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## Skills Training Group for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder: Outcomes of an Acceptance and Commitment Therapy-Based Program

### What is this research about?

Many youth with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) have difficulties in social settings and exhibit behavioral inflexibility such as repetitive and restricted behaviors, problems in the perception of self and others. This is due to the core symptoms of ASD and commonly connected mental health problems. Acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) is a cognitive behavioral-based psychological intervention. ACT aims to work on difficult topics and feelings, patterns of thinking, and includes relaxation strategies. The current study is the first to evaluate a modified school-based ACT program for youth with ASD.

### What did the researchers do?

Participants were recruited from a school that serves approximately 50 students with high functioning ASD in Sweden. Six classes were included in the study. There were 3 junior high school classes and 3 high school classes. There were 5-7 students in each class. The classes were randomly assigned to two groups: (1) ACT skills intervention or (2) waiting list. The ACT skills intervention consisted of two 40-minute group sessions per week and 6-12 minutes of daily mindfulness exercises in the classroom for six weeks. Those in the ACT skills groups were taught different methods of coping with daily hassles and stressful situations. This meant breaking down

### What you need to know:

Behavioral Inflexibility and social impairments are associated with negative outcomes for youth with ASD. This study looked at a modified school-based ACT program. Youth with ASD reported improved behavioral, emotional and social outcomes after the six-week intervention.

behavioral avoidance patterns and teaching more problem solving skills. Youth and their teachers completed surveys before and after the intervention. This measured to evaluate their progress in areas of social, emotional and behavioral difficulties. Youth were also asked about their satisfaction with the ACT treatment group.

### What did the researchers find?

Youth reported high satisfaction with the treatment. Those who received the skills training showed a decrease in stress, hyperactivity and emotional symptoms. This was shown through child and teacher reports. Participants also reported more positive social behavior such as sharing readily with other children. These effects remained when the participants were followed up two months after the intervention ended. This is the first study to show the effectiveness of an ACT school-based program for youth with ASD.



## How can you use this research?

ACT-based skills training programs may be helpful for youth with ASD in a school setting. Future research on the feasibility and effectiveness of school-based treatment programs are needed to tailor appropriate mental health services for youth with ASD. The current study included a small number of participants. Further research is needed to fully evaluate the effects of ACT for youth with ASD.

## About the Researchers

John Pahnke and Tatja Hirvikoski are involved in the Department of Women's and Children's Health at the Karolinksa Institutet (Sweden).

Tobias Lundgren works at Stockholm University, and Timo Hursti at University of Uppsala.

## Citation

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## Keywords

Acceptance and commitment therapy, Adolescents, Autism Spectrum Disorder, Cognitive behavioural therapy, Mindfulness, Skills training

This research summary was written by Jordan Cleland 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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