LOS ANGELES, CA. — Any young adult could feel awkward during social situations, or even with dating. Imagine what this situation would be like having autism. ABC 10’s Sarah Mac has more on a social skills program that helps those with autism spectrum disorder.
Like most 25–year–olds, Joey Juarez likes to look his best when he goes out with his friends. Since Joey has autism, he didn’t go out very often though, because social situations could be awkward.

Joey says, “I was feeling lonely.”

Now Joey feels more confident in social surroundings because of a program at UCLA’s Semel Institute for Neuroscience and Human Behavior. The program is called PEERS, which stands for Program for the Education and Enrichment of Relational Skills. The 16 week long program teaches social skills, including tips on dating.

Elizabeth Laugeson, Psy.D. of UCLA’s Semel Institute for Neuroscience and Human Behavior says, “Most adults on the autism spectrum really want to have friends and really want to have romantic relationships, but they don’t know how to.”

Even though people of all ages with autism struggle in social surroundings, most programs target young children. PEERS is one of the few that is for young adults and so far it’s the only one that proves effective through research.

Laugeson says, “What we found was not only an improvement in overall social skills – particularly in the areas of cooperation and assertion – but also a decrease in autism symptoms.”

The program also teaches parents how to coach their young adult children.

Joey’s dad, Jose Juarez says, “He is going through the program and applying, you know, the techniques. He’s able now to have more meaningful relationship that is going to last him for a long time, maybe for life, and that is really, really important.”

Joey now attends parties more frequently and says he feels more confident than ever before.

“They taught me how to, like, make and keep friends,” Joey added, “of course there’s many aspects that go into that.”

Researchers also created a book and an app with tips on social interactions for anyone to use when they need it.