



Social Skills Therapy at the Seaver Autism Center

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SOCIAL DYSFUNCTION is a fundamental feature of autism spectrum disorders (ASD) and perhaps the most debilitating one. Impairments in socialization persist in individuals with ASD regardless of age or language level, including difficulties with social communication, comprehension of appropriate facial expressions, and modulation of eye contact. Many of these difficulties persist into adulthood, and without intervention, may increase rather than diminish with age,¹ and are likely to impact social, emotional and occupational functioning as well as quality-of-life variables, such as employment and companionship.²⁻³

Improvement in social functioning is a critical

target for intervention for children and adolescents with ASD. Treatment objectives are broad and reflect the diversity of problems seen across the autism spectrum. Much of the current literature describes treatment plans geared toward increasing language and basic skills deficits found in younger, primarily nonverbal children with ASD. However, little is known about effective strategies for improving socialization in older, high-functioning children with ASD.

Despite a dearth of research, several models of social skills interventions have been applied to verbally fluent children with ASD. These interventions address a range of social deficits, from

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Leaders in Autism Research Gather at Mount Sinai



THE SEAVER AUTISM CENTER FOR RESEARCH & TREATMENT

at the Mount Sinai School of Medicine had the honor of hosting a clinical practicum of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP) as part of the Academy's 57th Annual Meeting on October 26. Chaired by Alexander Kolevzon, MD, Clinical Director of the Seaver Autism Center, the program covered recent advances in the genetics of autism spectrum disorders, diagnosis and assessment, and pharmacological and behavioral treatments. Speakers were (pictured l. to r.): Joseph Buxbaum, PhD, Director, Seaver Autism Center; Wayne Goodman, MD, Chairman, Department of Psychiatry; Alexander Kolevzon, MD; Jeffrey Newcorn, MD, Division Chief, Child and Adolescent Psychiatry; David Grodberg, MD, Assistant Professor of Psychiatry.

NOT PICTURED: Latha Soorya, PhD, Chief Psychologist of the Seaver Autism Center; Eustacia Cutler, advocate and author of *Thorn in My Pocket: Temple Grandin's Mother Tells the Family Story*.

basic (e.g., social initiation) to more complex (e.g., “theory of mind,” the ability to understand the emotions and perspectives of others). Models of intervention include cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT); play therapies based on psychodynamic theories; comprehensive packages (e.g., Relationship Development Intervention or RDI); and eclectic approaches that draw from various theoretical orientations.

SOCIAL SKILLS RESEARCH AT THE SEAVER CENTER

Preliminary studies suggest promise for social skills group therapies in individuals with Asperger’s Syndrome and high-functioning autism.⁴ A review article reported that approximately 70% of studies yielded positive treatment effects for targeted social skills therapy.⁵ Furthermore, neuroimaging research conducted by Seaver Center investigator Dr. Ting Wang found that simply providing children with ASD with explicit instructions to pay more attention to key social cues, such as facial expression and tone of voice, resulted in increased activity in the medial prefrontal cortex, part of the brain’s network for understanding the intentions of others (see Figure 1). This suggests that social skills interventions may facilitate more “normalized” patterns of brain activity.

A study currently in progress at the Seaver Autism Center by Drs. Wang and Soorya is one step toward developing the empirical support needed to advance therapeutic treatment for socialization skills in children with ASD. The study, funded by the NIH and Autism Speaks, is evaluating short-term outcomes associated with two forms of commonly used social skills therapies: CBT and child-directed play therapy. Each 12-

