

Social Skills Training for Youth with Autism Spectrum Disorders: A Follow-Up



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KEYWORDS

• Autism • Social skills • Youth • Interventions • Evidence-based practice

KEY POINTS

- Social communication remains one of the core deficits associated with autism spectrum disorders.
- Several interventions with strong empirical support are available for practitioners to choose from and information on them is readily available.
- Strategies are most successful when they are implemented with fidelity and match the individual's skill deficit.
- Assessment measures have been updated to identify social deficits and to align more closely with DSM-5 diagnostic criteria.

INTRODUCTION

The substantial increase in prevalence rates for autism spectrum disorders (ASD) over the last 10 years has sparked debate regarding cause and critical need for effective services. The most recent reports released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimate that as many as 1 in every 68 children are affected by ASD, a 78% increase from 2002 to 2010.¹ It affects more boys than girls with prevalence estimates being as high as 1 in 42 boys being diagnosed with ASD compared with 1 in 189 girls. The increase in prevalence rates has been referred to as an “epidemic” by some autism organizations and news organizations. However, the

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Abbreviations	
ASD	Autism spectrum disorders
CBI	Cognitive behavioral intervention
CDC	Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
DSM	Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder
EBP	Evidence-based practices
ESDM	Early Start Denver Model
NAC	National Autism Center
NPDC	National Professional Development Center on Autism Spectrum Disorders
PRT	Pivotal response training
SCD	Social (pragmatic) communication disorder
SRS-2	Social Responsiveness Scale-2
SSIS	Social Skills Improvement System
SSRS	Social Skills Rating System
SST	Social skills training
VSM	Video self-modeling

CDC has pointedly chosen to avoid using the term “epidemic,” opting instead to refer to the increase as an “important public health concern.” Irrespective of the terms used to describe the increase in prevalence, the demand for effective intervention modalities for youth with ASD has never been greater. Educators, therapists, and physicians have been inundated with an increase in the number of students and patients with ASD in their classrooms and clinics.

Definition of Autism

The definition of autism has changed several times since first described by Leo Kanner² in 1943. However, one characteristic has remained consistent: a marked impairment in social relatedness. In fact, “social communication” remains 1 of the 2 core deficits of ASD in the most recent edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder (DSM-5).³ According to the manual, characteristic deficits in social communication and social interaction occur across multiple contexts. Specifically, they include the following:

- 1. Deficits in social emotional reciprocity
- 2. Deficits in nonverbal communicative behaviors used for social interaction
- 3. Deficits in developing, maintaining, and understanding relationships.

Historically, the impairment in social relatedness presents itself in several ways, including limited eye contact, limited engagement with others, a tendency to be alone, impaired Theory of Mind, deficits in social reciprocity, and the inability to infer socio-cultural constructs of interaction.⁴⁻⁸

Asperger Syndrome

The 1994 release of the DSM-IV introduced Asperger syndrome as one of the diagnoses to fall under the umbrella of Autism Spectrum Disorders. Individuals diagnosed with Asperger syndrome have characteristic deficits in social skills and display specific interests or preferences or may have repetitive or stereotypical behaviors. However, they lack impairment in language development and have an IQ ranging from low average to highly gifted. The recent issue of the DSM-5 has removed the diagnosis of Asperger syndrome, offering only a diagnosis of ASD with the notation of mild, moderate, or severe. In addition, a separate diagnosis of Social (Pragmatic)

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