Lab Overview

The MSU Autism Lab was founded in 2007 by Brooke Ingersoll, PhD, BCBA. Our lab is interested in studying social-communication development in children with ASD. In particular, we are interested in the development and evaluation of interventions to improve these skills. We are also interested in the effect of ASD on the family.

However, programs focused on promoting social skills for older children, adolescents, and adults are often more limited than programs for younger children. Families often have to search for services beyond the school system that will be helpful for their child as he or she goes through later stages of development.

Social skill groups can be an effective approach for increasing socialization for older children, adolescents, and young adults with ASD. Evidence-based social skills programs are focused on teaching individuals with ASD to understand and use subtle social cues in order to improve interactions with others, and may also focus on emotional understanding, mood and anxiety problems, and behavior management.

Special Topic: Social Interventions for Older Individuals with ASD

Research indicates that social interaction is an important aspect of quality of life for older individuals with disabilities, including ASD. Thus, it is important that individuals with ASD continue to have opportunities to engage with others socially as they age.
Most programs are conducted with other individuals with ASD; however, some of these programs also include participants without autism who serve as peer buddies.

Effective social skills programs usually include the following features:

- Minimum of 12 sessions
- Explicit instruction in skills, often using visual supports
- Homework assignments to help individuals practice skills outside of the group
- Parent involvement

There are several social skills groups in the Lansing area for children and adults with ASD. Following is a description of several programs in the area.

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**MSU Social Skills Groups**

The Michigan State University Psychological Clinic has begun offering social skills groups for children 8-12 years old with autism spectrum disorders. The group program lasts 15 weeks and includes 13, 90-minute-long children’s groups, 4 parent groups, and an end-of-session party. These groups are most appropriate for children with average or slightly delayed cognitive and language skills who have difficulty with social skills such as building and maintaining friendships, emotion recognition and regulation, conversational skills, and reading and using nonverbal behaviors. We are midway through running our second session of “Friendship Club” at the clinic, and the children involved seem to be both learning new skills and building great friendships with one another!

The clinic is currently looking for families interested in participating in a new group to start in January, 2011. If you are interested in having your child participate in the social skills group at the Psychological Clinic, please contact the clinic at 517-355-9564 and ask to have your child placed on the waiting list for the social skills group. If you have additional question about the groups, Katie Meyer, one of the group co-leaders, can also be reached by leaving a message at the clinic.

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**ASPPIRE**

*Autism Spectrum Partners Providing Instruction Recreation and Enrichment* (ASPPIRE) offers Social Coaching for individuals age 16-30 with autism and social or cognitive challenges. Groups
Of six to eight participants meet weekly for an hour and a half. There are sixteen sessions which consist of twelve in class meetings and four outside activities. The outside activities provide opportunities for community integration and practicing previously learned social skills.

One of the main goals of ASPPIRE is to promote the acquisition and use of social skills. This group uses a combination of in class meetings and social outings to engage participants with others in order to minimize isolation and provide skills that can lead to having meaningful relationships. During each group session, a trained facilitator provides instruction in areas such as problem solving, conversation skills, conflict resolution, and building and maintaining friendships.

If you are interested in learning more about ASPPIRE or participating in the spring group sessions, please visit http://asppireofmidmichigan.com/.

Research Highlights

Research suggests that social interaction is an important aspect of quality of life for adolescents and adults with autism. However, there is limited research on effective social skills interventions for older individuals with autism who also have intellectual disability.

Our lab is conducting a study in collaboration with the New York Center for Discovery in Harris, NY, a residential center for individuals with development disabilities, on the benefit of Reciprocal Imitation Training (RIT) for adolescents with autism who have significant intellectual disability.

Pilot data indicate that adolescents with autism were provided with one to three RIT sessions per week for four months. Compared to baseline, the students made substantial gains in spontaneous imitation skills and showed a decrease in inappropriate behaviors. Center staff reported increases in social engagement outside of the treatment sessions.

Based on the results so far, the Center plans to include RIT in treatment plans for their students with autism to increase social interaction.
Current Projects

**Reciprocal Imitation Training (RIT):** This project studies the effects of a developmentally-based intervention that teaches imitation within a social context. We are no longer recruiting for this study, but continue to follow-up with our past participants.

We are now working with the Center for Discovery in Harris, NY, as they train adolescents with autism using Reciprocal Imitation Training.

**Internet-Based Parent Training in RIT:** This study examines the effectiveness of an internet-delivered, self-paced parent training program that introduces techniques involved in RIT.

If you have a child with ASD between the ages of 2-6 years that has difficulty with imitation, please contact Allison Wainer to learn more about the eligibility criteria for this study. 517-432-8031.

**Project ImPACT:** This project trains providers to teach parents of children with ASD evidence-based strategies for improving their child’s social communication skills during on-going family routines.

We are working with a number of programs to implement the Project ImPACT curriculum with their families, including Ottawa Area ISD, Livingston ESA, Clinton County RESA, Clinton-Eaton-Ingham CMH, Ingham ISD, San Diego County BRIDGE Collaborative, and Kaiser Permanente Health System in Ottawa, CA.

In addition to implementation in the school environment, our lab is training several families using this program by individual format. We also have recently added a project which consists of direct implementation of the Project ImPACT interventions to children in our lab, using trained research assistants as the intervention providers.

*If you are interested in learning more about any project listed, or want to be on our waiting list for our intervention studies, please call Nikki Bonter at 517-432-8031 or email: bonterni@msu.edu.*

Family Tidbits

In this section of our newsletter, we would like to highlight little family stories, or exciting “tidbits” concerning your child with ASD. It can be anything that brings a smile to your face; an accomplishment; a new word; a happy day; a funny happening.

When you have something to share, please e-mail it to bonterni@msu.edu, and we will be sure to add it to one of our upcoming newsletters. Thank you!
Aidan, 5y

Aidan is being mainstreamed in kindergarten this year! In the last month he has gained 30-40 spontaneous words, is gaining better social skills, and is learning to use his very own IPOD touch the school gave him to use. He is even telling his mom what he wants in his lunch, and doing great with saying people's names and greeting people when they come over! Way to go Aidan!!! 😊

5y old boy with autism

One of our friends has made huge gains in social engagement and interaction, preferring to play with someone, instead of by himself, much of the time! His language has multiplied immensely in the last year, and he communicates with everyone he sees, saying “hello” or “hi” to them! In addition, he has gained quite a sense of humor, playing tricks on his family, and turning his head and smiling when he decides to “ignore” them! Way to go! 😊

Ryder, 5y

Ryder continues to thrive in kindergarten! He rides the bus with his brother and loves it! He loves being with his peers, loves drawing, singing, music, gym, and library. This year, he is excited about Halloween (as well as other holidays) and has even picked out a costume that HE wanted! Way to go! 😊

Dominic, 5y

Dominic is quite the jokester and continues to add a sense of humor to his family life 😊 One day recently Dominic was riding in the car with his mom and sister and was stopped while waiting for a red light. There was a man walking across the street with very long dreadlocks. After Dominic took notice, he said excitedly....“Santa Claus!!!” 😊

*Thank you to all families who shared with us this month!

Autism Lab Family Outing

We have scheduled our next Autism Lab family outing at Jumpin’ Jax Bounce Arena for November, 18, 2010 from 5 to 7. Please bring your whole family and a family favorite dish/snack for a pot-luck.

We schedule several lab outings throughout the year. If you would like to be informed of upcoming outings, please email Nikki Bonter at bonterni@msu.edu and ask to be put on our contact list.