Title: Self-esteem as a Mediator of Social Skills Improvement and Social Anxiety for Adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) following the UCLA PEERS® Program


Introduction: Studies suggest that teens with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) have greater social impairment and are more likely to experience social anxiety while joining social groups (Brumariu & Kerns, 2008). Previous research has shown a positive relationship between social ability and self-esteem in typically developing youth (Lee & Robbins, 2000). Moreover, changes in self-esteem may trigger changes in social anxiety (de Jong, 2002; Rasmussen, & Pidgeon, 2011). The Program for the Education and Enrichment of Relational Skills (PEERS®) is an evidence-based, parent-assisted social skills treatment, which has been shown to improve social skills and reduce social anxiety in youth with ASD (Laugeson & Frankel 2010). However, self-esteem as a mediator of social anxiety and improvement in social skills following the UCLA PEERS® program has yet to be examined. The purpose of this study is to examine self-esteem as a mediator of social skills improvement and social anxiety for adolescents with ASD following the UCLA PEERS® Program.

Method: Participants included 279 adolescents with ASD (64.2% Male=207; 25.8% Female=72) aging from 11-18 years (M=13.62, SD=1.95) and their parents. Teens and parents attended weekly 90-minute social skills groups at the UCLA PEERS® Clinic over a 14-week period. Social skills related to making and keeping friends as well as handling conflict and rejection were taught in a small group format. To assess improvement in social skills, parents completed the Social Responsiveness Scale-Second Edition (SRS-2; Constantino, 2012) at pre-and-post intervention, which measures adolescents’ ability to interpret and respond to social cues. Adolescent self-esteem and social anxiety were assessed using self-reports on the Piers-Harris Self-Concept Scale-Second Edition (PHS-2; Piers, Harris & Herzberg, 2002) and Social Anxiety Scale (SAS; La Greca, 1998) at post-intervention. A Multiple Linear Regression was used to examine the relationship between changes in SRS-2 scores, and post-treatment PHS-2 and SAS scores, using self-esteem as a mediator variable.

Results: Results suggest the existence of a mediating effect. Data indicates that changes in SRS-2 Total scores from pre- to post-intervention are positively correlated with SAS Total scores (p<0.01) and PHS-2 Total scores (p<0.01) following treatment. However, Multiple Linear Regression results indicate when self-esteem on the PHS-2 is used as a mediator, the relationship becomes insignificant (r=0.022; p=0.757). These results reveal that self-esteem plays a mediating role in the relationship between social skills improvement and social anxiety, with greater self-esteem mediating reduced social anxiety at post-intervention.

Discussion: The current research examined self-esteem as a mediator of social skills improvement and social anxiety for adolescents with ASD following the UCLA PEERS® Program. Findings suggest that self-esteem may act as a mediator between social skills improvement and social anxiety. Specifically, increased social ability appears to increase self-confidence in applying newly acquired social skills, thereby reducing social anxiety when engaging in social activities.

References/Citations: