

Fostering Social Connections Among Adolescents With Autism: Lessons From a Mixed-Methods Project

Eric A. Common, University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS

Jenny Gustafson, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN

Melissa Sreckovic, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC

Erik Carter, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN

Abstract

We present findings from a multi-state project focused on implementing peer network interventions to foster social competence and connections for youth with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Lessons learned through 16 focus groups, 33 interviews, 2 single-subject interventions, and observations will be shared, along with considerations for delivering interventions in high schools.

Introduction

Adolescent Peer Relationships



Frequently sees friends Outside of school:

22%

14%

6%

Intellectual Disability Multiple Disabilities Autism
Never or rarely receives phone calls from friends:

42%

63%

84%

Intellectual Disability Multiple Disabilities Autism
Have NOT been invited to other youth's social activities during the past year:

25%

43%

50%

Intellectual Disability Multiple Disabilities Autism
(Wagner, Cadwallader, & Marder, 2003)

Peer Networks

A peer network is a group of students established around a student with a disability that: (a) meets weekly to participate in an activity and discuss interactions; (b) helps the student become more involved in school life; and (c) receives regular feedback/guidance from an adult facilitator.

Peer Network Goals

Provide intentional opportunities for students with disabilities to socialize and interact with peers; foster lasting relationships; increase school participation; provide peers with opportunities to get to know a student with disability.

Basic Steps for Implementation

1. Identify interested students with a disability and network facilitator
2. Invite 2-6 peers to join the group (peer partners)
3. Hold an initial orientation meeting
4. Facilitate regular peer network meetings
 - Arrange a shared activity
 - Check in on weekly social contacts
 - Encourage expansion of the network
5. Provide feedback and support
6. Fade adult support and maintain the network

Method

Focus Groups and Individual Interviews

- Discussed social competence; revised and refined components from feedback

Vanderbilt

- Nine focus groups (involving 61 stakeholders) including: educators and administrators; parents of high school students with ASD; community representatives and providers.
- Individual interviews (involving 33 youth and young adults with ASD)

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

- Seven focus groups (involving 41 stakeholders) including: educators, administrators, and other school personnel; parents of children with ASD; high school students and young adults with ASD

Pilot Studies: Implementation of Peer Networks Across Sites

Vanderbilt

6 male high school students with ASD (ages 14-18):
- 2 African-American, 2 European-American, 2 Hispanic
- 5 with intellectual disability and autism; 1 with medical diagnosis of Asperger's

4 adult facilitators (1 special educator, 3 paraprofessionals)

Each group had 1-4 peers partners (students without developmental disabilities) and 1 student with ASD

Three diverse metropolitan high schools serving 675 to 1,980 students. 73 to 90% of students were eligible for free or reduced-price meals. 29 to 68% of students were Black, 23 to 24% of students were White, 6 to 39% of students were Hispanic

Four networks met during a 30-min lunch period once per week; two networks met during a 30-min advisory period 1-2 times per week

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

3 male high school students with ASD (ages 15-16):
- All European-American

2 adult facilitators (research team members), 1 general education teacher consultant

Each group had 3-4 peer partners (students without developmental disabilities) and 1-2 students with ASD

One rural-fringe high school serving approximately 1,000 students. 28% of students were eligible for free or reduced-price meals. 13% of students were Black, 69% of students were White, 13% of students were Hispanic

Two networks total; each network met once per week during a 30-min lunch period

Focus Group Results

Stakeholder Perspectives on Relationships

- Students with ASD struggled to develop friendships
- “[If you] ask him who his friend is, he’ll say someone in class but he doesn’t do anything with people alone.” (Parent)
- Individuals with ASD expressed negative social experiences with peers

Stakeholder Recommended Strategies for Promoting Social Skills and Connections

- Acceptance from others
- Communication and social skills
- Internal processes (e.g., accepting criticism, empathy, perspective taking, forgiveness)
- Self-determination and confidence
- Capacity to learn from peers
- Valuing social skills and interactions
- Relationships (with a broad range of individuals) and friendship

Summary

- Students with ASD need targeted social supports
- Peer networks are one relatively easy way to address social-related support needs of adolescents with ASD
- Students with and without ASD benefit socially from peer networks
- Peer networks substantially increase social engagement and foster social connections

