

## **Embracing Neurodiversity: Impacts of an Early Social Skills Intervention on Acceptance and Advocacy among Parents of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder and Other Social Challenges**

Early social skills interventions for children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) have been associated with improvements in social performance and challenging behaviors (Wolstencroft et al., 2018). However, limited research has investigated outcomes related to responsive parenting and autism acceptance, despite evidence that such practices may drive language gains and social initiative among youth with ASD (Kapp, 2018). To examine parent perspectives, the present study conducted semi-structured interviews with 28 parents whose children ( $M=7.45$  years; 86% male) completed the UCLA Program for the Education and Enrichment of Relational Skills (PEERS), a parent-assisted social skills intervention for youth with ASD and other social challenges (Laugeson et al., 2011). Common parent experiences were generated using inductive thematic discourse analysis. Analyses revealed several program benefits on parent-child relationships, including better understanding of behavior ( $n=19$ ), increased focus on differences instead of disabilities ( $n=15$ ), and improved future outlook ( $n=12$ ). However, few parents actually discussed diagnoses with their children ( $n=6$ ) or practiced advocating for their needs ( $n=2$ ). Results highlight the pivotal role of PEERS in facilitating positive parent attitudes, yet enhanced parent education about discussing diagnoses and advocating for accommodations may be warranted. Future programs addressing these needs may empower children with ASD and other developmental disabilities while diminishing barriers in society.