

Building Pathways to Employment: The DDS-UCLA Partnerships for Autistic Adults



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Disclosure Statement

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US Department of Health & Human Services
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NIIMBL
Autism Speaks
California Department of Developmental Services

Learning Objectives

1. Describe the key components of the DDS–UCLA partnership model for supporting autistic adults in advocacy and employment.
2. Identify strategies used to develop career readiness and employment pathways for autistic individuals.
3. Understand how advocacy training and social skills development contribute to successful workplace outcomes for autistic adults.

Overview of Lecture

- DDS-UCLA Partnership
- Importance of advocacy skills for emerging disability rights leaders
- Overview of UCLA Advocacy Academy
- Employment landscape and outcomes among autistic adults
- Overview of PEERS[®] for Careers employment related social skills
- Resources
- Community discussant: Monika Jezebelle
- Q&A

AGENDA



DDS-UCLA Partnership:

Workforce Preparation and Placement

- Purpose: To improve employment outcomes for autistic adults served by the California Regional Center system
 - The California Regional Center system is a statewide network that coordinates and funds lifelong services and supports for individuals with developmental disabilities
 - Regional Centers are funded by the California Department of Developmental Services (DDS)
 - Clients of the Regional Centers are served by the UCLA Tarjan Center, which is a University Center of Excellence in Developmental Disabilities (UCEDD)



DDS-UCLA Partnership: Workforce Preparation and Placement

- Five program components:
 - Neuroinclusive Employer Training
 - Training for DDS supervisors, managers, and employees
 - UCLA Advocacy Academy
 - Develop advocacy skills for autistic emerging disability rights leaders
 - PEERS® for Careers
 - Employment social skills program for autistic job seekers
 - Individualized coaching for autistic participants
 - Paid internship opportunities at DDS and UCLA



DDS-UCLA Partnership: Workforce Preparation and Placement

- The focus of this lecture will be:
 - UCLA Advocacy Academy
 - Develop advocacy skills for emerging disability rights leaders
 - PEERS® for Careers
 - Employment social skills program



Defining Advocacy Language

Advocacy

- The process of influencing public policy to create meaningful systems change and improve the lives of people with disabilities
- Example: Meeting with lawmakers

Public Policy

- Laws, regulations, or organizational rules that guide decisions and affect how systems operate
- Example: Inclusive legislation

Systems Change

- Improving the way organizations, services, or governments work so they create better outcomes for people
- Example: Accessible services

Importance of Advocacy Skills for Emerging Disability Rights Leaders

- Builds the next generation of disability rights leaders
- Develops self-advocacy, leadership, and public speaking skills
- Increases knowledge of disability policy, law, and systems change
- Prepares advocates to shape local, state, and national policy
- Amplifies the voices of people with lived experience



Importance of Advocacy Skills for Emerging Disability Rights Leaders

- Fosters community leadership
- Creates pathways to advisory boards, commissions, and public service
- Strengthens self-determination and advocacy across systems
- Expands representation of leaders with lived experience in decision-making
- Promotes sustainable leadership through mentorship and peer support



UCLA Advocacy Academy



UCLA LEADERSHIP ACADEMY FOR EMERGING DISABILITY RIGHTS LEADERS

FOR PERSONS WITH INTELLECTUAL AND DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES
WHO ARE INTERESTED IN DISABILITY POLICY AND ADVOCACY

About the Program

- Sessions will focus on disability history, law, self-advocacy, and leadership.
- Participants will attend virtual sessions for 2 hours per week for 12 weeks.
- Participants will practice new skills with the support of leadership coaches for 1-2 hours per week outside of sessions.
- Participants will receive a \$500 gift card at the end of the program.



Apply by Friday, February 28!

Scan the QR code or click on the link:



 <https://bit.ly/TarjanLEND2025>

-  April 4 – June 13, 2025
-  Fridays 2–4pm PT on Zoom
-  No experience required
-  Open to ages 18+

For information, please contact: Tarjan-LENDAcademy@mednet.ucla.edu

- Sessions focus on disability history, law, self-advocacy, and leadership
- Participants attend virtual sessions for 2 hours per week for 12 weeks
 - Lectures and discussions with disability rights leaders
 - Advocacy didactic lessons
 - Participants practice new skills with the support of advocacy coaches
- Skills practice for 1–2 hours per week outside of sessions with advocacy coaches

UCLA Advocacy Academy

- Co-developed with individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD)
- Interactive learning through expert-led sessions, practice activities, small and large group discussions, and weekly skills practice
- Individualized mentorship from trained advocacy coaches and disability rights leaders with IDD
- Advocacy Showcase where participants present advocacy topics to peers and disability rights leaders



UCLA Advocacy Academy:

TEL Your Story

(TEL = Trustworthiness, Emotion, Logic)

Trustworthiness (Introduction)

Your First and Last Name	Joe Bruin
Where you are from	Los Angeles, California
Organizations/schools/ boards/committees	UCLA Tarjan Center, Disability Rights California Youth Advisory Board
Professional/Advocacy Interests	Accessible transportation, inclusive education, and leadership opportunities for youth with disabilities
Work you do	I'm a peer advocate and mentor for other young adults with disabilities. I speak on panels, help train professionals, and support youth in learning their rights.

Emotion (My story)

What is the issue I want to talk about?	Transportation barriers for people with disabilities in Los Angeles.
How does my disability status inform my experience of this topic? (Lived Experience Statement)	As someone with a physical disability who uses a wheelchair, I know how frustrating it can be when the bus ramp doesn't work or when paratransit is late—or doesn't show up at all. I've missed classes, job interviews, and social events because of transportation issues.
Why should people care?	Transportation connects us to everything—school, work, healthcare, and community. If it's not accessible, it's like locking the door and throwing away the key.

UCLA Advocacy Academy:

TEL Your Story

(TEL = Trustworthiness, Emotion, Logic)

How does the problem make me feel?	It makes me feel isolated and like I can't fully participate in my community. I lose out on chances to learn, earn money, and make friends.
What is the goal of sharing?	I want to raise awareness about how inaccessible transportation harms disabled people, and encourage changes that make the system fair and reliable for everyone.

Logic (Facts about my topic)

What is the issue I want to talk about?	Transportation barriers for people with disabilities.
Fact #1	Only 3 out of 10 Metro train stations in LA have working elevators 100% of the time.
Fact #2	Paratransit rides must be booked a day in advance, which makes it hard to be spontaneous or respond to emergencies.
Fact #3	Many ride-share drivers illegally refuse passengers with wheelchairs or service animals.

Ask (What do I want?)

What do I want changed?	More accessible, reliable, and flexible transportation options for disabled riders in Los Angeles.
What am I asking for?	I'm asking LA Metro to improve training for drivers, invest in equipment maintenance, and expand same-day ride options for paratransit users.
Do I have a call to action?	Yes—please support funding for accessible transportation and invite riders with disabilities to help design these improvements.

