This study aimed to examine the efficacy and durability, through replication and extension, of the Program for the Education and Enrichment of Relational Skills (PEERS®: Laugeson & Frankel, 2010). PEERS® is a parent-assisted social skills group intervention for high-functioning adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

This study is the first to address replication of the long-term outcomes of PEERS® outside of the site of development. Further, this study is the first to assess the effects that PEERS® has on the plasticity of physiological regulation and social anxiety over time.

36 participants completed PEERS® and were assessed at three different time points, pre-PEERS®, post-PEERS®, and 6 months following participation in PEERS®. Assessment measures utilized parent report, adolescent self-report, and Respiratory Sinus Arrhythmia (RSA), a measure of vagus nerve cardiac regulation. The RSA of 31 typically developing adolescents was also collected.

Results indicated that adolescents who received PEERS® maintained treatment gains at long-term follow-up, including increased knowledge of PEERS® concepts and friendship skills, frequency of get-togethers, friendship quality, and overall social skills, as well as decreased problem behaviors, core autistic symptoms, and social anxiety. RSA was found to be significantly different than the typically developing group at long-term follow-up and, contrary to expectations, was positively correlated with social anxiety.

This study leads to a better understanding of physiological responses to intervention as well as characteristics of RSA in autism. Moreover, it has significant implications in the widespread usage of PEERS® and the development of other interventions.