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UCLA program improves social skills for autistic teens

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The UCLA PEERS program has assisted high functioning teens with autism by teaching them the strategies they need to improve relating to their peers

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According to a recent Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), more US children than ever before are being diagnosed with [autism](#) spectrum disorders (ASDs). [ASD](#) includes a range of persistent developmental disorders characterized by problems with communication and socialization; it is estimated that one in 88 children born in the US has some form of ASD. UCLA researchers are well aware of this epidemic. Since 2006, the UCLA Program for the Education and Enrichment of Relational Skills (PEERS) has assisted high functioning [teens](#) with ASD by teaching them the strategies they need to improve relating to their peers. The scientists published the current status of the PEERS program in the current edition of the Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders.

The researchers note that ASD is characterized by deficits in communication and impairments in social interactions; however, the degree of disability ranges widely. Some teens with the disorder are deemed to be “high functioning,” and are capable of being mainstreamed in school. However, their lack of **social skills** impacts interaction with their classmates. Many teens in middle and high school are susceptible to becoming social outcasts if they aren’t “cool enough.” However, the problem is greatest among those with disabilities such as ASD.

Previous research has found that the PEERS program was effective; however, it was not known whether these new skills persisted with the teens after they completed the classes. Therefore, the researchers conducted a 14-week follow-up study, which found that the skills taught and learned either stayed with the teens or further improved. Elizabeth Laugeson, a UCLA assistant clinical professor of psychiatry, and colleagues found that the PEERS intervention resulted in significant improvements in social skills as reported by parents and teachers using standardized measurements of social functioning. Dr. Laugeson is the director of the UCLA PEERS Clinic and The Help Group—UCLA Autism Research Alliance.

Parental reports also noted that teens significantly decreased ASD symptoms relating to social responsiveness by the end of the class as well as 14 weeks later. Furthermore, the teen’s knowledge of social skills improved and they socially interacted to a greater degree with their peers. Feedback from teachers also reported improved social skills among the ASD teens at the long-term follow-up. Of importance, the teachers were unaware that the teens had attended the PEERS class.

At the conclusion of the program, both parents and teachers reported a decrease in behavior problems with the teens. Dr. Laugeson explained, “Teens not only showed better social competence and greater understanding of social skills, but they were having more frequent get-togethers with their peers because they had developed the critical skills needed to make and keep friends.” She added that studies investigating the effectiveness of social skills training for individuals with ASD indicate that intervention during childhood and adolescence is critical; however, very few evidence-based interventions focus on improving the social competence of teens with ASD, which make the present findings unique and important.



Dr. Laugeson attributes the success of the program to the parents. The PEERS classes focus on teaching the rules of social etiquette to teens, and require parents to participate as well, providing them information in separate meetings on how to be social coaches to their teens in the real world. Many of the social skills taught are those things most of us know intuitively: how to have a conversation by trading information; showing good sportsmanship (i.e., “Hey! Nice shot!”); how to avoid bullying or deflect taunts (i.e., “Yeah, whatever”). The classes meet for 90-minutes for 14 weeks, and include brief didactic instruction, role-playing demonstrations, behavioral rehearsal exercises for teens to practice newly learned skills, in-class coaching with performance feedback, and weekly homework assignments, supervised by parents, such as

inviting a friend over to their home for a get-together.

Dr. Laugeson explained that the class is very structured; the skills are broken down into small rules and steps of social etiquette that give the teens specific actions they can take in response to a social situation. She added, "This method of instruction is very appealing to teens with autism because they tend to think concretely and literally and often learn by rote." A unique feature of the program is that it teaches the skills of socially accepted teens, not what adults think teens should do. Dr. Laugeson cited an example. If a teen is teased, most adults will tell him or her to ignore the person, walk away, or tell an adult; however, if one asks a teen if this works, they will respond that it does not. Therefore, the PEERS program teaches the teen to do what socially accepted adolescents are naturally doing. In this case that would be to give a short comeback that shows what the person said didn't bother them, such as responding, "whatever" or "yeah and?" Thus the ASD teen learns not to take the bait.

For further information about the PEERS program, click on [this link](#).

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