Ending and Follow-up

Offer to answer questions	I'm happy to answer questions and share more about my experience.
Offer to be a resource	I'm also open to being a resource if you want to involve self-advocates in transportation planning.
"Thank you for your time" statement	Thank you for taking the time to hear my story and for thinking about how we can build a more accessible city together.
Contact information	JoeBruin@email.com; 555-1212

Pilot Study of UCLA Advocacy Academy (Warner et al., 2026)

Warner, Estabillo, Cincione, Martinez, Bolourian, Rosenau, & Laugeson

UCLA Leadership Academy

"I Belong Here": The UCLA Leadership Academy for Emerging Disability Rights Leaders

Blake E. Warner, Jasper A. Estabillo, Elisabeth Cincione, Julianna Martinez, Yasamin Bolourian,
Kashia A. Rosenau, and Elizabeth A. Laugeson

University of California, Los Angeles, Los Angeles, CA

Pilot Study of UCLA Advocacy Academy (Warner et al., 2026)

Demographic Characteristics of Fellows

Demographic characteristic	Response categories	<i>n</i>
Age	20 - 35 years	9
	36 - 45 years	1
Identified gender	Male	3
	Female	6
	Non-Binary	1
Ethnicity	Hispanic	4
	Non-Hispanic	6
Race	American Indian/Alaska Native	0
	Asian ^a	3
	Black or African American	1
	Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	0
	White ^b	3
	Multiracial	0
	Preferred not to answer	3

^a Includes Philippine Islands Origins.

^b Includes origins in Europe, Middle East, or North Africa.

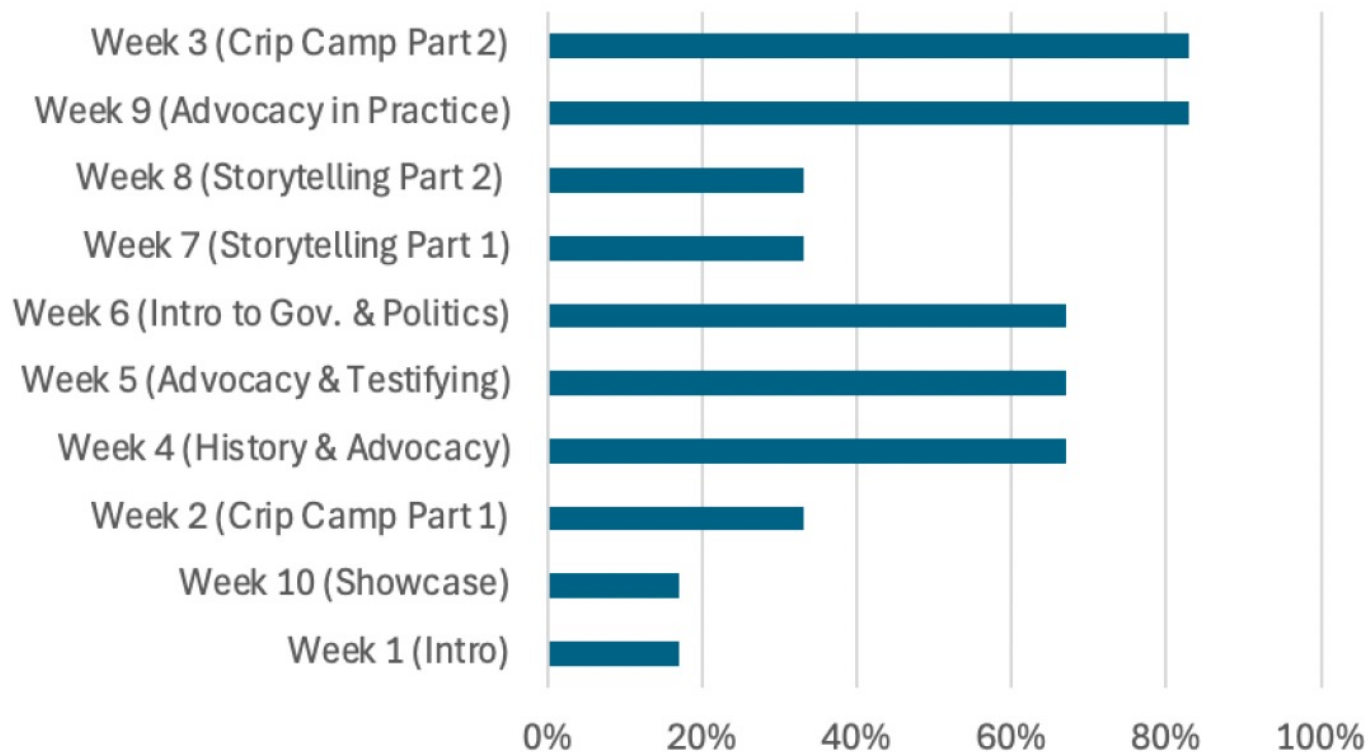
Pilot Study of UCLA Advocacy Academy (Warner et al., 2026)

Curriculum Overview

Week	Curriculum
1	Introductions
2	<i>Crip Camp</i> Part 1 Screening
3	<i>Crip Camp</i> Part 2 Screening
4	History & Advocacy
5	Advocacy & Testifying
6	Introduction to Government & Politics
7	Storytelling Part 1
8	Storytelling Part 2
9	Advocacy in Practice
10	Showcase with the TEL Your Story Advocacy Pitch

Key Findings of UCLA Advocacy Academy (Warner et al., 2026)

Percentage of Fellows Who Selected Each Session Topic as “Most Helpful”



Key Findings of UCLA Advocacy Academy (Warner et al., 2026)

- 90% completed the program with 77% attending at least 8 of 10 sessions.
- 100% of participants reported increased advocacy knowledge, advocacy skills, and satisfaction with the program.
- Participants reported significant improvements in:
 - Confidence
 - Leadership identity
 - Readiness to become advocates and mentors



Key Findings of UCLA Advocacy Academy (Warner et al., 2026)

- Senior Fellows (disability rights leaders) identified three major areas of improvement:
 - Leadership growth
 - Mentorship and belonging
 - Professional development
- Findings support the benefit of a disability-led leadership model that prepares individuals with lived experience for leadership and policymaking roles



Why Employment Matters

- Employment is a primary pathway to:
 - Financial independence
 - Social inclusion
 - Improved mental health and quality of life
- Lack of employment is associated with:
 - Increased isolation
 - Reduced well-being
 - Long-term dependency
- Takeaway: Employment is not just an outcome
 - It impacts adult functioning and quality of life



Role of Supported Employment

- Supported employment is individualized job support in real-world settings
- Research shows that supported employment:
 - Increased likelihood of obtaining employment
 - Greater job retention
 - Improved quality of life
 - Less expensive compared to traditional services
 - Associated with better employment outcomes at similar or lower cost
- Takeaway: People with intellectual and developmental disabilities can benefit from supported employment



