**Title:** The Feasibility and Collateral Benefits of a Peer-Mediated Model of the PEERS Curriculum

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**Introduction:** Previous studies suggest that peer mediation strategies in social interventions for autism spectrum disorder (ASD) are associated with increased generalizability and do not appear to cause negative outcomes for participants with ASD or typically developing (TD) peer mentors (Chan et al., 2009; Watkins et al., 2015). However, there have been mixed reports regarding the efficacy of peer-mediated interventions compared to interventions without peer mediation (Kasari et al., 2012; Kasari et al., 2016). In a larger study, we examined the effectiveness of including peer mediation strategies in the PEERS curriculum, a manualized intervention for adolescents with ASD without intellectual disability (Laugeson & Frankel, 2010). Results of the larger study will be reported elsewhere (Matthews et al., under review). This abstract explores the feasibility of including peer mediation in the PEERS curriculum and examines changes in social skills, social skills knowledge, loneliness, autism knowledge, and autism-related stigma among TD peer mentors.

**Method:** Participants in the present analysis include 16 TD adolescents (M age = 15.50, SD = 1.27; 7 males) who served as peer mentors in peer mediated PEERS (PMP), and one parent of each peer mentor. PMP was administered with a 1:1 ratio of peer mentors to participants with ASD. Peer mentors completed a 1-hour training and received in-vivo prompting from clinicians to implement the peer mediation strategies of proximity and peer initiation (Odom & Strain, 1984) during PEERS sessions and homework assignments. Participants completed the Social Responsiveness Scale (Constantino & Gruber, 2012), Social Skills Improvement System (Gresham & Elliott, 2008), Quality of Socialization Scale (Frankel & Mintz, 2008), the Test of Adolescent Social Skills Knowledge (Laugeson & Frankel, 2010), the Social Interaction Anxiety Scale (Mattick & Clarke, 1998), the Revised UCLA Loneliness Scale (Russell et al. 1980), autism knowledge questionnaire (Kuhn & Carter, 2006), and the Social Distance Scale (Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2015) pre- and post-treatment. Analyses included separate paired samples t-tests or Wilcoxon signed rank tests with a Bonferroni corrected alpha of .004 to examine change from time 1 to time 2.

**Results:** Recruitment of peer mentors did not pose a challenge, likely because the study site regularly recruits mentors for other interventions. Number of peer mentor absences ranged from 0 to 2 (M = 1.13, SD = 0.81). Formal data were not collected on the conduct of the TD peer mentors during PEERS sessions; however, clinicians reported that the vast majority were able to implement peer mediation strategies. The most commonly reported challenge was the tendency of peer mentors to indicate that they did not complete homework assignments during homework review; this was addressed through individual meetings. There was a significant increase in adolescent social skills knowledge (z = 3.52, p < .001, d = 2.33). Approaching statistical significance were a medium reduction in adolescent-reported loneliness (t(15) = 2.76, p = .01, d = 0.69); a medium increase in peer mentors’ autism knowledge (t(14) = -2.48, p = .03, d = 0.66), and a medium increase in parent-reported invited get-togethers (z = 1.98, p = .05, d = 0.57).

**Discussion:** Findings provide preliminary support for the feasibility of PMP and preliminary evidence that serving as a peer mentor in PEERS provides benefits to TD participants. Marginal improvements in autism knowledge are intriguing given that the only direct instruction related to autism occurred at the 1-hour peer mentor orientation. Exposure to ASD may have resulted in implicit learning about the disorder. Alternatively, peer mentors may have sought additional information because of their involvement in the program. Future research is necessary to examine the feasibility of implementing PMP in other settings and to replicate current findings.

**References/Citations:**


