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## Group-Based Social Skills Training & Individual CBT Helps Improve Social Functioning and Reduce Anxiety in Teens With ASD

### What is this research about?

The number of people diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorders (ASD) is growing. One key diagnostic feature of ASD is difficulties with social interaction and relating to others. Among children and teenagers with ASD, anxiety-related concerns are especially common, with 11 to 84% of children with ASD experiencing anxiety. For many youth with ASD, there is a connection between anxiety problems and social skill difficulties. Because youth may be aware of their social skill weaknesses, as the social demands increase during middle and high school years, they may experience greater social anxiety. Treatments that both reduce anxiety and assist in learning social skills could be especially useful for teenagers.

Cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) is the most common treatment for childhood anxiety disorders. Studies have shown that CBT is particularly useful in reducing anxiety for children and teenagers with ASD. This was the first study to evaluate programs that address anxiety and social skills in adolescents with ASD.

### What did the researchers do?

The researchers evaluated a new treatment program designed to reduce anxiety and improve social skills in teenagers with ASD. Two males and two females with ASD participated in a multi-component integrated treatment (MCIT) program. Over the course of 11 weeks, the participants were involved

### What you need to know:

A combination of group-based social skills training, along with individual cognitive behavioural therapy, may be helpful in improving social functioning and reducing anxiety in teenagers with ASD. However, more research is needed in order to fully understand the effectiveness of this treatment.

in 12-13 individual therapy sessions, and five social-skills training sessions in a group setting. Parents played an active role in the treatment by helping their children with homework and encouraging and reinforcing positive behaviours.

### What did the researchers find?

Three of the four participants reported feeling significantly less anxious about social interactions by the end of treatment. The fourth participant also improved, but the change was not as noticeable. Improvements in social skills differed among the participants. Two of the participants showed considerable improvement in how they communicated in social situations, and two were more motivated by the end of the treatment. At six months after the intervention, two of the participants were free of their anxiety diagnosis, while the other two still met criteria for anxiety disorders.

### How can you use this research?

This research has the potential to improve the quality of life for many teenagers with autism who



have anxiety. A combination of individual and group therapy along with parental support could prove to be an effective treatment. However, this study had a very small sample size, and further research is needed. The researchers are currently conducting a study using this program with a larger number of participants. Expanding treatments for adolescents with ASD is important.

### About the Researchers

Susan White and Thomas Ollendick are Professors of Psychology at the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University.

Lawrence Scahill is a Professor of Nursing and Associate Professor in the Child Study Center and of Nursing at Yale University.

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### Citation

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### Keywords

Autism, Anxiety, Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy

This research summary was written by Maria Khan for the Chair in Autism Spectrum Disorders Treatment and Care Research. This research summary, along with other summaries, can be found on our [blog](#) and at [asdmentalhealth.ca/research-summaries](http://asdmentalhealth.ca/research-summaries)

### About the Chair

The Chair in Autism Spectrum Disorders Treatment and Care Research is dedicated to studying ways to improve the mental health and well-being of people with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) and their families in Canada.

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