Evidence-Based Employment Supports

- Research-supported components include:
 - Job coaching
 - Structured training programs
 - Workplace accommodations
 - Employer education
- Takeaway: Multi-component programs outperform isolated supports



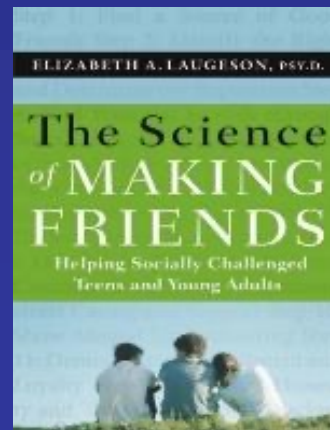
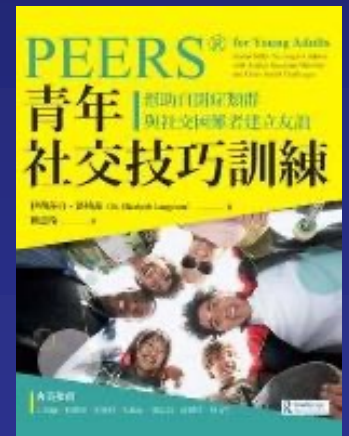
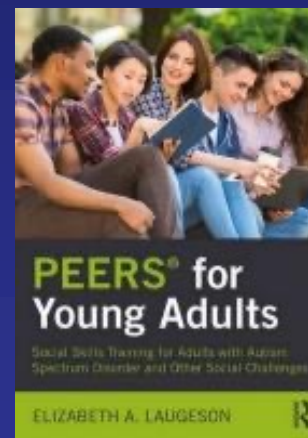
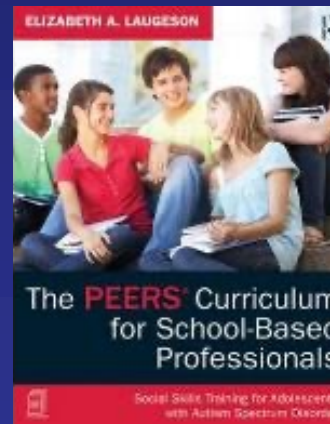
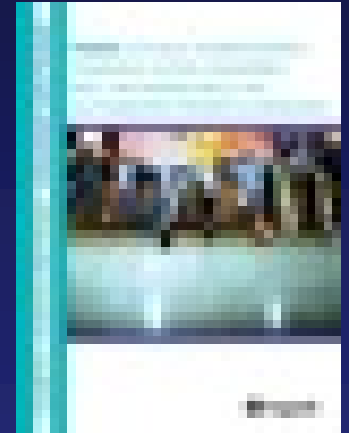
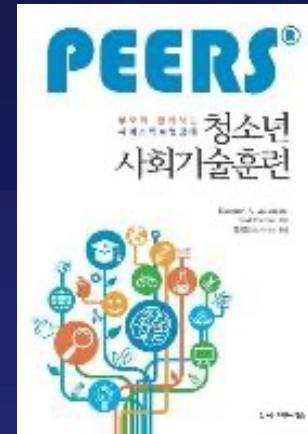
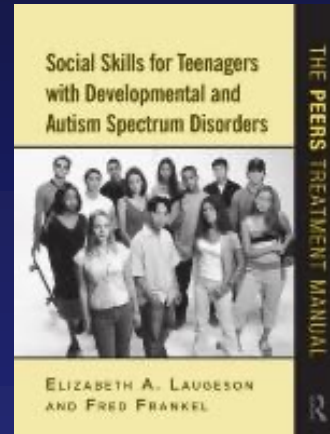
DDS-UCLA Partnership: Workforce Preparation and Placement

- Five program components:
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 - UCLA Advocacy Academy
 - PEERS® for Careers
 - Individualized coaching for participants
 - Paid internship opportunities at DDS and UCLA



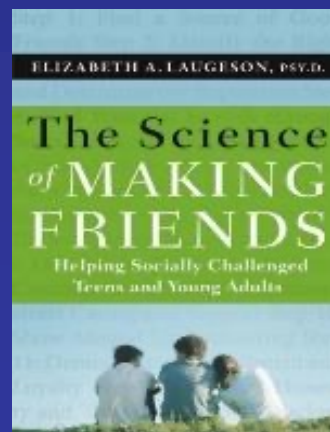
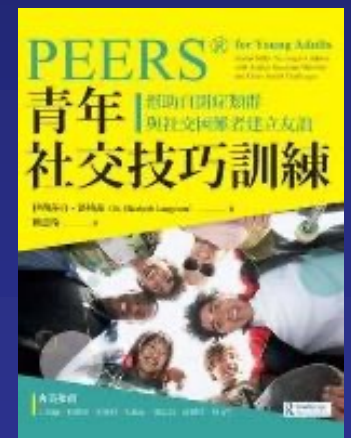
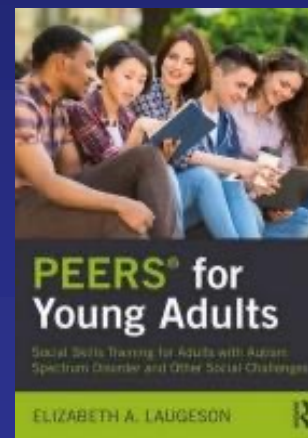
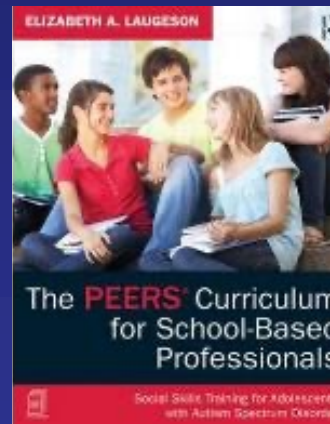
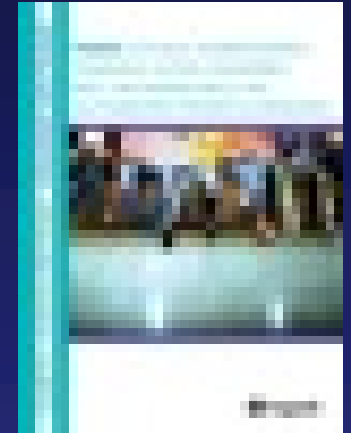
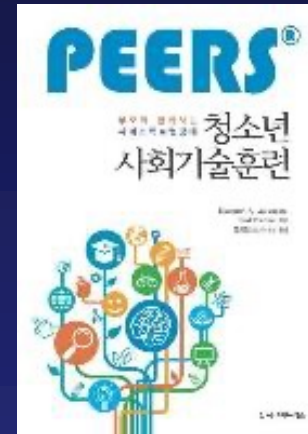
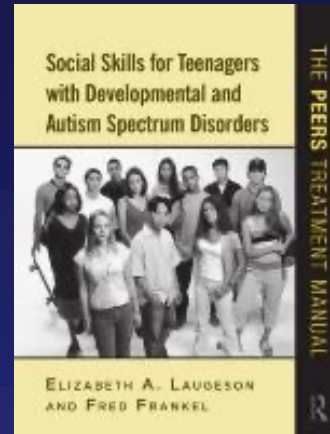
Background about PEERS®