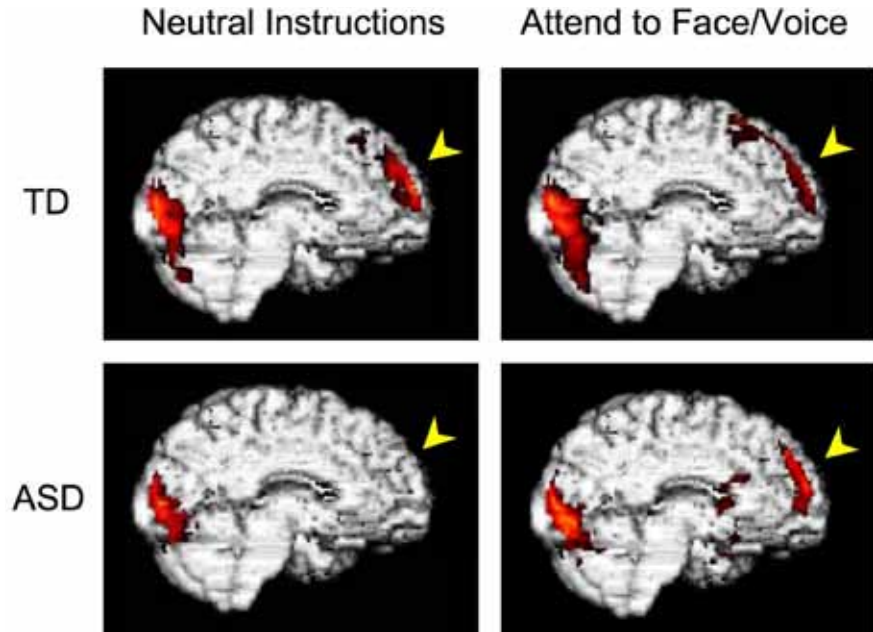


FIGURE 1. Change in medial prefrontal cortex activation patterns in children with autism spectrum disorders following instructions to attend to facial expression and tone of voice. (TD = typically developing) Wang, AT, et al, 2007; 64:698-708, *Archives of General Psychiatry*.

week group is focused on children 8-11 years of age with ASD and fluent verbal skills and includes a concurrent therapy group for parents.

Importantly, the study compares CBT and child-directed play therapy in a randomized, controlled design. This study is assessing a variety of outcomes, including effects on emotional perception, changes in social behavior at home and school, and changes in brain activity during social information processing (measured by functional magnetic resonance imaging).

CBT and play therapy represent two different approaches to social skills treatment, but they target similar deficits. The play therapy group is a child-directed group utilizing strategies such as reflective functioning statements to draw out emotion-focused behavior and language in children. For example, a therapist may comment, “You/your character seem frustrated. What’s going

on?” CBT represents an adult-directed model in which skills are broken down to make learning more manageable. For example, when teaching group members to initiate conversation, steps may include:

1. Walk up to your friend
2. Look at him
3. Say, “Hi.”
4. Wait for him to respond
5. Ask a question related to a topic of his interest.

COMMUNITY COLLABORATIONS

The Seaver Autism Center is striving to translate these scientific efforts into optimal community care through alliances with numerous support groups and community agencies, as well as formal affiliations with the YAI National Institute for People with Disabilities, Jewish Community Center

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(JCC) and Federation Employment and Guidance Service (F.E.G.S.). Work in the community enables the Seaver Center to serve a broader population, including a wider age range as well as individuals with more significant cognitive impairments who may benefit from the strong literature base on building basic social skills in children with ASD.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

We are presently focused on developing and adapting evidence-based interventions to meet the pressing needs of the burgeoning population of adolescents and young adults with ASD. In clinical practice with adults with ASD, social skills interventions focus on acquiring new skills to navigate social interactions with family members, friends, neighbors, and co-workers. Social skills groups may provide a safe place for discussing these skills and then practicing them in role plays.

For example, members of a social skills group conducted through Adaptations at the JCC-Manhattan discuss strategies to become better conversationalists, deal with difficult social situations, and manage their stress. In a recent lesson on assertiveness, participants role-played being assertive with various people in their lives, from co-workers to parents to friends. Some examples included requesting clarification from a boss, when not understanding an assignment at work or requesting that a friend pay back money he borrowed. The lesson plans draw from evidence-based interventions from marital counseling, stress management, and social skills literature and is being developed into a manual to test in future research studies.

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SUNDAY, APRIL 3, 2011

For more information, please contact Sarah.Teitelbaum@mssm.edu

New Seaver Foundation Fellowships

The Seaver Foundation recently awarded four new Fellowships, and provided funding for a junior faculty member at the Mount Sinai School of Medicine:

- OZLEM BOZDAGI-GUNAL, MD, PhD is an electrophysiologist working on novel mouse models of autism.
- TRACY BRANDT, PhD, is developing an advanced clinical algorithm for diagnosing genetic defects in autism.
- IOANA CARCEA, MD, PhD is evaluating the role of the autism-associated Sema 7A protein in the development and plasticity of the brain.
- NEPA UPPAL is a PhD student who is performing quantitative characterization of changes in key cortical areas involved in autism pathology.
- SEUNGTAI (CHRIS) YOON, PhD is a biostatistician with the Seaver Autism Center who is working on data analysis and interpretation.

Meet the Chief Psychologist

Dr. Soorya oversees psychological evaluations and behavioral interventions

LATHA SOORYA, PhD, Chief Psychologist at the Seaver Autism Center, is a clinical psychologist, board-certified behavior analyst (BCBA), and Assistant Professor in the Department of Psychiatry at the Mount Sinai School of Medicine. As Chief Psychologist, Dr. Soorya oversees psychological evaluations and behavioral interventions at the Seaver Autism Center. Dr. Soorya is also a trainer and experienced evaluator in specialized autism diagnostic tools and cognitive assessments, and oversees the team of clinical psychologists, psychiatrists, residents and fellows in conducting reliable and accurate assessments. Dr. Soorya's background is ideally suited to provide reports that are acutely geared toward linking test data to direct, practical intervention recommendations.

In addition to her clinical work, Dr. Soorya is also actively involved in the dissemination of information to the community through lectures, involvement in graduate student education/training, through community grant funding, and lecturing to physician groups on best practices in the assessment and treatment of ASDs. In addition, Dr. Soorya and Seaver Autism Center staff have worked with several community agencies to deliver social skills interventions geared to the needs of children with ASDs beyond our academic center. Through generous funding from the UJA Federation of New York, Seaver Center staff are currently working with four local agencies including Westchester Jewish Community Services (WJCS), JCC-Manhattan, Samuel

Field Y, and the Rosenthal-Y on using evidence-informed practices for individuals with ASD. Dr. Soorya also oversees psychology fellowship training programs funded by FEGS and the JCC-Manhattan to support the delivery of evidence-informed practices in community agencies serving adults and children with ASDs.



Dr. Soorya's research includes studies evaluating measurement tools for treatment outcome research and building an evidence base for socialization interventions. Dr. Soorya and Ting Wang, PhD, a developmental psychologist and neuroimager at the Seaver Center, have received grant funding from the National Institute of Mental Health and Autism Speaks to conduct

the first randomized controlled trial comparing two different types of social skills group treatments for high functioning children with ASDs. The study is evaluating neural (through functional magnetic resonance imaging), behavioral, and social/emotional outcomes of social skills interventions in children ages 8-11 years old with high-functioning ASD. The study will enroll approximately 75 children over four years, and seeks to yield important information on the efficacy of social skills groups and whether the results can be applied in a general way to other children with ASD.

Dr. Soorya and the Seaver Autism Center are committed to developing empirical support for widely used interventions such as social skills groups. Research efforts such as this will advance both science as well as service delivery.

• **THE SEAVER AUTISM CENTER NEWSLETTER** brings you timely updates about new developments related to research and treatment of autism spectrum disorders, as well as activities at the Seaver Autism Center. To be placed on our mailing list, please contact SeaverCenterEditor@mssm.edu or The Seaver Autism Center, Mount Sinai School of Medicine, One Gustave L. Levy Place, Box 1668, New York, NY 10029. Our phone number is 212-241-0961 and our web site is www.SeaverAutismCenter.org.

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