

Improving Social Skills for adults with autism and co-occurring intellectual disabilities to promote workplace inclusion

Social behaviors are complex and differ in presentation across age groups and cultures. The development of social skills, are necessary to promote positive social interactions across a range of community environments, especially the workplace. The ability to follow instructions, communicate needs, participate in teamwork activities, and engage in conversations with customers and colleagues are a requirement for many employment settings. However, teaching social skills that can spread to a variety of related behaviors and occur across settings and people can be difficult.

Researchers from the School of Psychology at the National University of Ireland Galway have found that a social skills intervention for adults with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and co-occurring intellectual disabilities was successful in significantly improving participants' ability to communicate and interact with others, across direct and standardized measures. The study originated from a need identified within a community whereby individuals with ASD presented with many social challenges in successfully integrating to the workplace. The social skills intervention was directly designed to teach and improve the generic social skills necessary for workplace inclusion. The research team investigated the effects of the Walker social skills curriculum: the Adolescent Curriculum for Communication and Effective Social Skills (ACCESS; Walker, Todis, Holmes, & Horton, 1988) and video modeling on increasing social communication skills. This social skills intervention employs a systematic and easy to follow teaching protocol across 31 lessons, video models depicting correct and incorrect demonstrations of the skills, role-play, behavioral rehearsal with feedback, and homework assignments to practice the newly acquired skills in the natural environment to help promote generalization.

Seven participants aged 19-22 years, attended two social skill classes a week across a period of 20 weeks. Participants received training on skills such as having conversations, how to join in with others, negotiating, how to communicate your intent, and respond to requests from employers. The training also supported learning in understanding facial expressions, social cues, and tones of voice to help learners discriminate between positive and negative social interactions. Additionally, the social skills training provided seven lessons on self-related social skills such as, taking pride in your appearance, being organized, and feeling good about yourself.

Following the social skills intervention, all participants showed significant increases in a range of social behaviors. The newly acquired skills continued to be observed three months following completion of the intervention. High levels of satisfaction were reported from participants, parents/caregivers, and teachers. Those participating in the study said that they enjoyed taking part and felt other students would like the social skill classes. When participants were asked what they liked the most about the intervention, the video models and the role-play components came out on top.

Successful planning of transitions from education to employment is critical. During and following the intervention, on-site training and workshops were provided to staff on the implementation of the intervention to ensure sustainability of the project when the research was complete. The intervention has since been replicated across multiple sites with similar positive outcomes. It is important for research to investigate

evidence-based interventions to support adults with ASD and co-occurring intellectual disabilities transition to the workplace.

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Publications

[An Evaluation of a Social Skills Intervention for Adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder and Intellectual Disabilities preparing for Employment in Ireland: A Pilot Study.](#)

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J Autism Dev Disord. 2018 May