- International program
 - Developed at UCLA in 2004 by Dr. Elizabeth Laugeson (UCLA PEERS Clinic Director)
 - Programs have been translated into dozens of languages
 - Used in over 150 countries across the globe
- Evidence-Based Social Skills Programs:
 - PEERS® for Careers
 - PEERS® for Dating
 - PEERS® for Young Adults
 - PEERS® for Adolescents
 - PEERS® for Preschoolers



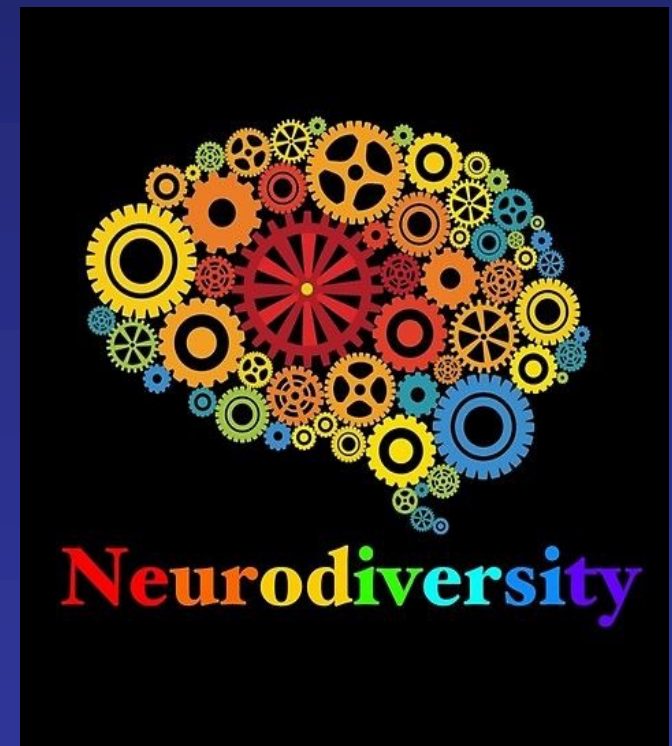
Unique Aspects of PEERS®

- One of the only evidence-based social skills programs
 - ONLY evidence-based social skills program for autistic teens and adults and those with other social challenges
- Social coaching
 - Social coaches are trained to support participants outside of the group
- Only teaches ecologically valid social skills
 - Presents socially helpful behaviors and socially risky behaviors
- Cross-culturally adapted across the globe
 - Numerous scientific papers and manuals published outside of the U.S.



The Role of Neurodiversity

- Neurodiversity means people have different ways of thinking
- We should respect the role of neurodiversity when learning new social strategies
- Differences do not make us less than
- There are strengths in neurodiversity
- PEERS[®] is a strengths-based approach



The Importance of Choice

- Each week we review strategies related to employment that have been shown to be:
 - Socially helpful
 - Socially risky
- Learning and/or using the strategies taught in PEERS® should NOT be about changing a person
- Learning and using these skills should be about enhancing social interactions so others can appreciate who we already are
- Ultimately, learning and/or using the strategies taught in PEERS® will be a PERSONAL CHOICE



PEERS[®] Neuroaffirming Pledge

- We value neurodiversity, acceptance, and authenticity
- We honor the diverse ways people experience the world
- We respect each person's unique perspectives and communication styles
- We recognize there is no one right way to connect with others
- If using the strategies taught in PEERS[®] feels like camouflaging or masking, and/or they don't align with your goals, then you do not have to use them
- Learning and using the skills taught in PEERS[®] is a PERSONAL CHOICE



PEERS[®] for Careers Curriculum

- Choosing a career
- Creating a resume
- Finding and applying for employment
- Interviewing skills
- Networking skills
- Conversational skills
- Electronic communication
- Disclosing diagnoses
- Requesting accommodations
- Starting, entering and exiting conversations
- Organization skills
- Stress management
- Navigating the workplace culture
- Conflict resolution



Disclosing Diagnoses or Conditions

QUESTIONS

How do you disclose a diagnosis or condition to an employer?

If your goal is to get and keep a job, what are some socially risky behaviors to avoid when disclosing a diagnosis or condition to an employer?





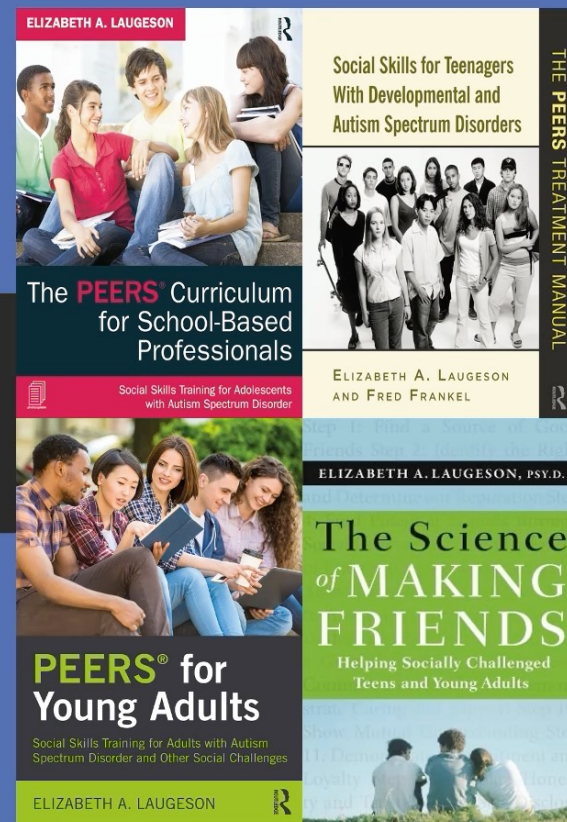
Disclosing Diagnoses or Conditions

Socially Risky Behavior

PEERS®

ROLE PLAY

What is Elina doing that
may be socially risky?





