

Social Skills Training: An Intervention for Adults with High-Functioning Autism

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Abstract

Social skills training programs are often used as a behavioural intervention with elementary school-aged children; however, many students with high-functioning autism do not receive diagnoses until they reach adulthood. There is therefore a strong need for social skills training programs that can be provided as part of students' accommodations in post-secondary schools. These programs will not only help students with their personal relationships with others, but may also have a strong effect on their students' self-confidence and success in future employment.

Although social skills are vitally important for one's success in life, they are an area of accommodation that is often overlooked in relation to educating adults with high-functioning autism spectrum disorder (HFASD). Difficulties in verbal and nonverbal communication define autism spectrum disorder (Freitag et al., 2013; Hotton & Coles, 2016; Mostert, 2013); however, for those who are high-functioning, their education and accommodations are focused on the academic sphere, as opposed to social behaviours. These individuals are expected either to have no social problems or to learn to adapt on their own. Because they are expected to have already gained the skills needed to communicate effectively, the sole focus for accommodation is in the academic realm. The consequences of failing to provide students with appropriate social skills go beyond the inability to create relationships with others. Effective social behaviours benefit individuals in multiple areas, including personal well-being and mental health, relationships with others, and employment. Therefore, while training is often done with children in the areas of social/behavioural development, there is a clear need for this work to be continued into adulthood and for vital resources to be provided to students that will assist them in all areas of their lives.

Personal Well-Being and Mental Health

Social skills training improves an individual's self-esteem and mental health. In addition to causing interpersonal difficulties, social skills deficits can result in other negative consequences, such as dropping out of school, trouble with the law, and experimentation with drugs and alcohol (Craig, Brown, Upright, & DeRosier, 2016; Hotton & Coles, 2016; Tse, Strulovitch, Tagalakis, Meng, & Fombonne, 2007). Not only can the lack of social behaviours and attitudes affect one's self-confidence, but it often leads to more serious mental health issues such as depression and anxiety (Hillier, Fish, Siegel, & Beversdorf, 2011; Hotton & Coles, 2016; Parsons & Mitchell, 2002). Individuals who already have a diagnosis of HFASD and who suffer from mental health problems will have difficulty managing this and new and more complex experiences.

When students enter a post-secondary institution, many are leaving home for the first time and experiencing a level of independence that can be intimidating. Among feelings of excitement, many students will also experience loneliness and sadness at being away from their families. During this time of heightened emotion, students experiencing the effects of negative social interactions will be even more likely to suffer from depression or anxiety. Without a formal intervention, such as a social skills training program, individuals with HFASD will not learn to communicate effectively and have a safe environment to practise social skills. Many will develop social phobias and will shy away from interactions with others because they fear that they will not be able to perform the social skills needed to communicate effectively (Hotton & Coles, 2016; Mesibov, 1984). Social skills training programs can not only teach participants appropriate social behaviours, but also give a safe place for individuals to practise these skills without fearing rejection from their peers. Research has shown that by attending these groups,

participants build healthy relationships with the instructors and other members in the groups; in many cases, these groups motivate participants to share their experiences and hear about others' experiences and difficulties (Hotton & Coles, 2016; Plavnick, Kaid, & MacFarland, 2015; Zaks, 2011). Experiencing rejection or feeling isolated from one's peers because of an inability to communicate well makes many students feel that their situation is unique, and this can increase the feeling of seclusion; by talking with people in a group about similar experiences, many participants feel less alone. As a result, participants who report having depressive/anxious symptoms prior to receiving social skills training improve dramatically by the end of the program (Hillier et al., 2011; Van Dam-Baggen & Kraaimaat, 2000). Social skills training programs, therefore, provide essential skill training that one needs for the future, and also act as an unofficial group therapy for participants.

Improvement in confidence levels benefits not only one's mental health, but also other areas of one's life. Many individuals with HFASD who have had social skills training are capable of advocating for themselves when situations arise. In many post-secondary institutions, students meet instructors who are experts in their own subject area, but who may have limited experience teaching to students with HFASD and may therefore not understand the unique needs of these students and the purpose for accommodations (Mostert, 2013). In these cases, students who struggle with social interactions will often not seek a solution for fear of causing conflict, or else they will act aggressively and inappropriately in dealing with the situation (Craig et al., 2015). For example, Samantha¹ is a student who waited until her third year of university to seek accommodations, because one of her teachers in her first year told her that nothing was physically wrong with her and so she did not need to be accommodated. Instead of explaining her legal right to be accommodated by the educational institution she was attending, Samantha did not disagree with her instructor and struggled in the first two years of her program. Many social skills training programs teach students how to deal appropriately with conflict by means of calm discussions and negotiation. As well as learning to advocate for themselves, students with HFASD who gain confidence in social skills training programs often see an improved academic status; usually these students are naturally gifted in academics, but are unable to perform to their ability in academic settings because of their anxiety and depression (Craig et al., 2016; Hillier et al., 2011). Creating a social skills training program for students with HFASD entering post-secondary institutions enables students to gain the skills they need to be confident and not suffer from mental health issues that arise because of their social problems.

Relationships

Social skills play a major role in creating relationships with others; without these skills, individuals with HFASD may have difficulties creating friendships and romantic relationships, and be unable to connect with peers or teachers in an academic setting. There is little doubt of the importance in relationships with others and their effect on one's emotional well-being and quality of life. For example, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs model places social interactions and relationships with others high on the scale, even above personal safety and other basic physiological needs (McLeod, 2014). For individuals with HFASD to lead satisfying lives, it is vital that they maneuver social situations and create relationships with others, in the form of either friendships or romantic partnerships. Social skills training programs teach these skills, starting from the basic level of initiating a conversation with someone else to more complex skills, such as proper dating etiquette and how to handle disagreements (Ross & Cornish, 2004; Foden & Anderson, 2011). Even if someone with HFASD has received social skills training at a young age, the skills often do not transfer to more mature relationships that adults need. Friendships and romantic relationships are important not only for creating loving and familial

¹ Unless otherwise specified, all individuals are students who have accessed this author's services as an accessibility services officer. Pseudonyms have been used to protect individual identities.

relationships, but also for providing emotional support for people with HFASD (Zaks, 2011). Post-secondary schooling introduces students to a world of fresh perspectives and new challenges, which can be even more difficult to someone with HFASD. Seeking out the support of a friend or loved one during this time is crucial to finding success in the demanding academic setting, as well as in forming social relationships with other classmates and professors.

Bullying due to lack of sufficient social skills by their peers (and even their teachers) is an occurrence that many individuals with HFASD have already encountered by the time they reach post-secondary education, but can often be much worse in this setting (Unnever & Cornell, 2003). As individuals with HFASD mature, they are more aware of their social difficulties and the fact that they are not making connections with their peers (Tse et al., 2007). Whereas staff will intervene when bullying is present in public schools, in universities and colleges the options for dealing with this type of behaviour are limited and those with HFASD can become targets of bullies more easily. Not only can it be difficult to create relationships with one's peers, but it can also be even more challenging to connect with one's professors and mentors who are often needed as references for future employment. Because most professors/instructors' main area of training is in their own subject area as opposed to education, many do not understand the challenges and behaviours of students with HFASD in their classes. Instead of seeing the potential in their students, many instructors will create a connection between a student's social deficit and an academic one, and assume that a student with HFASD or any other disability does not have the skills to succeed in university. While these stigmas and inappropriate behaviours by peers and teachers are what need to change (Zaks, 2011), social skills training can help students with autism to communicate effectively with acquaintances and even teach them how to deal with bullies in an appropriate, non-aggressive manner (Ross & Cornish, 2004; Mesibov, 1984). Close relationships are important for individuals with autism, but learning how to communicate effectively with everyone they meet is essential, and is a skill that can be used in other areas of their lives to become successful and functional members of society.

