

## ABSTRACT

### IS TELEHEALTH EQUIVALENT TO IN-PERSON INTERVENTION? A REPLICATION AND EXTENSION OF PEERS® FOR ADOLESCENTS

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One commonly requested area of support for autistic youth centers around teaching and maintaining social skills, as social communication differences are a core feature of autism spectrum disorder. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many healthcare services transitioned to telehealth, and some caregivers were concerned about if telehealth services were efficacious. There is a growing body of literature supporting the effectiveness of in-person social skills interventions, however research on telehealth administration of social skills intervention is more limited.

This study aimed to evaluate if the telehealth version of PEERS® for Adolescents has similar effects for autistic youth as the originally developed in-person format. Change in social, familial, and emotional-behavioral factors over the course of intervention and across delivery method was analyzed via adolescent- and parent-reported measures. Additional factors not previously addressed in the PEERS® literature, including intolerance of uncertainty and perceived treatment acceptability, were explored within the context of the telehealth intervention.

Aim 1 results indicated successful replication of positive improvements over the course of in-person and telehealth PEERS®, including get-togethers, social skills knowledge and competency, social responsiveness, social problems, parent stress, and anxiety and depression symptoms; improvement in environmental stress/disorder was only observed in telehealth groups. Changes in social skills knowledge, social competency, social responsiveness, get-togethers, social problems, and withdrawn/depressive symptoms were deemed statistically equivalent across format of intervention. Aim 2 results suggested improvements in intolerance of uncertainty following telehealth PEERS®. Aim 3 results revealed families found telehealth PEERS® to be an acceptable intervention. Methods and results are discussed in detail.

Overall, this study suggested that families will receive similar, if not equivalent, benefits from participating in either in-person or telehealth formats of PEERS® for Adolescents. It is also important to highlight that families perceived the telehealth format of PEERS® to be acceptable. These findings may encourage healthcare providers to expand access to evidence-based intervention by offering telehealth services to the wider autism community.