

Abstract

This study investigated the efficacy of the school-based Program for the Education and Enrichment of Relational Skills (PEERS®) when implemented as a pre-employment transition service, on the social competence of teens and young adults with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD). The program was administered weekly by vocational rehabilitation counselors via telehealth. Results indicate a decrease in the severity of the ASD symptomatology pertaining to social communication. Participants were invited to, and hosted, more get-togethers with peers who shared their interests. Implications for individuals on the autism spectrum and for-employment transition service providers are discussed.

Social Skills and Workplace Readiness

Workforce Innovation & Opportunity Act (2014)

- Legal mandate to support teenagers with social-skills deficit
- Support for Individuals with Disabilities to attain meaningful employment

Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) Agencies

- Allocated 15% of their federal grant dollars to provide a new set of services
- Aimed to promote early preparation and exposure to employment for students with disabilities

Pre-Employment Transition Services

- Workplace readiness training to develop social skills and foster independent living
- Recognizes the demonstrated correlation between social skill proficiency and future success in employment (Office of the Federal Register, 2014; Webb et al., 2008)
- Designed to be delivered in group settings and in collaboration with schools
- Made available to students at an earlier age, starting at 14
- Eliminated the barriers of application and eligibility determination
- Removed the requirement for recipients to be VR clients
- Made Available for students who receive special education services or have a 504 Plan

Office of Disability Employment Policy

- Highlights the importance of social skills in employer hiring decisions
- According to "Soft Skills: The Competitive Edge (Office of Disability Employment Policy, n.d.), networking, oral and written communication, teamwork, and collaboration skills are essential for work readiness

Research Questions

The goal of this project was to evaluate the effectiveness of an evidence-based social skills intervention (PEERS® for School-Based Professionals) for teens and adults with an ASD diagnosis between the ages of 14-years to 19-years via telehealth as part of pre-employment transition services provided by the Maine Department of Labor, Division of Vocational Rehabilitation. Specifically, the research questions for this study were:

What is the effect of delivery of the PEERS® for school-based professionals' curriculum via telehealth as a pre-employment transition service on the social skills knowledge of teens with an ASD diagnosis?

1. What is the effect of delivery of the PEERS® for school-based professionals' curriculum via telehealth as a pre-employment transition service on the number of invited get-togethers hosted by or attended by teens with an ASD diagnosis?
2. What is the effect of delivery of the PEERS® for school-based professionals' curriculum via telehealth as a pre-employment transition service on the autism symptomatology of teens with an ASD diagnosis?
3. What is the effect of delivery of the PEERS® for school-based professionals' curriculum via telehealth as a pre-employment transition service on the autism symptomatology of teens with an ASD diagnosis?

Results

Table 1.

Statistical Differences between Pretest and Posttest in TASSK and SRS-2

Measure	Pretest		Posttest		t	df	p	ES (g)
	M	SD	M	SD				
TASSK	0.610	0.100	0.763	0.142	3.371	9	.008*	0.974 [0.239, 1.677]
SRS-2 Total T-score	68.700	7.196	62.556	7.748	-2.058	9	.069	-0.595 [-1.210, 0.046]
SRS-2 SocCom. T-score	68.000	8.042	59.778	7.390	-3.018	9	.015*	-0.872 [-1.548, -0.165]
SRS-2 SocCog. T-score	67.200	8.766	60.889	9.445	-2.144	9	.061	-0.620 [-1.239, 0.027]
SRS-2 SocAwa. T-score	62.300	6.165	60.222	4.848	-0.855	9	.415	-0.247 [-0.818, 0.337]
SRS-2 SocMot. T-score	63.400	6.257	59.556	8.247	-1.092	9	.303	-0.316 [-0.892, 0.277]
RRB T-score	71.600	7.763	66.667	7.288	-1.531	9	.160	-0.442 [-1.033, 0.169]

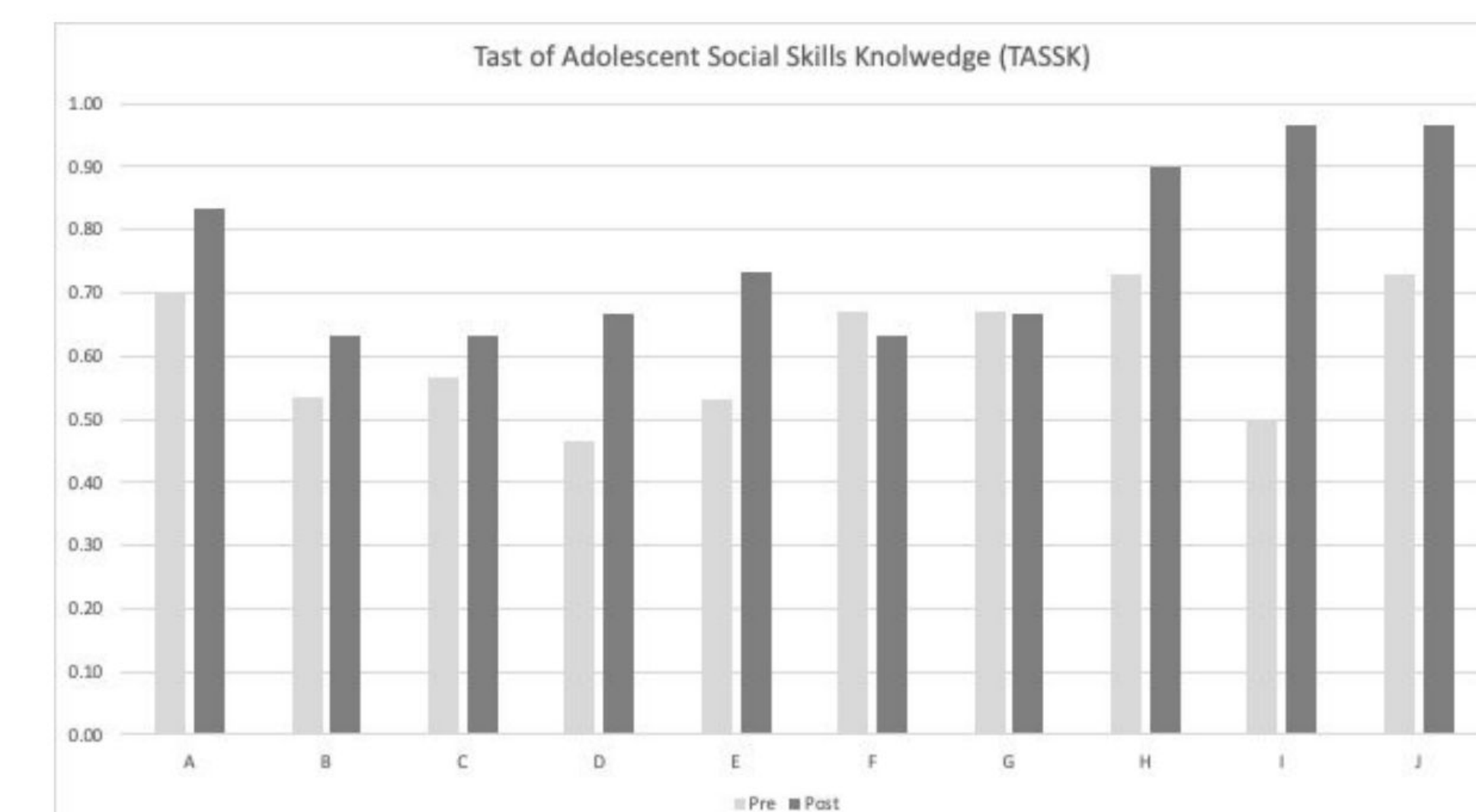
Table 2.

Nonparametric Statistical Differences between Pretest and Posttest in QSQ

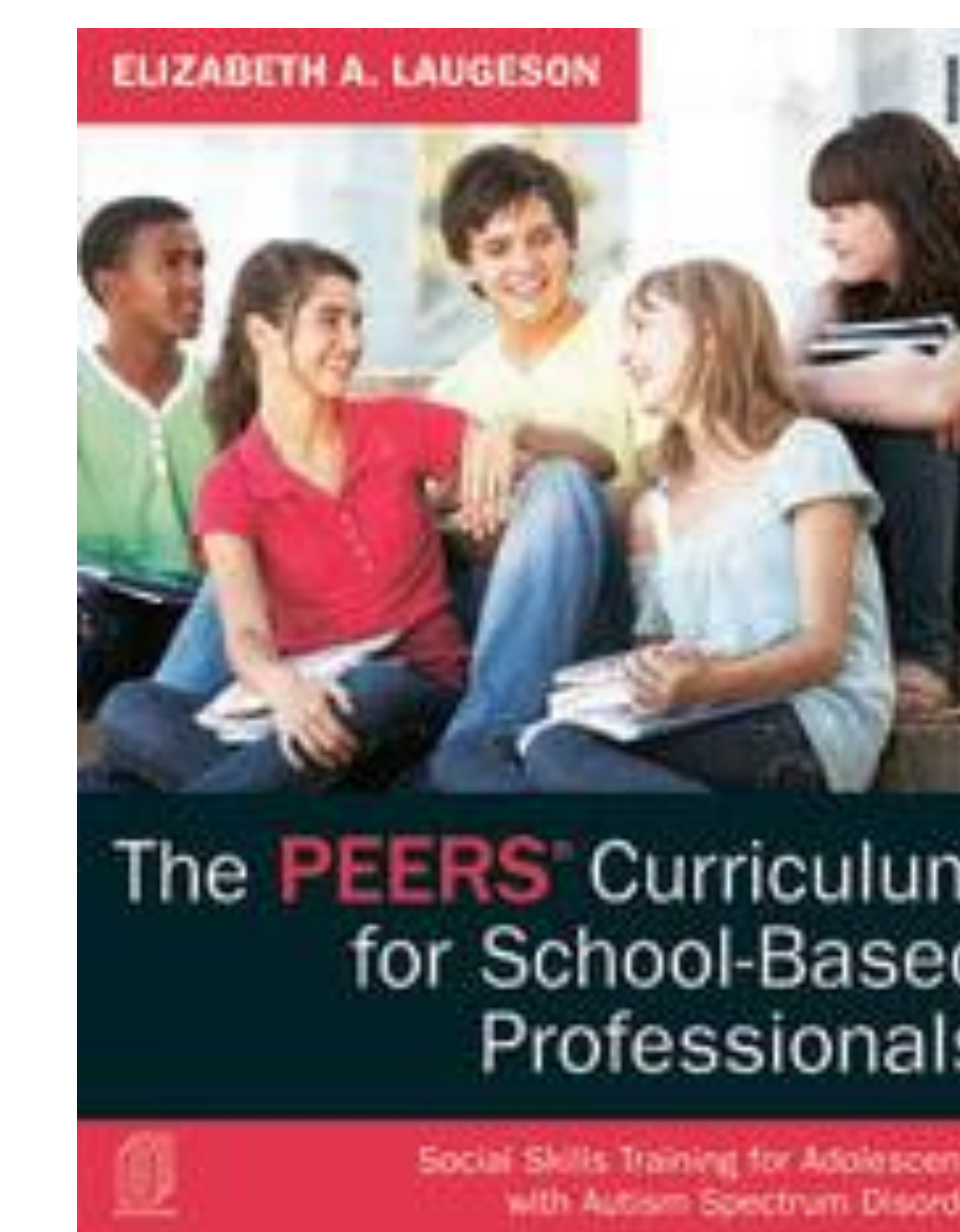
Measure	Pretest		Posttest		\bar{T}	z	p	ES (r)
	M	SD	M	SD				
QSQ Host GTG	2.300	3.683	3.500	4.249	15	0.949	.343	0.300
QSQ Guest GTG	1.700	1.829	2.300	1.703	13.5	1.656	.098	0.523

