**IMPACT OF SOCIAL SKILLS TRAINING ON THE NUMBER OF ROMANTIC AND PLATONIC SOCIAL GET-TOGETHERS OF YOUNG ADULTS WITH AUTISM**

**Ncube, B. L.1, Bebko, J. M.1, Bardikoff, N.2, Thompson, M. 2, Spoelstra, M. 2, & Brown, L. 2**

**1York University; 2Autism Ontario**

**Objectives**: Research suggests that most high-functioning adults with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) are interested in romantic relationships (Strunz et al., 2017). Unfortunately, social difficulties associated with ASD may increase barriers to establishing romantic relationships (Cunningham et al., 2016). PEERS for Young Adults is a 16-week program designed to increase social skills in young adults with ASD. The program is designed to provide young adults with the skills to make and keep friendships and develop romantic relationships. Few studies exist examining the impact of PEERS on get-togethers of young adults with ASD (Gantman et al., 2012; Laugeson et al., 2015) and none examining romantic get-togethers separately. Autism Ontario is a registered charitable organization that has been running the PEERS for Young Adults program since 2016. The present study examined whether young adults who participated in Autism Ontario’s PEERS groups saw an increase in the frequency of romantic and platonic get-togethers after participating in the program.

**Method**: Twenty-one young adults (81% male) who participated in PEERS for Young Adults were asked to complete a number of measures before and after participating in the program. The domains assessed included empathy (Empathy Quotient), social skills knowledge (Test of Young Adult Social Skills Knowledge), social anxiety (Social Anxiety Scale), and the number of romantic and platonic get-togethers that they had participated in over the previous month.

**Results**: Young adults who participated in the PEERS program reported a significant increase in scores on the Empathy Quotient from pre (*M* = 33.81, *SD* = 11.85) to post (*M* = 38.29, *SD* = 9.65) PEERS participation, *t*(20) = -3.338, *p* = .003. Higher scores on the measure indicate greater empathic ability (Baron-Cohen & Wheelwright, 2004). The young adults’ knowledge of social skills, as measured by the Test of Young Adult Social Skills Knowledge, significantly increased from pre (*M* = 17.86, *SD* = 3.69) to post (*M* = 21.62, *SD* = 3.29) PEERS participation, *t*(20) = -4.467, *p* < .001. Participants also reported significant reductions in social anxiety (Social Anxiety Scale) from pre (*M* = 53.67, *SD* = 15.43) to post (*M* = 49.24, *SD* = 14.12) PEERS participation, *t*(20) = 2.189, *p* = .041. Despite the positive results in empathy, social skills knowledge, and social anxiety experienced by young adults who participated in the PEERS program, our results did not reveal significant differences in the number of romantic get-togethers they participated in from pre to post PEERS participation (*p* = 1.000). Similarly, participants did not report significant changes in the number of platonic get-togethers the young adults participated in before and after the program (*p* = .125).

**Discussion**: Our results provide support for the effectiveness of PEERS at reducing social anxiety, and increasing social skills knowledge and empathy among young adults with ASD. We did not see a significant increase in the number of romantic or platonic get-togethers of participants. However, it is possible that they may see an increase as they continue to practice implementing the new strategies in the weeks following the end of the program.

**Correspondence**:

Busisiwe L. Ncube, York University, busi.louise@gmail.com

James M. Bebko, York University, jbebko@yorku.ca

Nicole Bardikoff, Autism Ontario, nicole@autismontario.com

Marilyn Thompson, Autism Ontario, marilyn@autismontario.com

Margaret Spoelstra, Autism Ontario, marg@autismontario.com

LB Brown, Autism Ontario, lb@autismontario.com