Disclosing Diagnoses or Conditions

Socially Helpful Behavior

1. Choose the right time
2. Choose the right person
3. Choose the right context
4. Acknowledge the difference
5. Give an explanation
6. Acknowledge what the difference means for you
7. Turn a challenge into a strength
8. Make your strength an asset to the company
9. Be prepared to answer any questions
10. Remember employment is a choice

STEP 1 >

STEP 2 >

STEP 3 >



Disclosing Diagnoses or Conditions

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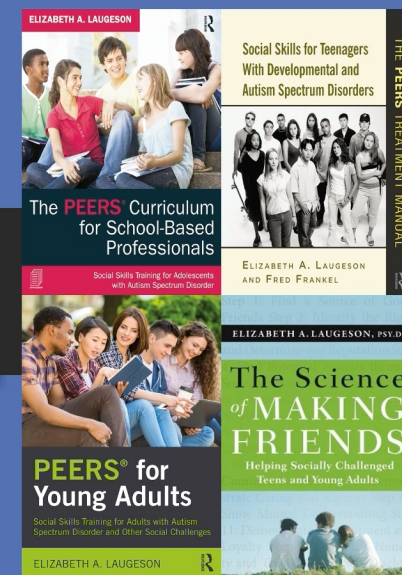
9. Be prepared to answer any questions

10. Remember employment is a choice

PEERS®

ROLE PLAY

What is Elina doing that
may be socially helpful?



UCLA PEERS[®] for Careers

College to Career Transition Program

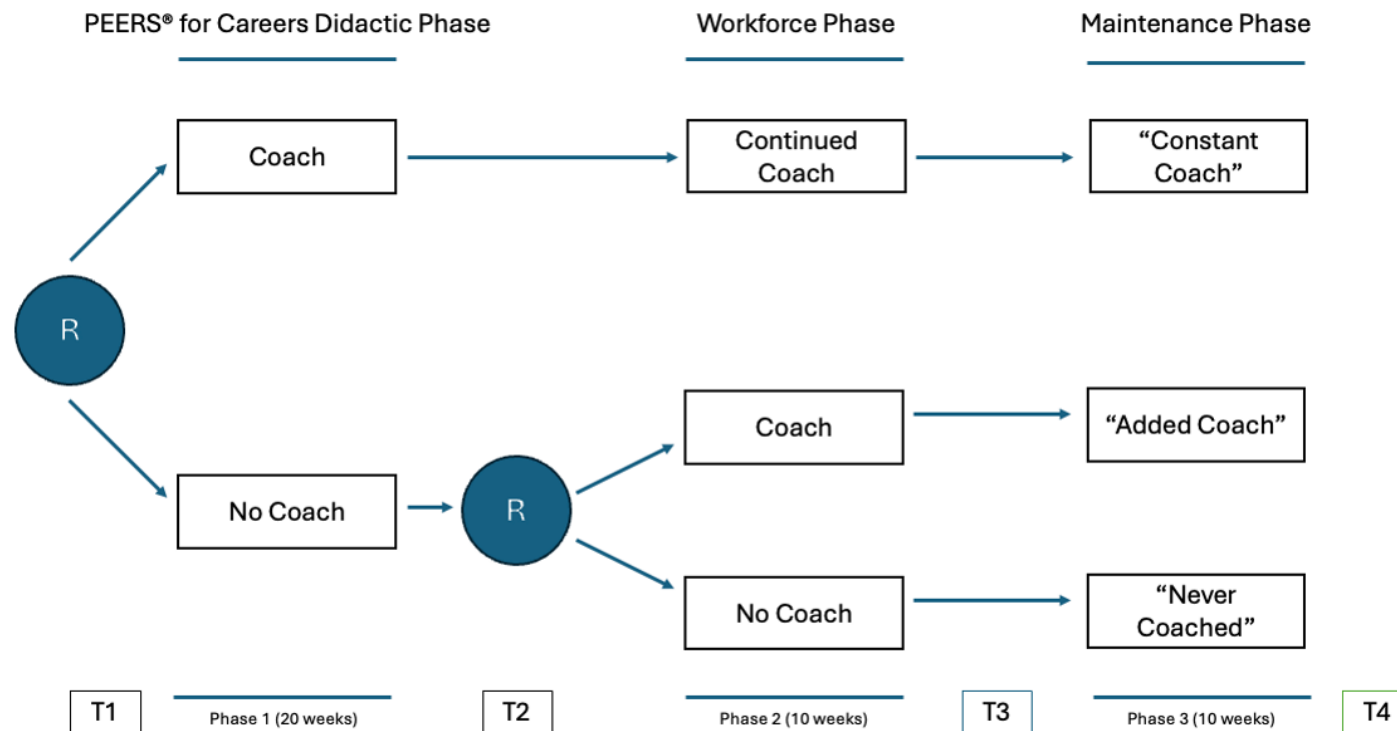
Autism Speaks Adult Transition
Research Grant (Gulsrud, PI)

- Investigate the efficacy of PEERS[®] for Careers
 - 20-week didactic course
 - 10-week internship
 - 10-week follow-up assessment
- Target the development of employment social skills in the work setting
- Provide internship or employment opportunities
- Randomize career coaching



PEERS[®] for Careers Study Design: Multi-Stage Randomized Trial

Figure 1. Study Design Chart



Note. R: Randomization. T1: Timepoint 1 Assessment. T2: Timepoint 2 Assessment. T3: Timepoint 3 Assessment. T4: Timepoint 4 Assessment.

Participant Demographics

Table 1. Participant Demographic and Baseline Characteristics

	<i>n (%)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>
Gender		
Male	83 (78.3%)	
Female	16 (15.1%)	
Non-Binary	3 (2.8%)	
Missing	4 (3.8%)	
Age		23.0 (3.8)
Race/Ethnicity		
White	52 (49.1%)	
Asian	19 (17.9%)	
Latino/Hispanic	8 (7.5%)	
Black	5 (4.7%)	
Multiracial	9 (8.5%)	
Other	8 (7.5%)	
Missing	5 (4.7%)	
Postsecondary Education Enrollment		
Full-time	46 (43.4%)	
Part-time	25 (23.6%)	
Missing	4 (3.8%)	
Employment Status		
Paid Employment	25 (23.6%)	
Unpaid or Volunteer	11 (10.4%)	
Unemployed	70 (66.0%)	
WASI-II FSIQ Estimate		109.5 (12.9)
SRS-2 Self-Report Total T-Score		61.9 (9.5)
SRS-2 Other-Report Total T-Score		65.0 (9.9)

Note. WASI-II: Wechsler Abbreviated Scales of Intelligence, 2nd Edition. FSIQ: Full Scale Intelligence Quotient. SRS-2: Social Responsiveness Scale, 2nd Edition.

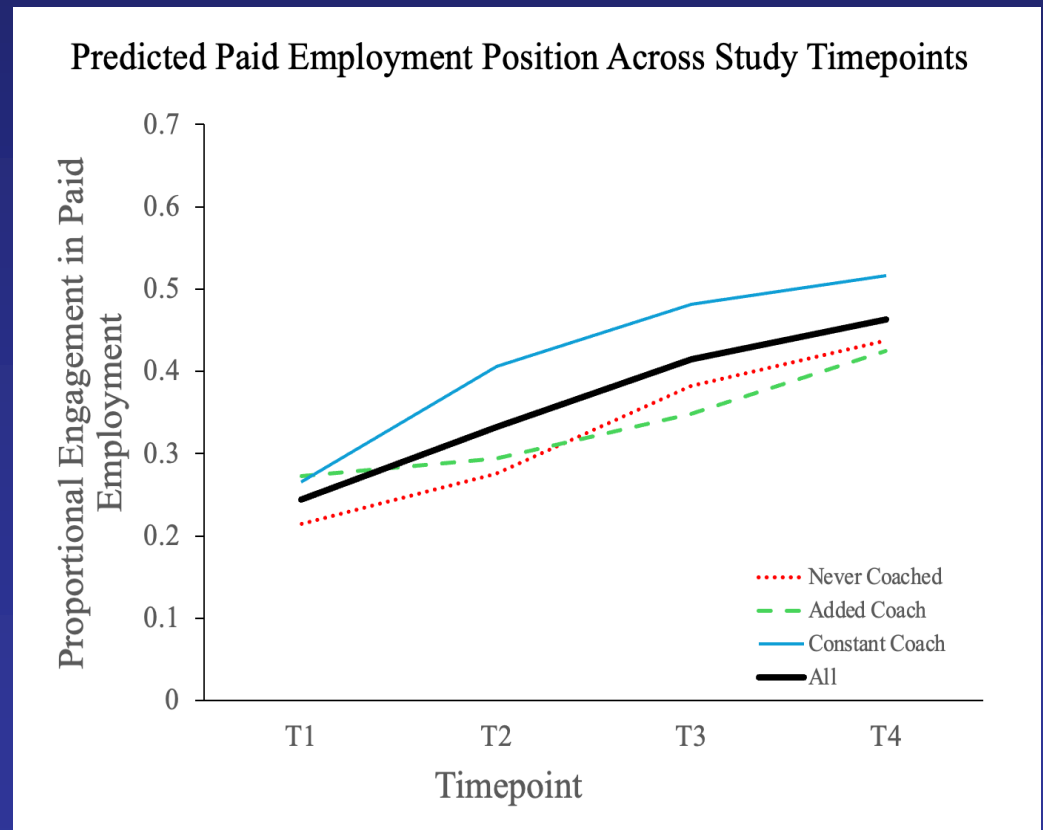
PEERS[®] for Careers

- PEERS[®] for Careers Course
 - 20-week course
 - 2.5 hour weekly classes provided over Zoom
- Separate homework review for young adults and career coaches
- Combined lessons
- In-session practice exercises
- Homework assignments completed outside of sessions with career coaches
- Pre, post, and two follow-up assessments (T1, T2, T3, T4)



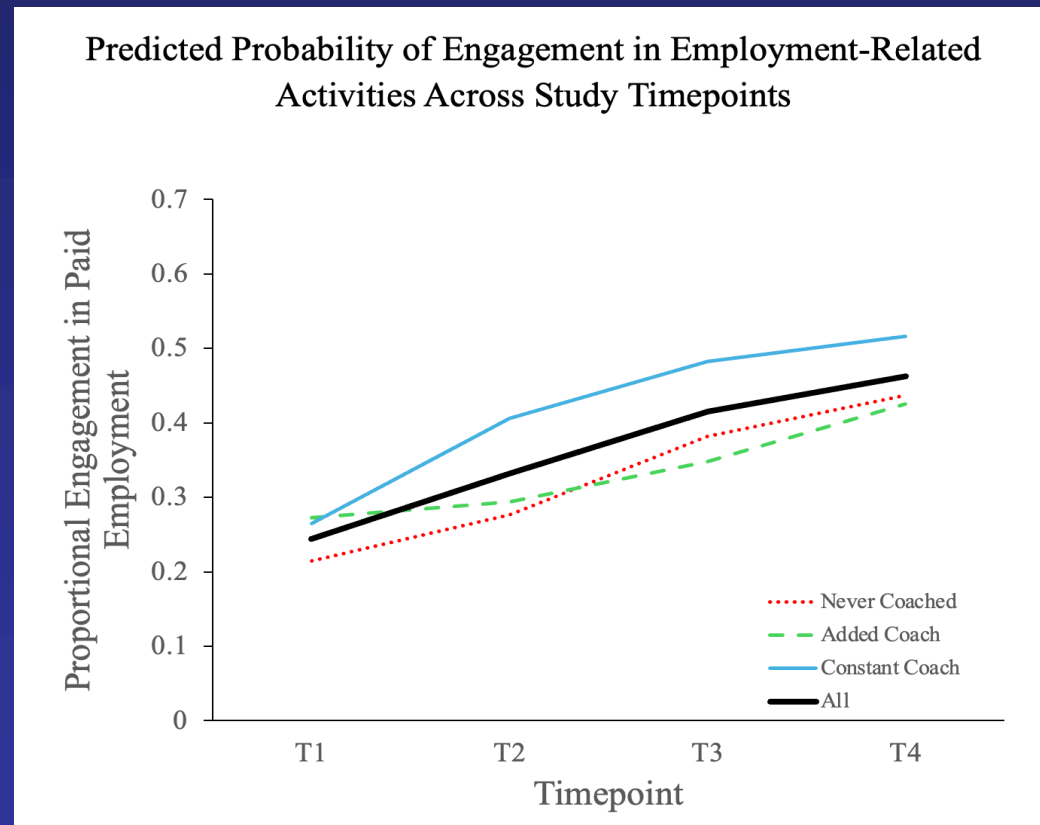
PEERS[®] for Careers Results: Paid Employment

- Paid employment increased from T1 to T4 (24% to 46%), with the largest gains early (T1 to T2) and similar trajectories across coaching groups.
- No differences in trajectories were observed across coaching groups