Figure 1.

Pretest and Posttest Scores of TASSK for Individual Students



Intervention



Laugeson, E. A. (2013). *The PEERS curriculum for school-based professionals: Social skills training for adolescents with autism spectrum disorder*. Routledge.

Dependent Measures

Test of Adolescent Social Skills Knowledge (TASSK)

Instructions:

The following items are about making and keeping friends. After you read each item, there will be a couple choices to choose from. Decide which choice is the best by bubbling in the best answer. Only choose one answer per item.

1. The most important part of having a conversation is to:
 - Trade information
 - Make sure the other person is laughing and smiling
2. The goal of a conversation is to:
 - Make the other person like you
 - Find common interests

Quality of Socialization Questionnaire – Adolescent (QSQA- Revised)

We are interested in get-togethers that you had in the last month. A get-together is any time that teens follow through with a commitment to meet together after agreeing on a place and time.

- It may be a planned activity, such as bowling or at the video arcade or just to "hang out".
- It may be organized well in advance or spontaneously for later the same day.
- It may be with one other teen or a group of teens.

1. How many get-togethers did you organize in the last month?

Please list the first names of all of the friends who came to your get-togethers in the past month. If you did not organize a get-together with another teen or other teens in the past month, leave the section below blank.

Friend's first name _____	Friend's first name _____
Friend's first name _____	Friend's first name _____
Friend's first name _____	Friend's first name _____

2. How did you and your friends get along at the last get-together?

Circle the number below that describes how true each sentence is.

Dependent Variables



TASSK

The Test of Adolescent Social Skills Knowledge (TASSK; Frankel et al., 2010) was developed to assess knowledge of ecologically valid social skills taught during the PEERS® for Young Adults intervention. This is a 30-item measure that assesses knowledge of PEERS® concepts via questions such as, "The most important part of having a conversation is to: a) Trade information or b) Make sure the other person is laughing and smiling" (Gantman et al. 2012). The psychometric properties of the YA version of this measure have not been examined (McVey, et al., 2016).

SRS-2

The Social Responsiveness Scale-2 (SRS-2) is a quantitative measure used to characterize symptoms of autism spectrum disorder. Psychometric properties evaluated include measures of reliability (internal consistency, test-retest reliability) and validity (structural, construct, content). The SRS-2 is a 65-item rating scale that was used to evaluate the severity of participants' autism spectrum symptoms. Higher SRS-2 scores suggest a higher number of social deficits and autism spectrum-related symptoms. The SRS-2 is a widely used clinical measure of ASD symptomatology and social competency.

QSQ

The QSQ is a 12-item self-report measure adapted from the Quality of Play Questionnaire for children with ASD (QPQ; Frankel and Mintz 2011). The QSQ has been successfully used to assess the frequency of social engagement among adolescents with ASD (Laugeson et al. 2009, 2012) and young adults with ASD (Gantman et al. 2012). The QSQ assesses the participants' frequency of hosted and invited get-togethers over the previous month. It was administered to participants at pre and post-tests to assess intervention outcomes on social get-togethers.