Title: Comparing Changes in Level of Social Anxiety in Teens and Young Adults with ASD following the PEERS® Social Skills Intervention

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Background: Previous research shows that deficits in social skills may increase anxiety in individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) (Kuusikko 2008). Research also suggests that social skills interventions often decrease anxiety symptoms as social skills improve (White, Ollendick & Bray 2011). However, children with ASD report an increase in social anxiety as they grow older (Kuusikko 2008). Given this trend, it would be beneficial to determine whether social skills interventions are as effective in decreasing social anxiety for young adults as they are for adolescents. While there is empirical support demonstrating the effectiveness of social skills interventions in decreasing anxiety for adolescents with ASD, the effectiveness for young adults requires further examination.

Objectives: The purpose of this study was to compare changes in anxiety levels pre- to post-treatment between adolescents and young adults following the UCLA Program for the Education and Enrichment of Relational Skills (PEERS®), an evidence-based, caregiver-assisted social skills program.

Methods: Fifty-four young adults (72.2% male; mean age=23.07, SD=4.36) and 158 teens (76.6% male; mean age= 13.64, SD=1.84) with ASD and their caregivers participated in the 16-week UCLA PEERS® social skills intervention, which targets skills related to making and keeping friends and handling peer conflict and rejection. At baseline, all participants had clinically-elevated ASD symptoms, as determined by a total score ≥ 60 on the Social Responsiveness Scale-Second Edition (SRS-2; Constanino 2012). Treatment gains were assessed using caregiver-reports on the Social Anxiety Scale (La Greca 1999). Treatment benefit was confirmed in the teen and young adult groups using Paired sample T-tests of pre- and post-treatment total scores on the SAS. Differences in rate of treatment gains across the two groups were determined using an ANOVA.

Results: Paired samples T-tests show significant decreases in social anxiety on the SAS pre- to post-treatment in both groups: adolescent (t=.576, p<.000), and young adult (t=.672, p<.000). Results from the ANOVA reveal no statistically significant difference in rate of decreased parent-reported social anxiety across the adolescent and young adult groups, F(.967, 1) = .995, p<.327.

Conclusion: These results suggest that PEERS® is equally effective in decreasing social anxiety in adolescents and young adults with ASD. These findings are encouraging given our understanding of how social anxiety may increase as youth with ASD get older (Kuusikko 2008). Future research is needed to continue to compare differential treatment gains across other stages of development following social skills interventions to determine if these differences are consistent across other domains.

References/Citations: