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Teaching Teenagers With Autism How to Make Friends

Class helps teens learn social skills, become less isolated.

By [Nancy Shute](#)

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Teenage social life can be frustrating in the best of circumstances, and it's even harder for teenagers with autism, who report feeling lonelier and having poorer-quality friendships than their typically developing classmates. But social skills can be learned, according to researchers at the University of California-Los Angeles. They have created a new class that lets autistic teenagers practice key social skills, from asking someone to get together to brushing off teasing with a "That's so lame."

Social skills classes are common for young children with autism, because problems with social interactions and communications are a hallmark of the disorder. However, there is little help for teenagers and young adults, despite the fact that teenage life is all about communicating with peers. "Because autism research is in its infancy, we're just starting to set these things up," says Elizabeth Laugeson, a clinical instructor of psychiatry at UCLA who also is associate director of the UCLA Parenting and Children's Friendship Program. She and her colleagues created a series of twelve 90-minute classes, taught weekly, in which high-functioning teenagers with autism spectrum disorders work on practical social skills. They include how to pick the peer group that's right for them (jocks, nerds, gamers); how to join and leave a conversation; how to host a get-together; how to handle bullying and teasing; and how to change a bad reputation.

Parents of the teenagers take separate classes in which they learn how to support their child's social efforts and help with "homework." At the end of 12 weeks, 33 teenagers ages 13 to 17 who participated in a study group were having more peer interactions outside of school and had increased the number of get-togethers they hosted. Their parents reported a significant increase in the children's social skills, and both parents and children reported better friendships, compared with a control group of teens who did not attend the classes.

"We could literally see a dramatic improvement in these kids' behavior," says Laugeson. "A lot of our kids came into the program with virtually no social contact outside of school. We saw a dramatic increase in the amount of get-togethers with friends. They weren't so socially isolated anymore." That research is

published in the April *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*. A second study, which is tracking whether teenagers maintained the improved social skills three months after classes ended, has just been completed. It found that the kids continued to have more get-togethers, including invitations to others' homes.

The Program for the Education and Enrichment of Relational Skills, or PEERS, isn't yet available outside UCLA, although Laugeson's group has adapted it for schools, where it will be tested starting this fall. A training manual for mental health professionals is also in the works, and Laugeson hopes there will be a do-it-yourself book for parents in the near future.

Although social skills classes for autistic teens might be hard to find, my colleague Meghan Johnson recently wrote about [summer camps that teach social skills for teenagers with ADHD](#) and other special needs. Advocacy groups are pushing hard for more [real-world skills training for teenagers with autism](#). And here's the story of [Joe Steffy](#), a 23-year-old with autism and Down syndrome who runs a popcorn business with the help of his family and employees.

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