of age
- Grade: M=8th grade; SD=1.55; Range 6th to 12th grade
- Gender: 84% male (n=122), 16% female (n=24)
- Ethnicity: Caucasian 60% (n=87); Latino/Hispanic 18% (n=26); African American 8% (n=12); Asian 3% (n=5); Native American 1% (n=1); Middle Eastern 2% (n=3); Other 8% (n=12)
- Social Responsiveness Scale (SRS-P; Constantino & Gruber, 2005) Total Score: M=76.17; SD=14.55

PEERS® School-Based Curriculum:

- Social skills curriculum
- Manualized
- Teacher-facilitated
- For middle school and high school students with ASD
- 30 minutes of daily instruction in the classroom for 14 weeks
- Curriculum includes didactic instruction, role-play demonstrations, behavioral rehearsal activities, and review of socialization homework assignments

PROCEDURES

- Measures:
  - Parent measures collected at pre-intervention:
    - Social Skills Improvement System (SSIS-P: Gresham & Elliot 2008)
    - Adolescent measures collected at pre and post intervention:
      - Friendship Qualities Scale (FQS; Bukowski, Hoza, & Bolvin 1994)
  - Pearson correlations were calculated to examine the relationship between overall social skills at baseline and improvement in friendship quality following treatment.

RESULTS

Relationship Between Baseline Social Skills and Improvement in Friendship Quality Following the UCLA PEERS® School Based Curriculum

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Pearson Correlation</th>
<th>P Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SSIS – P Communication</td>
<td>0.219</td>
<td>0.024</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SSIS – P Assertion</td>
<td>0.242</td>
<td>0.012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SSIS – P Empathy</td>
<td>0.199</td>
<td>0.039</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: SSIS – P = Social Skills Improvement System – Parent Report
FQS = Friendship Qualities Scale

CONCLUSIONS

- These findings suggest that adolescents with ASD who present with greater impairment in communication, assertion, and empathy prior to treatment are more likely to spend increased time (as measured by SRS-P) in social skills intervention after receiving the PEERS® School Based Curriculum.
- Findings also suggest that adolescents who have better communication, assertion, and empathy at baseline are also likely to have greater companionship following the PEERS® School Based Curriculum, but not to the magnitude or intensity of adolescents with greater impairment.
- This study appears to be the first to examine the predictors of treatment outcome related to improved friendship quality and companionship following the PEERS® School-Based Curriculum.

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REFERENCES