Title: Positive Self-Esteem as a Predictor of Treatment Outcome in Adolescents with ASD following the UCLA PEERS® Intervention


Introduction: Adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) often present with social deficits, which often negatively impacts their self-esteem and self-concept. Youth with ASD are less likely to perceive themselves as socially or physically competent and report poorer ratings of global self-worth compared to typically developing children (Williamson, Craig, & Slinger, 2008). Positive peer relationships can contribute to the development of security, positive empathic relationships with others, and increased self-esteem in adolescents with ASD (Mota & Matos, 2013). The Program for the Education and Enrichment of Relational Skills (PEERS®), a 14-week evidence-based parent-assisted social skills intervention, has been shown to improve social skills by teaching ecologically valid friendship skills (Laugeson et al., 2012). Previous research suggests that PEERS® is effective in improving overall social skills for adolescents with ASD; however, the influence of self-esteem in predicting treatment outcome following this parent-assisted intervention has yet to be examined. The purpose of this study is to examine self-esteem as a predictor of treatment outcome in a 14-week evidence-based parent-assisted social skills program for adolescents with ASD.

Method: Participants included 277 adolescents, 11-18 years of age (M=13.62; SD=1.96). Adolescents and their parents attended weekly 90-minute groups for 14-weeks through the UCLA PEERS® Clinic. To assess baseline self-esteem, adolescents completed the Piers-Harris Self-Concept Scale-Second Edition (PHS-2; Piers et al., 2002) prior to treatment. The PHS-2 includes six subscales measuring self-concept. To assess treatment outcome, parents completed the Social Responsiveness Scale (SRS; Constantino, 2005) at pre and post-intervention. The SRS is an autism screening questionnaire, which includes five subscales. Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated to examine the relationship between baseline self-esteem on the PHS-2 and treatment outcome following intervention on the SRS.

Results: Results indicate that higher baseline total scores on the PHS-2 are significantly correlated with greater reduction in SRS Total scores ($r=-0.17; p=0.05$), particularly in the areas of Autistic Mannerisms ($r=-0.21; p=0.01$) and Social Cognition ($r=-0.18; p=0.04$). Additionally, higher baseline Behavioral Adjustment ($r=-0.18; p=0.04$), Happiness and Satisfaction ($r=-0.18; p=0.03$) on the PHS-2 are significantly correlated with a decrease in Autistic Mannerisms on the SRS. Higher baseline Freedom from Anxiety on the PHS-2 significantly predicts greater reduction in Autistic Mannerisms ($r=-0.23; p=0.01$) and Social Communication ($r=-0.19; p=0.02$) on the SRS.

Discussion: These findings suggest that adolescents with ASD who report higher self-esteem prior to treatment may experience greater gains in social ability, particularly in social communication and social cognition, following the PEERS® intervention. In particular, adolescents who endorse greater behavioral adjustment, happiness and satisfaction, and freedom from anxiety at baseline are more likely to experience a greater reduction in autistic mannerisms following treatment. Less anxiety prior to treatment is also associated with gains in social communication, and higher overall self-concept scores are associated with improvements in social cognition. These findings suggest that adolescent self-esteem may play an important role in predicting treatment outcome following PEERS®.

References/Citations: