Promoting Peer Acceptance of Females with Higher-functioning Autism in a Mainstream Education Setting

A Replication and Extension of the Effects of an Autism Anti-Stigma Program

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Motivation for the Program

Students with Higher-functioning autism (HFA) are often expected to be able to cope relatively independently within the mainstream school environment.

- What environmental supports are in place within schools for students with social impairments?
Motivation for the Program

- Peer victimisation and rejection are commonplace experiences for students with HFA
- Significant barrier to successful inclusive educational experiences for these students
Motivation for the Program

Increasing awareness that girls with HFA tend to go unrecognised
Motivation for the Program

Possible explanations:

- Different presentation due to the typical processes of gender socialisation
  - Fewer unusual special interests, better superficial social skills, better communication skills and subtler forms of aggression

- Different default coping mechanisms
  - Greater motivation to please others
  - Tendency to observe and imitate peer behaviours
  - Fly under the radar by escaping into fantasy
Hsiao et al., 2013:

- Female adolescents with autistic-like social deficits experienced the greatest level of negative peer interactions relative to adolescent boys and children of both genders.

Possible risk factors for greater levels of peer victimisation:
- Lack of overt ASD behaviours
- Inappropriate attributions of girls’ social competencies as they mature
Targeting Stigma

- Stigma embodies three elements (targets of change):
  - Problematic knowledge (ignorance)
  - Attitudes (prejudice)
  - Behaviours (discrimination)
Targeting Stigma

- Provision on three information types:
  - **Descriptive information**: emphasising the *degree of similarity* between students (cognitive consistency theory)
  - **Explanatory information**: emphasising the *lack of control* students with HFA have over their social deficits (attribution theory)
  - **Directive information**: providing instruction and guidance on *how to interact* with students with HFA (self-efficacy theory)
- Contact with an individual with the stigmatised condition
Staniland and Byrne (2013) developed and assessed the effects of the autism anti-stigma program ‘Understanding our Peers’ on typically-developing adolescent boys

- Independent Catholic school setting
- Six 50-minute sessions on a weekly basis
- Provision of descriptive, explanatory and directive information
- Direct and video contact with students with HFA
Previous Research

Findings:
- Significant improvement in knowledge and attitudes towards peers with HFA immediately following the program and maintained to 3-month follow-up
- No significant improvement in behavioural intentions towards peers with HFA
The Present Study

- **Aim:** to investigate strategies that may promote peer acceptance and reduce the stigmatisation of female students with HFA in mainstream education settings
  - Extend and replicate Staniland and Byrne (2013) with typically-developing female adolescents
    - Maintain key components thought to reduce stigma
    - Increasing the length of the intervention from six to eight 50-minute sessions
    - Updating the measure of behavioural intentions to better reflect the social norms of Australian adolescents
      - E.g., Invite them to parties, movies or study sessions
Methodology

- Participants:
  - 273 typically-developing female students across grades seven, eight and nine

- Setting:
  - Independent Catholic School

- Randomised control design:
  - *Intervention condition (n = 48)*: Two randomly selected eighth-grade classes participated in the program
  - *No-intervention peer condition (n = 56)*: Remaining eighth-grade classes were used to assess any spill-over effects to non-targeted students
  - *No-intervention non-peer condition (n = 169)*: All seventh- and ninth-grade classes formed the control condition
‘Understanding Our Peers’ Program

- Learning strategies used within the program:
  - Different learning outcomes for each session
  - Guided group brainstorming
  - Direct and video contact with students with HFA
  - Role Plays
  - Empathy enhancing activities
  - Co-accompanying web-based learning site
Effectiveness of the Information Provided

- Students reported *greater perceived similarity between themselves and peers with HFA*

- Students reported *perceiving peers with HFA as having less personal responsibility for their behavior*

- Students were *better able to differentiate between strategies for effectively interacting with peers with HFA*
As expected...

- Immediately after the program, students in the intervention condition showed:
  - More knowledge
  - More positive attitudes
  - Marginally improved behavioural intentions

- The improvements in knowledge and attitudes were maintained until the end of the following school term

- However, the marginal improvement in behavioural intentions was lost by the end of the following school term
Implications and Limitation

- Preliminary evidence for the efficacy of an intervention tailored to the unique characteristics and needs specific to the female presentation of HFA

- First study to observe any change in a measure of behavioural intentions towards peers with HFA

- Remains unknown how self-reported behavioural intentions predict actual behaviour
  - Two students directly observed to spontaneously act on the directive information during the visit by a female student with HFA
Unexpected Program Outcomes

- Improvements in attitudes were observed across all conditions and were maintained until the following school term.

Untargeted positive change processes:
- Half of the intervention students reported discussing the program with non-targeted peers.
- A number of teaching staff expressed explicit interest in learning more about HFA and learning how to support these students.
Unexpected Program Outcomes

- Behavioural intentions within the no-intervention non-peer condition became poorer after the program
  - Despite their coinciding improvement in attitudes!

- Possible implications:
  - Difference in exposure to directive information?
  - If perceived self-efficacy is low individuals are more likely to avoid tasks involving those behaviours
Possible Implications:
- Dual social interaction deficits within mainstream school settings?
  - Students with HFA in typical social interaction skills
  - Typically-developing students in atypical social interaction skills

Typically developing students may need explicit instruction on the necessary skills to successfully engage with peers with HFA to reduce their uncertainty and increase their confidence to act in line with positive attitudes.
“I was moved by the guest speaker’s talk and hearing a real story of a girl just like me who lives with this condition. The program taught me useful skills I can use when working with a little boy with Asperger’s at the drama school I work at. I now know how to act around him and what I need to do now I am more aware of his difficulties. I have a lot of respect for people with autism, because they live with it and have to deal with it everyday”
Any questions?
Further Reading
