AUTISM **ADVISOR**
Information, and Tips about Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

What to Look for When Choosing Social Skills Programs for People with ASD

In choosing what components to look for in a social skills program, whether you are designing your own child's or student's program or evaluating the best options available in your community, we are recommending that you consider the following:

1. Social Skills Curriculum

Of all curriculum-based models, the PEERS model for teens (Laugeson et al., 2008) and the Children's Friendship Training (CFT) model for children (Frankel et al., 2010) have the strongest research evidence to support their use for individuals with ASD. The use of these manualized friendship-training programs will require appropriate training from those who have been trained by Frankel, Laugeson and colleagues, as well as ongoing evaluation to ensure effectiveness and generalizability of skills to real life situations. Other Social skills curricula that have some research support are listed in *Appendix A*.

2. Ongoing Program Evaluation

In evaluating the implementation of any social skills curriculum, parents and professionals are encouraged to collaborate with researchers or those trained in program evaluation to ensure that the evaluation provides an accurate and comprehensive assessment of the program. Social skills assessment tools to be used in the evaluation can be drawn from the research studies listed in this literature review. Several assessment tools that may be useful are listed in *Appendix C*.

3. Choosing Social Skills Interventions

If you choose to design your own social skills program rather than using a pre-existing curriculum, you have a range of intervention strategies to choose from that research has shown to be evidence-based or promising.

a. **Evidence-based practice.** Video modeling is the only social skills intervention that has sufficiently strong research support to be considered suitable for inclusion as an "evidence-based practice". Despite the strength of the research on video modeling procedures, ongoing research and evaluation is needed to determine how these procedures can be used with individuals of different ages and ability levels.

b. **Promising Interventions.** The following intervention strategies have sufficient research support to consider them promising and worthy of using in your social skills program with persons with ASD:

   • Social skills training groups

   • Parent training

   • Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) strategies

More research is needed on these interventions to determine the conditions under which they are effective (for example, with which age groups or developmental levels). Ongoing evaluation at the individual level will be needed to ensure effectiveness and skill generalization.

c. **Interventions with insufficient research or variable results.** For the following interventions, there is either insufficient research or the results across studies have been variable when the intervention was applied to teaching social skills to persons with ASD:

- Self-management training

- Activity-based interventions

- Peer-mediated interventions

- Social Stories™.

It is recommended that further research be carried out to clarify under what conditions these interventions are efficacious or effective. At this time, the inclusion of these strategies in social skills programs is questionable and, if used, should be closely monitored for effectiveness.

4. Focus on Skill Generalization and Maintenance

Very few research studies included opportunities to directly assess whether skills learned during social skills training actually generalized to real life social situations and led to better social functioning. As well, few studies incorporated follow-up assessments more than a couple of months following intervention to assess long-term maintenance or the need for "booster sessions" to re-establish gains if needed. Strategies for generalization and maintenance of social skills are provided in Appendix D.

5. Focus on Larger Social Goals

Making and maintaining friendships was one of the primary goals that parents in our survey had for their children participating in social skills groups; however, 46% of parents reported poor outcomes in maintaining relationships following intervention. It will be important for any social skills program to not only look at how to promote generalization and maintenance of specific social skills, but to consider curriculum models that promote these larger social goals. Details on the PEERS model for friendship development can be found in Appendix A.

6. Strive for Quality Adaptation of Social Skills Curricula

Material translated into French can vary greatly in terms of consistency of terminology, accuracy of autism related language, quality and universality of the French. Material must be adapted, not simply translated, and reviewed by people knowledgeable in the field of ASD to ensure quality and applicability.

When using translated material, it is recommended that regionally relevant language be used to facilitate generalization to the natural environment.