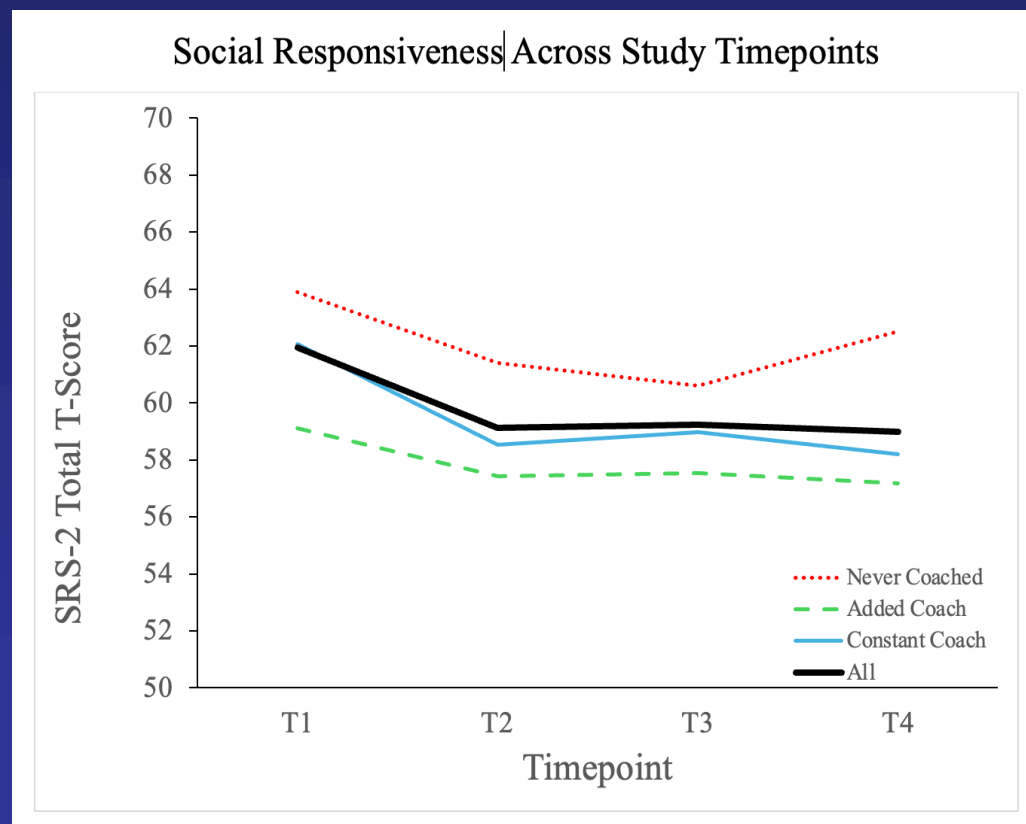
PEERS[®] for Careers Results: Employment Related Activities

- Engagement in employment related activities (unpaid internships and volunteer positions) significantly increased over time, doubling from 33% at T1 to 66% at T4.
- Statistically significant gains from T1 to T2 (largest) and T2 to T3 (continued).
- Maintained (plateaued) from T3 to T4.
- No differences across coaching groups. All groups improved in similar patterns over time.



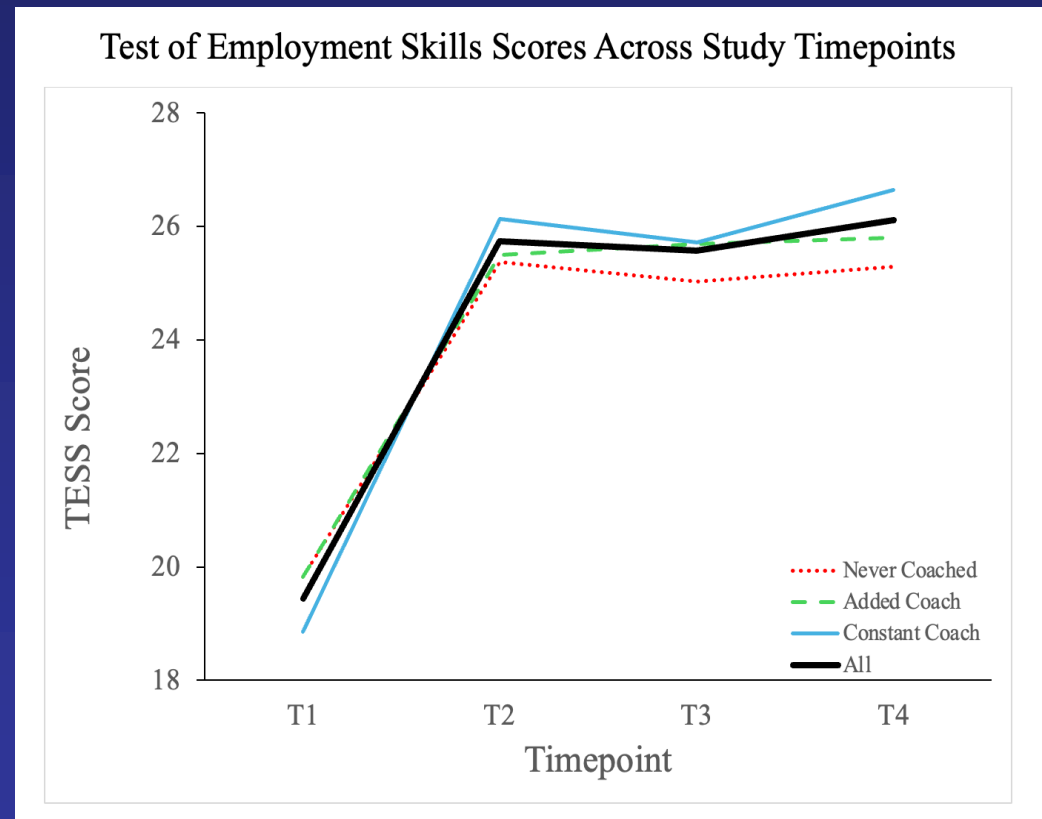
PEERS[®] for Careers Results: Social Responsiveness

- Self-reported social responsiveness (SRS-2) improved significantly.
- Gains occurred from T1 to T2 and were maintained through T4.
- Scores shifted from the mildly elevated to the typical range on SRS-2.
- Modest effect size but still clinically meaningful shift.
- Groups improved at similar rates.



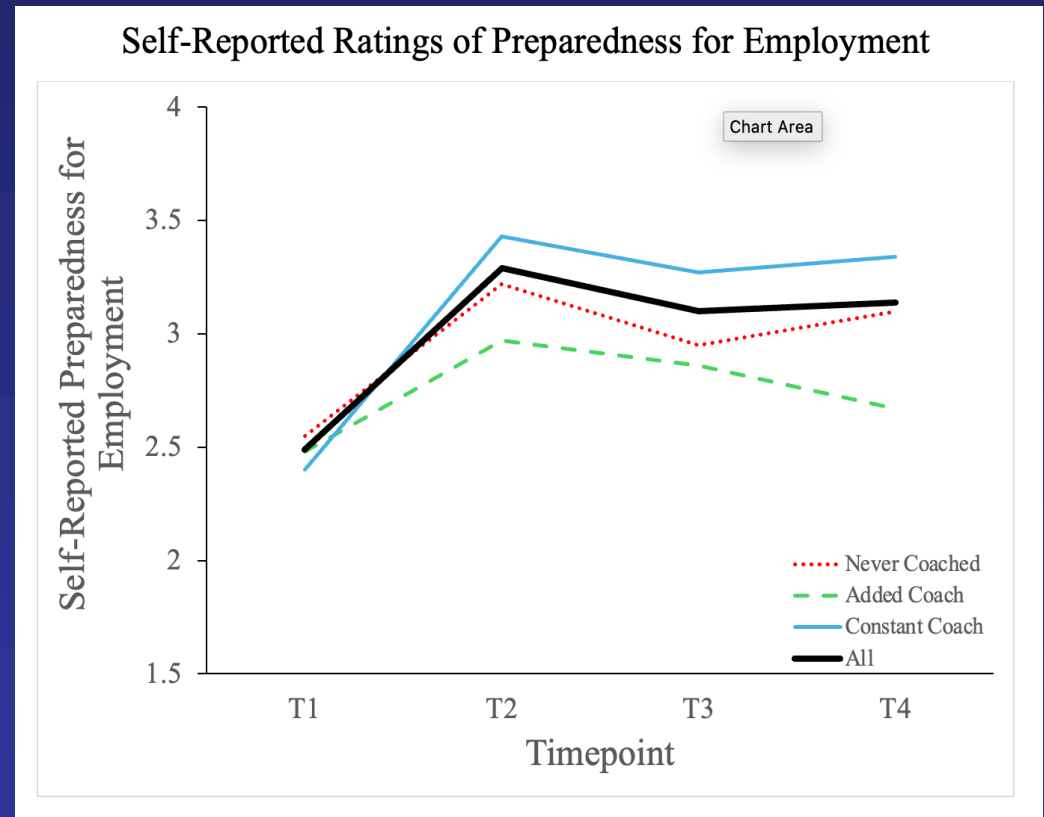
PEERS[®] for Careers Results: Employment Social Skills Knowledge