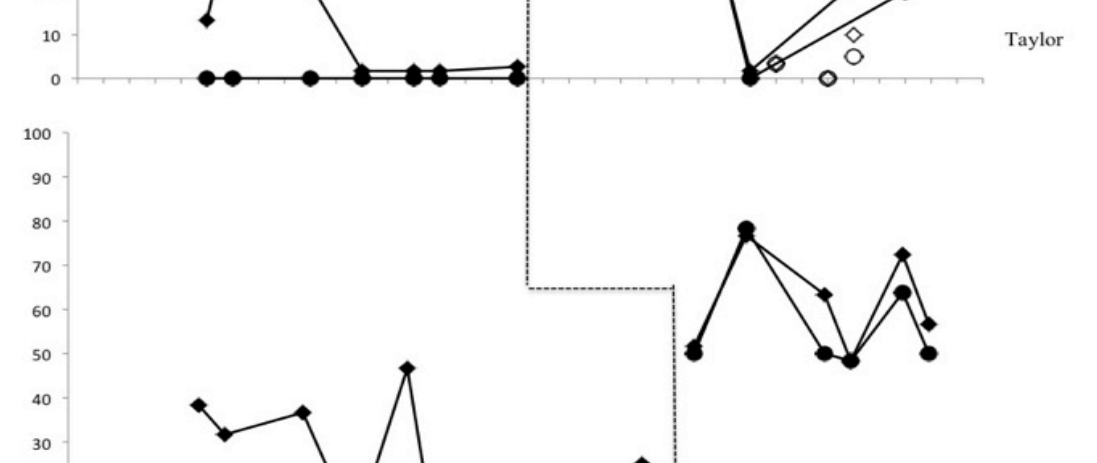
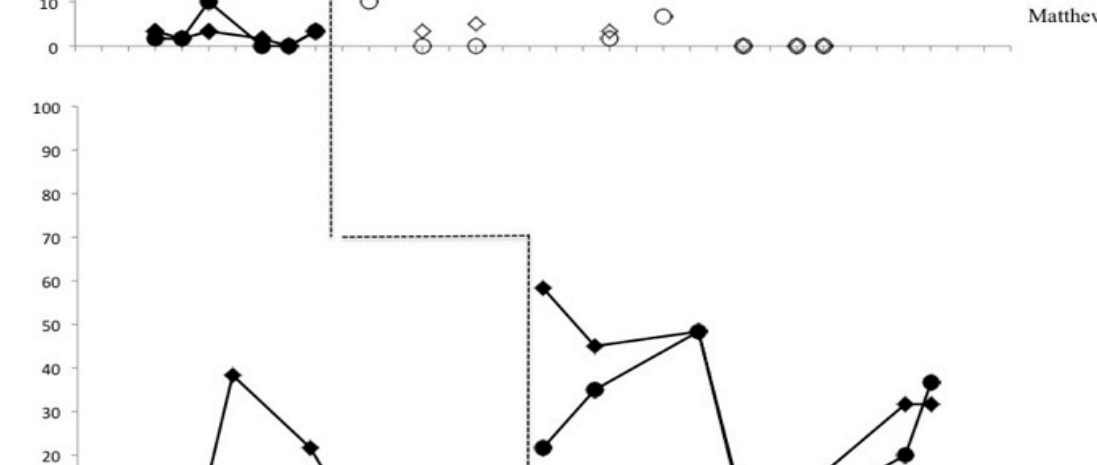
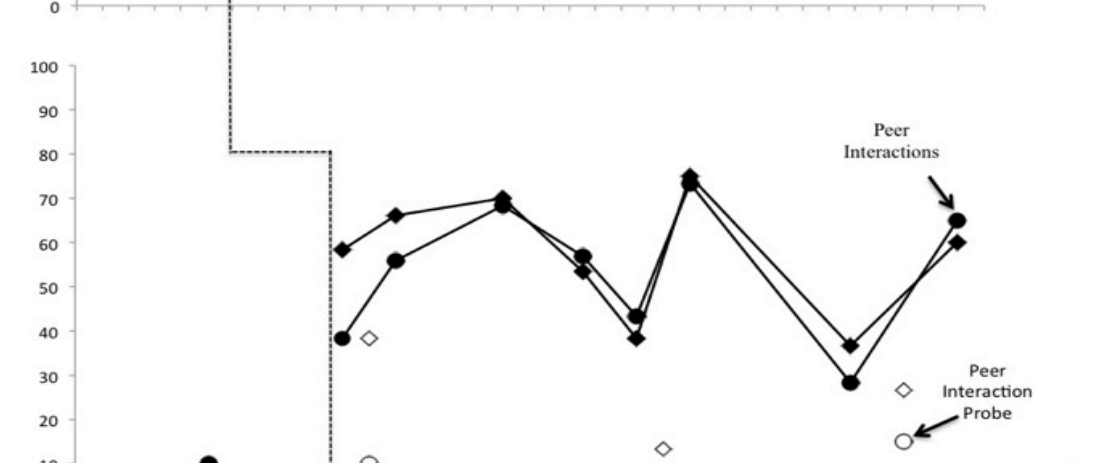
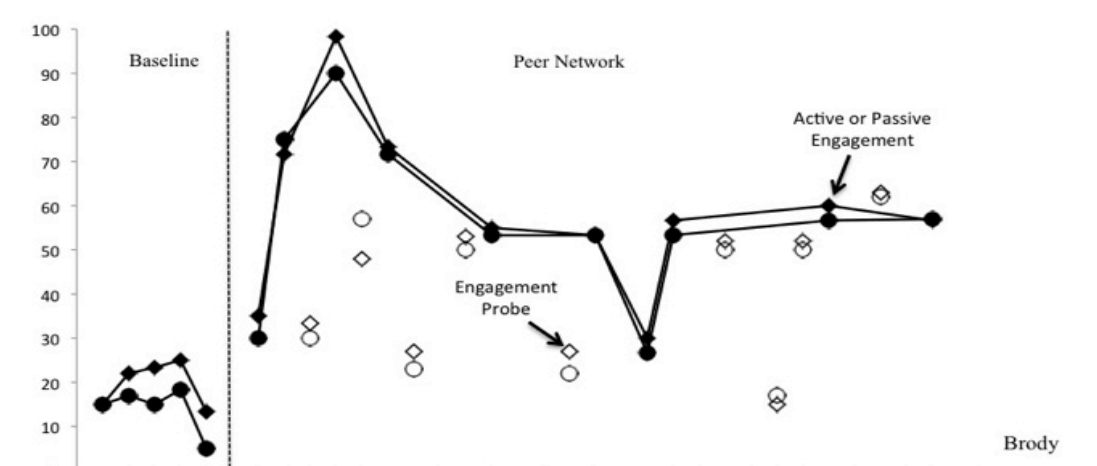
Thank you!

