Title: An Examination of Social Anxiety Differences Between Males and Females Among Young Adults with ASD Following Intervention

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Introduction: Social anxiety is highly prevalent in the general population and is frequently associated with significant social, interpersonal, and professional impairment (Xu et al., 2012). Prior findings indicate that women are both more likely to develop Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD) than men, as well as report greater clinical severity compared to men (Asher, et al., 2017). The Program for the Education and Enrichment of Relational Skills (PEERS®) is an evidence-based, caregiver-assisted social skills intervention for young adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder and other social challenges, such as social anxiety (Laugeson & Frankel, 2010). Previous research indicates that young adults who participate in PEERS®, many of whom suffer from social anxiety, demonstrate increased social skills post-treatment (Laugeson et al., 2015); however, gender variance in social anxiety levels following the PEERS® intervention has yet to be examined. The purpose of this study was to compare gender differences with regard to decreased social anxiety among young adults following the UCLA PEERS® social skills program. We hypothesized that while both males and females would show significant decreases in social anxiety post-treatment, no significant difference in treatment gains would be observed between young adult female and young adult male participants.

Method: Participants included 121 young adults presenting for treatment through the UCLA PEERS® Clinic between the ages of 17 to 37 (M=22.89, SD=4.029), including 90 males (74.4%), and 31 females (25.6%). Decreases in social anxiety following treatment were assessed using parent-reports on the Social Anxiety Scale (SAS; La Greca, 1999) pre- and post-treatment.

Result: Paired samples T-tests show significant decreases in social anxiety on the SAS pre- to post-treatment across both genders: Female (t=4.61, p<.001) and male (t=6.13, p<.001). Results from an ANOVA reveal no statistically significant difference in rate of decreased parent-reported SAS scores across male and female populations, F(1, 118)=1.296, p=.257.), supporting the original hypothesis.

Discussion: Results reveal that while participants report significant decreases in social anxiety post-treatment, there is no significant difference in the amount of progress ascertained following the PEERS® intervention between the male and female participants. This finding is consistent with previous research suggesting that the PEERS® intervention is equally efficacious for females and males (McVey, et al., 2017). Future research might examine to what extent gender impacts social anxiety among the adolescent and preschool PEERS® populations to further ensure unbiased intervention.

References/Citations: