

Development and Flexible Implementation of a PEERS[®]-Informed School-Based Curriculum for Middle Schoolers with Social Skills Challenges

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Introduction

PEERS Program

- PEERS[®] is an evidence-based social skills group for adolescents with autism spectrum disorder (ASD).
- Manuals for both outpatient and school-based implementation are currently available.
- Topics include: rules for back-and-forth conversations, finding a source of friends, and handling disagreements and bullying.

Challenges of Implementing PEERS in Schools

- The official PEERS School-Based program is designed to be a 90-minute session/14-week group with daily practice.
- Most schools are not able to allot the 90 minutes per week needed to fully implement the program.
- In addition, students often struggle to use the skills learned in group effectively with their peers outside of session.

Aims

- 1) Adapt the PEERS School-Based Curriculum to meet the needs of school-based partners while maintaining the evidence-based components of the curriculum
- 2) Train school staff how to implement the group independently and to promote generalizability outside of group sessions
- 3) Create a supplemental manual with the modified curriculum

Steps Toward Adaptation and Implementation

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|--------------------|---|
| Conceptualization | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Obtained buy-in and operational support from Director of Student Services <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Identified district needs and interests ✓ Proposed plan for adapted curriculum ✓ Identified target schools & group leaders ✓ Identified progress monitoring measures • Developed didactic training to introduce district to the group |
| Pre-Implementation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provided training to broad group of teachers, behavioral health providers, and support staff • Coached School Teams at targeted schools in strategies to.. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Select group leaders ✓ Identify appropriate students, ✓ Discuss strategies to promote generalizability • Prepared adapted group curriculum based on individual needs of students and time constraints |
| Implementation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provided coaching & modeling to group leaders before, during, and after each session <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Co-led the group with another group leader and behavioral coach ✓ Strategies & materials for communication with educators, parents, & families ✓ Gradually reduced role in group during later sessions to promote independence of group leaders |
| Follow-Up | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adapted manual and coaching will be provided to school teams <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Tailored district-focused implementation supports including resources, handouts, newsletters, tips, and guidance ✓ Guidelines for assessment and evaluation of progress • Group postponed due to COVID: Tentative plan to include group in summer programming |

Population

- Two middle schools in suburban school district
- Group 1: six students across several 8:1:1 special education classrooms
- Group 2 (planned for Summer, 2020): will include 6-8 students in the general education setting
- Most, but not all students have ASD diagnosis
- Students must be socially motivated and have intact language skills

Discussion

- Evidence-based school groups can be difficult to implement *as written*, limiting dissemination
- Planful adaptations both can and need to be made to fit within district schedules, cultures, and populations
- Technical support and consultation is necessary for this to be done well

Next Steps

- Development of adapted supplemental implementation manual with 45-minute lesson plans, and tips and strategies for group leaders
- Ongoing discussion about including group in summer programming (if permitted due to COVID)
- New group leaders will receive coaching for the first several sessions of group
- Continue discussion with school teams about feasibility of group implementation during the academic year, including barriers (e.g. staffing, scheduling)

Limitations

- Pilot group & Round 2 were postponed indefinitely after Week 9 due to COVID-19. No post-test measures completed
- Data from group leaders & supports ($n=2$) not reported, to protect confidentiality

| PEERS As Written (90 mins/14 weeks) | Adapted PEERS (45 mins/12 weeks) |
|---------------------------------------|---|
| Homework Review (30 mins) | Didactic Lesson & Roleplays (30 mins) |
| Didactic Lesson & Roleplays (40 mins) | Teen Activity (10min) |
| Teen Activity (15 mins) | Educator Newsletters for Continuity* |
| Homework Assignment (5 mins) | Parent Newsletters with At-Home Activities* |

*Newly developed supplemental materials