

PEERS

LESSONS IN RELATIONSHIPS FOR YOUNG ADULTS

by L. B. Brown



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How do I let someone know I'm interested in them? How do I exchange contact information? What steps are needed for planning a get-together or a date? These are questions that nine young men had when they became part of the PEERS for Young Adults program that the Niagara Chapter offered this past spring. PEERS (Program for Enrichment & Education of Relational Skills) was developed by Dr. Elizabeth Laugeson from UCLA for teens with high functioning autism and Aspergers who are interested in learning how to make and keep friends. PEERS is a 14-week, evidence-based social skills program where caregivers (social coaches) and teens have separate but concurrent weekly lessons pertaining to social skills.

THE NIAGARA CHAPTER now offers PEERS for Young Adults, PEERS, and Children's Friendship Training through a multi-year community grant from the Branscombe Family Foundation, to individuals on the spectrum 7-30 years of age and their families. The Niagara Chapter has recognized the need for evidence-based social skills programs in their area as local agencies are able to offer these evidence-based programs only once a year. Through their Adult ASD Social Club, many young adults and their caregivers requested social skills programs where there was a focus on dating and relationships. The curriculum for the PEERS for Young Adults program has yet to be published, but Autism Ontario was invited to be part of the advanced training for the PEERS for Young Adults with a select group of Dr. Laugeson's research colleagues from Korea, Canada and the United States. As the Family Support Coordinator for the Hamilton and Niagara regions, I was fortunate to have been a part of the PEERS for Young Adults advanced training, making it possible for the Potential Programme and the Niagara Chapter to offer this program for the first time in Ontario.

Nine young men aged 18-28, met for 16 weeks last spring, for two hours on Tuesday evenings. Four of the 16 weeks focused on dating and relationships. Each week a lesson that focused on a specific social skill and the young adults had an opportunity to practice these skills with a male or female behaviour coach. We wanted to ensure that each participant was comfortable with their practice partner, which is why a male and female behaviour coach was very important. Some of the skills included entering and exiting conversation, hosting get-togethers and dating etiquette/skills. One participant shared some of his "ah-ha" moments, focusing on how valuable the lesson on handling peer rejection, teasing and bullying was. "I wish I had heard and known all that stuff years ago and wish it was taught to elementary kids."

The lessons on entering and exiting conversation were also a highlight for him "I never really had a very good grasp of it, so it opened my eyes to the skills I need to do it." Through the support of their social coaches, each of the young men were able to make a variety of gains based on their existing social skills.

The role of the social coach in PEERS is what sets it apart from other social skills programs. Social coaches (i.e., parent, family member, adult sibling, life coach, etc.) must attend each session and are taught how to assist the young adults in making and keeping friends by supporting the young adult in completing their weekly socialization homework assignments. Our social coaches had "ah-ha" moments that they wanted to share as well:





PEERS participants and their coaches
Photo courtesy of L. B. Brown

“Improvements in Curtis from PEERS – I feel the group really helped him mature and realize if he wants to have friends he has to work at it. The group helped give him the tools to form new friendships. The group made me realize I am way overprotective and I have to let him fail more to learn more. Also, didn’t realize how much he would like to date!” – Joanne M.

“In the beginning, he was scared, hesitant and then downright belligerent of the group; he didn’t want to ‘join in’ and really hated the idea of joining groups and being more social - even though he knew that was the aim of the group. The first couple of nights [after]we left there, I needed to talk him down out of his anxieties, a bit of anger and some mistrust of how it would all play out. His big ab-ba moment was on one of these drives home. With a background of what we had learned that night about what a real friend was, we talked about the difference between what he saw as his ‘friends’ at school – acquaintances that liked gaming, but that’s all they talked about – and what a real friend could be – a connection, someone to reach out to, to confide in and share life with. He saw the difference and knew he needed real friends. That was a real breakthrough.

“After that, he was much more open to trying things, making calls, going out, wanting to find a friend, group and a hangout. I felt empowered as a social coach to get him to try new things and go outside his comfort zone because I saw what a change it could make. He seems to feel more confident and comfortable socially. At the cottage this summer, he would walk down the road to our cousins’ place (not ones we are that emotionally close to) and go and find people to sit and talk with. He did the same with our neighbours and even joined in water play out in the lake with the other teenagers in the bay, laughing and easily joining in.

Big mama-proud moment – watching him confidently stride across a big stage in a crowded hall (all dressed up, hair cut short, complete with strange cap and gown) and graduating high school. He managed it all easily and was only uncomfortable waiting in the hall beforehand, hoping he wouldn’t go mute, which he most certainly didn’t do. He always swore he wouldn’t go to grad. But he did it so well and was so proud of himself. His confidence is the PEERS graduation that he wears every day.” – Amy P.

Our nine young men and their social coaches did an amazing job throughout the 16-week program.

For local program information please visit your local Autism Ontario website. More information regarding PEERS can be found at: <https://www.semel.ucla.edu/peers>. ■



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