Title: Predicting Peer Relationship Quality in Children with ASD: Parallel Associations between Social Skills and Behavior Problems

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Introduction: Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) demonstrate characteristic deficits in the social domain, and often also present with accompanying behavior problems (Carter et al., 2005; Totsika et al., 2011). These social and behavioral challenges may impede their ability to form and maintain high quality relationships with classroom peers (E.g., Frostad & Pijl, 2007; Jones & Frederickson, 2010). The purpose of the current study was to explore the parallel associations of social skills and behavior problems of children with ASD over 1.5 years, and how the baseline rate and growth of these two growth processes predicts peer relationship quality in the classroom.

Method: Teachers reported on the social skills, behavior problems, and two measures of peer relationship quality (inclusion and rejection), of 192 children with ASD, ages 4-7, three times over the course of 1.5 years. This study examined a model of the longitudinal association between social skills and behavior problems of young children with ASD through parallel process latent growth analysis. Within that model, we also examined how the intercept and slope of social skills and behavior problems was related to children being included and/or rejected by their peers.

Results: The model provided reasonably good fit to the data based on CFI = 0.96, TLI = .93, and RMSEA 0.08. Social skills and behavior problems were significantly negatively associated at baseline and in growth over time (ps < .001). There was a negative association between intercept and slope for both processes of social skills and behavior problems (ps < .001). Greater peer inclusion was predicted by higher initial rates and growth of social skills and lower initial rates of behavior problems (ps < .05). Meanwhile higher initial rates and growth in behavior problems over time predicted greater peer rejection (ps <.001), but there was no effect of social skills on rejection.

Discussion: Children who had greater social skills and fewer behavior problems at baseline were at risk for losing those advantages over time as social demands become increasingly complex. Children’s social skills were predictive of inclusion by peers, whereas behavior problems predicted both inclusion and rejection by peers. While numerous social skills training programs exist to improve the peer relationships of children with ASD (see Otero et al., 2015 for a review), the current study suggests future directions for interventions to reduce children’s behavior problems or improve peer acceptance of problem behaviors, in order to facilitate higher quality peer relationships for children with ASD in the classroom.

References/Citations: