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STUDY SHOWS SOCIAL INTERVENTION PROGRAM FOR YOUNG ADULTS WITH AUTISM IMPROVES SOCIAL SKILLS, REDUCES AUTISM SYMPTOMS

Experts who created the first social skills program that has shown significant results in a clinical trial offer social tips for those with autism

Los Angeles, CA. - Parties and social situations can be nerve-wracking for any young adult, but imagine experiencing this type of anxiety if you had autism. A recent study reveals that a social skills program for young adults with autism spectrum disorder is the first to show significant improvement in participants' ability to overcome their social fears.

Researchers at UCLA's Semel Institute for Neuroscience and Human Behavior found that participants attending their 16-week program which taught social skills including tips on dating were able to better engage with their peers and even showed increased empathy and greater responsibility. The intervention program called PEERS stands for [Program for the Education and Enrichment of Relational Skills](#).

The [study](#), the largest randomized controlled trial to show improved social functioning in young adults with autism, appears in a special issue of the online Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders.

"Most young adults on the autism spectrum really want to have friends and even romantic relationships, but they don't know how to do that," said Elizabeth Laugeson, the founder and director of the UCLA PEERS Clinic, an assistant clinical professor of psychiatry at the UCLA Semel Institute and the study's principal investigator. "Most of the treatment and research in autism focuses on children. It's as if we've forgotten that these children grow up to be adults with their own unique challenges that very often affect their ability to become employed and establish meaningful friendships and even romantic relationships.

"Our study offers encouraging findings that, through an evidence-based, caregiver-supported intervention, adults with autism can improve in ways that may help them be more successful in these aspects of their lives. We're not teaching what we think young people should do in social situations, but what we know actually works through research."

Autism affects approximately 1.5 million people in the U.S., and the number of young adults identified with the disorder is rising every year. Although individuals of all ages on the autism spectrum struggle

as a result of social deficits, most interventions target young children. Few programs are available to help young adults improve their social functioning and no program other than the PEERS program has been shown in research to be effective.

The PEERS for Young Adults intervention consists of 16 weekly 90-minute sessions, along with concurrent sessions for caregivers. Laugeson and her colleagues, including Dr. Fred Frankel, a UCLA professor of psychiatry, developed PEERS at UCLA in 2005 and it has since expanded to other sites in the U.S. and other countries. To find one in your area: <http://www.semel.ucla.edu/peers/training>.

SOCIAL TIPS FOR THOSE WITH AUTISM

When young people with autism struggle socially when trying to meet a new group of people, they are often advised to go up and introduce themselves – a strategy that Laugeson said can come across as awkward. Instead, follow the tips below when entering a group conversation.

5 tips for entering a group conversation:

- 1) Watch and listen (use a prop such as a cell phone so that you do not appear to be eavesdropping)
- 2) Figure out the topic
- 3) Wait for a pause in conversation
- 4) Move in closer
- 5) Say something related to the topic

More tips can be found in Laugeson's book "The Science of Making Friends" and "FriendMaker" app. To learn more go to www.semel.ucla.edu/peers.

MORE ABOUT THE STUDY

In the study, 22 people aged 18 to 24 and their caregivers were randomly assigned either to receive the PEERS treatment or to be part of a control group in which treatment was delayed. Those in the PEERS group received training on social etiquette related to conversational skills, humor, electronic communication, identifying sources of friends, entering and exiting conversations, organizing successful get-togethers, and handling peer conflict and peer rejection. The young adults in the PEERS group also received four sessions on dating etiquette.

The PEERS approach teaches skills using concrete rules and steps of social behavior via lessons, role-play demonstrations, behavioral rehearsal exercises and assignments to practice the skills in natural social settings. Caregivers (including parents and other family members, job and life coaches, and peer mentors) are also provided tips to help participants use their skills in the real world.

Among members of the PEERS group, social skills, frequency of social engagement and social skills knowledge improved significantly, and autism symptoms related to social responsiveness diminished.

In addition, 16 weeks after the treatment ended, most of the gains were still evident, and the

researchers observed new improvements in social communication, assertion, responsibility and empathy — a result the scientists attributed to the involvement of caregivers as social coaches.

The new study was funded by the Organization for Autism Research and the National Institutes of Health.

Individuals and families who are interested in participating in PEERS may contact the program at peersclinic@ucla.edu or 310-26-PEERS.

B-ROLL, SOUND BITES, WEB ELEMENTS & HI-RES STILL PHOTOS - Including HD video available for free/unrestricted use by the news media: bit.ly/1IVV0PL

Courtesy: UCLA's Semel Institute for Neuroscience and Human Behavior

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