

Development, feasibility, and preliminary efficacy of an employment-related social skills intervention for young adults with high-functioning autism

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Work-related social skills, otherwise known as soft skills, include effective communication, professionalism, and problem solving. While instrumental to workplace success, soft skills are typically not taught but, rather, acquired through observing others and learning from them. This lack of explicit soft skills instruction makes it difficult for individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), to navigate the social and professional demands inherent to finding and keeping a job. This study describes the development and impacts of a soft skills training program for young adults with high-functioning ASD (HFASD). The Assistive Soft Skills and Employment Training (ASSET) program was designed to teach soft skills to transition-age individuals with HFASD (ages 14-25), who are seeking employment or who wish to maintain employment. ASSET consists of eight, weekly, 90-min group sessions delivered in the community. The program was adapted and modified from a general, soft skills curriculum: "Skills to Pay the Bills: Mastering Soft Skills for Workplace Success," published by the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy, which covers six core areas: Communication, Networking, Attitude and Enthusiasm, Teamwork, Problem Solving and Critical Thinking, and Professionalism. In this study, 17 young adults with HFASD participated in the ASSET program. ASSET participants showed improvements in work-related social skills knowledge, social functioning, and self-confidence. Participants also reported high satisfaction with the training program and found the curriculum practical and useful. Additionally, ASSET facilitators described the training manual as easy to follow, and noted that the training program can be readily incorporated into existing school and community-based programs.