Vocational

After graduating from a post-secondary institution, the assumed next step is to start a career; however, an effective use of social skills is needed to be successful in job interviews and also to succeed later in the job with clients and co-workers. Many employers look for interviewees to be personable and appear able to work as a team with their coworkers; they also do not understand what a diagnosis of autism means, or else assume that it equates to an individual not being able to do skilled work (Foden & Anderson, 2011; Van Pelt, 2008). If someone is unable to show the desired skills in the interview, it is unlikely that he/she will be hired; also, because of the stigma associated with disabilities, many individuals with HFASD do not want to share their diagnosis in an interview, so their behaviour can make an interviewer see their social difficulties as a character flaw instead of as a part of their autism diagnosis.

Social skills training programs, and especially those that specifically pertain to vocational training, teach skills that are essential for interviews, such as how to look presentable and how to show confidence, yet in a way that is respectful and courteous (Hall, Wilcoxson, McGroarty, & Low, 2011). Mark is a 37-year-old who graduated university in 2015 with a degree in a field that currently has many job opportunities. Before starting his degree, he worked in the field but wanted to obtain a higher paying job that required a degree. Since graduating, Mark has had over 40 interviews across the country. As a student, he often disagreed with professors and administrators, and often approached these situations aggressively. He is confident in his abilities, but this confidence often comes off as egotism and, while not meaning to, Mark can treat others as though they are less intelligent than he is, and he can seem off-putting. Because of this behaviour and because he has never had any intervention with his social behaviours, he has never been called back after interviews. Many individuals with HFASD will put in years of working hard at post-secondary education, overcoming academic and institutional barriers;

however, because of this one particular part of their diagnosis, many will not be found suitable to work in their chosen fields (Van Pelt, 2008). Mark, similarly to other students with HFASD, has the skills and the knowledge to be successful in his work, but because he does not possess the social skills of his peers, he may never have the chance to show his expertise.

Individuals with HFASD who pass the interview process must continue to use appropriate social behaviours with their co-workers. Many jobs increasingly expect employees to work as team members, or at the very least to have positive relationships with their co-workers. When individuals with HFASD do not share their diagnosis with the workplace (which they are not legally obligated to do), their interactions with their coworkers can come off as awkward and the workplace can become like a school yard with fellow work employees as the bullies. Instead of being seen as exclusion on the part of coworkers, rejection by co-workers can be seen as an inability to work well with others, despite the fact that many individuals with HFASD are above-average workers in terms of skill use and in completing work ahead of schedule (Van Pelt, 2008). Many of the skills that can be taught in social skills training programs can be used when learning to communicate effectively with co-workers, including how to react to bullying, how to deal with conflict in a non-aggressive manner, and how to behave appropriately according to societal norms. Many individuals with HFASD have many years of post-secondary schooling or other training for specific job fields and, in many cases, the introduction of a social skills training program is the intervention that means the difference between employment and unemployment.

Conclusion

Students with high-functioning autism spectrum disorder will often receive interventions in academic areas, but often social behaviours are not seen as essential to one's success. Social skills training programs can benefit individuals with autism in multiple areas in their lives. Improved social skills can give adults with autism confidence, improve their self-esteem, and help with other psychological disorders that may arise from a social deficit such as depression or anxiety. Improved social skills are also vital to creating lasting relationships; close friendships, romantic partnerships, or casual acquaintances can provide loving and emotional support that all people need to live quality lives. Lastly, social skills training can provide individuals with autism the skills and information that they need to perform well in job interviews and later in their careers with their employers and co-workers. In an ideal world, students would be accepted for their differences, no matter what their ability, and a greater emphasis would be placed on the disability studies perspective, which views disability as constructed by the society (Ashby, 2012; Baglieri, Valle, Connor, & Gallagher, 2011). Until the point when this belief is more widely accepted by society as a whole, it is important that students with exceptionalities are given the resources and tools that they need to succeed, both emotionally and professionally.

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About the Author

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