This study would not have been possible without the support of: Karen Gardner, Teagan Mullins, Julie Hochman, Hannah Fan, Michelle Harvey, and the CSESA team at UNC Chapel Hill.



The work reported here was supported by the Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education through Grant R324C120006 awarded to UNC-Chapel Hill. The opinions expressed represent those of the authors and do not necessarily represent views of the Institute or the U.S. Department of Education.

In the Cafeteria



Hochman, Carter, Bottema-Beutel, Gardner, Harvey, Gustafson, & Huber (in preparation)

In the Classroom (Advisory)

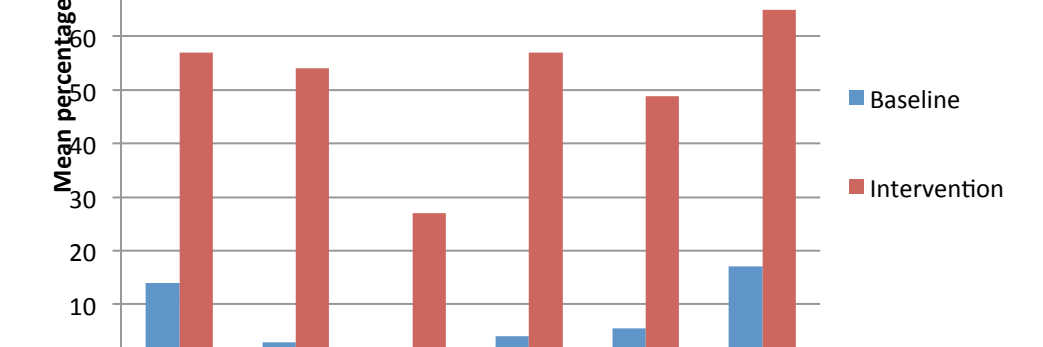
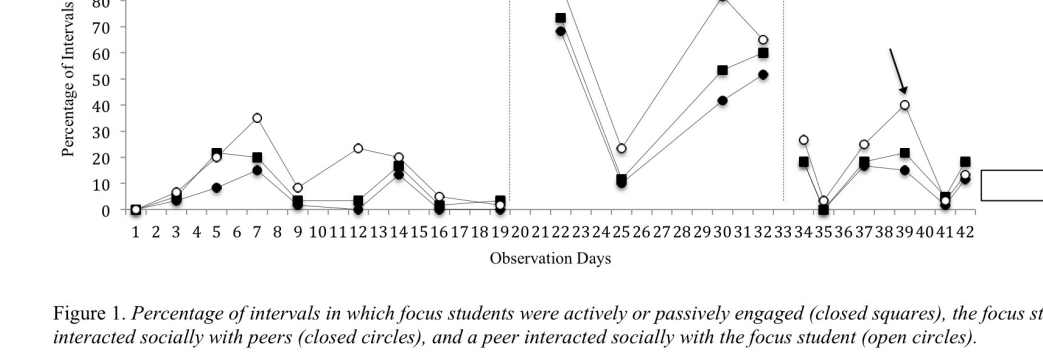
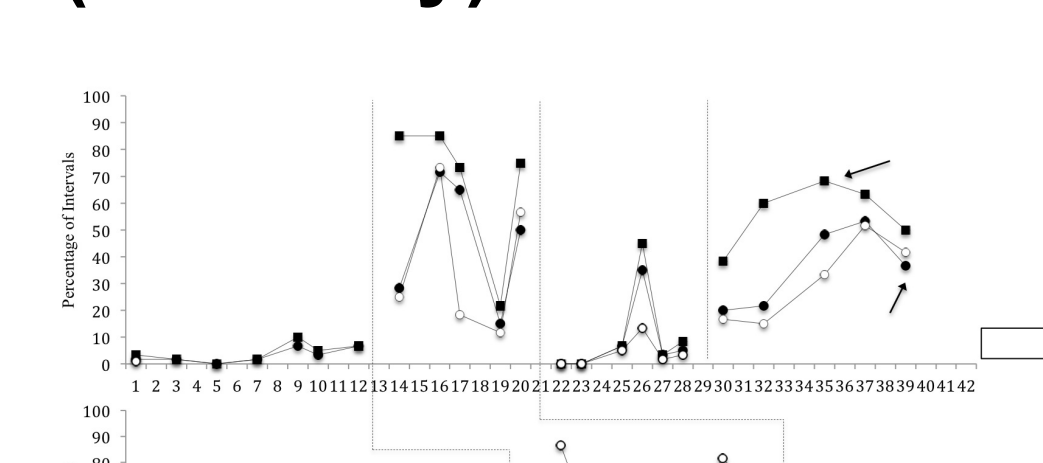
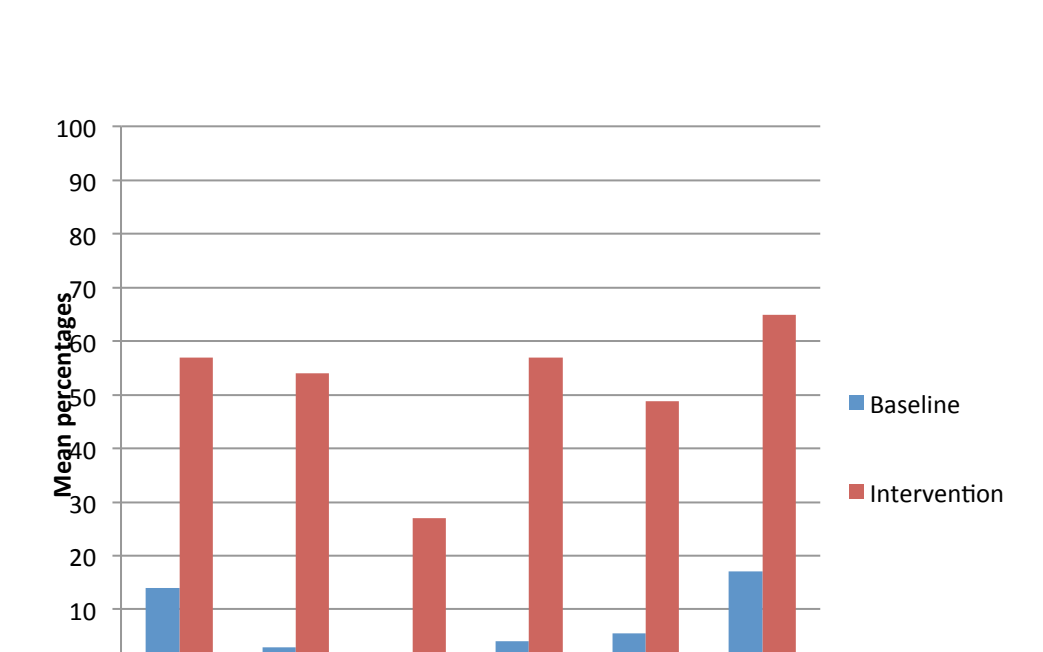


Figure 1. Percentage of intervals in which focus students were actively or passively engaged (filled squares); the focus study interacted socially with peers (filled circles); and a peer interacted socially with the focus student (open circles).

Increases in Peer Interactions



Pilot Study Results

Participant Feedback

Students with ASD

-Enjoys to “meet every Friday and talk about new things.”

Peer Partners

-“These are skills you can take with you to college.” (coming out of your comfort zone, learning to work with people who are different than you)

-“It helped not only the students we were working with but helped us grow as people.”

-Peer partners noticed other students being nicer to students with ASD.

Parents of Children with ASD

-“I think the more [my son] interacts with positive peers, the more comfortable he becomes with all interactions.”

-“[My son] likes to have someone to eat lunch with on peer support group days – he talks about this.”

Teacher Consultant

-“It makes me realize that programs like this need to be initiated in freshmen, sophomore classes.”