- Employment-related social skills knowledge (TESS) increased significantly over time.
- Largest gains occurring from T1 to T2 and maintained through T4.
- No differences across coaching groups.



PEERS[®] for Careers Results: Perceived Preparedness for Employment

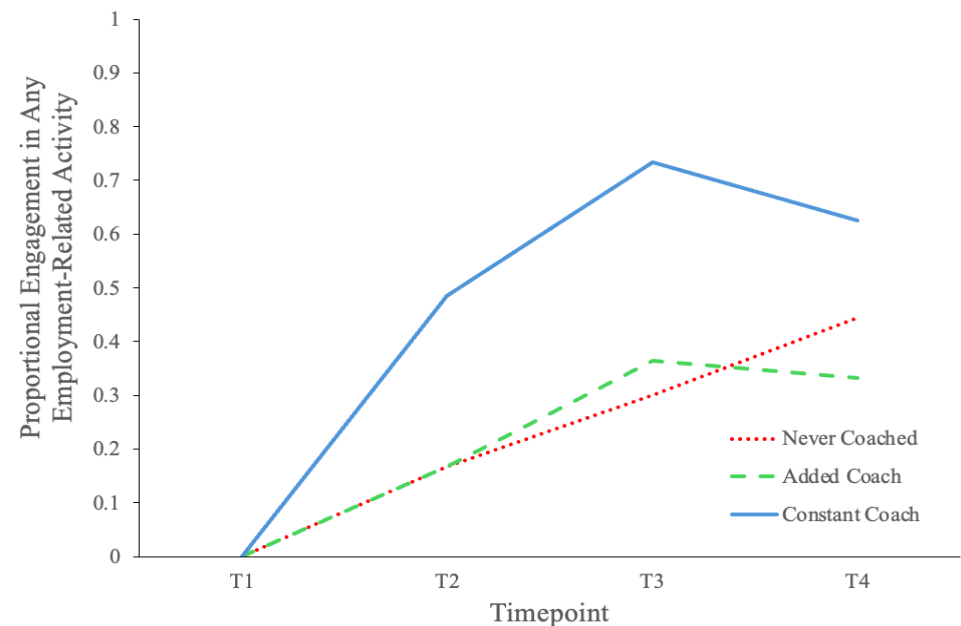
- A significant group x time interaction emerged for perceived preparedness for employment.
- Constant Coach group showered greatest gains in preparedness for employment compared to no coach or added coach groups.
- Group differences emerged by T3 and were maintained at T4.



PEERS[®] for Careers Results: Impact of Career Coaching among Unemployed at Baseline

- Among those individuals not engaged in employment related activities at baseline, coaching had a significant impact on employment related activities.
- 73% of participants who were assigned to the Constant Coach condition were engaged in employment related activities at T3 compared to:
 - 36% in the Added Coach
 - 30% in the Never Coached

Exploratory analyses of the subgroup of individuals who entered the study without employment related activities



RESOURCES



PEERS[®] for Careers and Advocacy Academy

COMING
FALL 2026!





ARE YOU AUTISTIC?
ARE YOU LOOKING FOR A JOB?

FREE TRAINING FOR CAREERS IN

BIOMANUFACTURING

This research study includes a 6-month program teaching employment-related social skills, hands-on training for biomanufacturing careers, and a guaranteed interview with a biotech company.

QUALIFICATIONS

- ✓ Some college experience (e.g., community college, four-year university, career technical education)
- ✓ Between 18-35 years of age
- ✓ Currently seeking employment and have an interest in the biomanufacturing industry
- ✓ Identify as autistic

APPLY NOW →

CollegeToCareer@mednet.ucla.edu

<https://nctm.tamu.edu/Neuropipes/>

(310) 267-3377



National Center for
Therapeutics Manufacturing



UCLA PEERS® CLINIC
SOCIAL SKILLS PROGRAMS



NeuroPIPES PEERS® for Careers Research Study

WEDNESDAYS
TIME TBD



PEERS®
PROGRAM FOR THE EDUCATION AND
ENRICHMENT OF RELATIONAL SKILLS

PEERS® Clinical Services & Educational Groups

Offered year round
with educational groups open to
international participants



UCLA PEERS® Clinical & Educational Social Skills Groups



The Program for the Education and Enrichment of Relational Skills (PEERS®) is world-renowned for providing parent/caregiver-supported evidence-based social skills programs to preschoolers, adolescents, and young adults who are interested in developing and maintaining close friendships and/or romantic relationships.



CLINICAL SERVICES

16-WEEK GROUP FOR AGES 4-6

PEERS® for Preschoolers Groups

16-WEEK GROUP FOR AGES 11-17

PEERS® for Adolescents Groups

16-WEEK GROUP FOR AGES 18-35

PEERS® for Young Adults Groups

EDUCATIONAL CLASSES

16-WEEK CLASSES FOR AGES 11-35

PEERS® Online Social Skills Classes

16-WEEK CLASSES FOR PARENTS

PEERS® for Preschoolers Educational Groups

16-WEEK CLASSES FOR AGES 18-35

PEERS® for Dating Online Social Skills Classes

LEARN MORE



To enroll, please contact:

☎ (310) 267-3377

✉ peersclinic@ucla.edu

Stay updated:

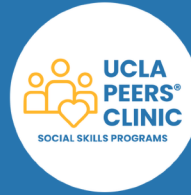
📘 UCLA PEERS Clinic

✕ @UCLAPEERS

📷 @uclapeers

UCLA PEERS® CERTIFIED TELECONFERENCES

BECOME A PEERS® CERTIFIED PROVIDER AND BRING UCLA'S EVIDENCE-BASED, NEUROAFFIRMING SOCIAL SKILLS PROGRAM TO YOUTH AND ADULTS. DEVELOPED BY DR. ELIZABETH LAUGESON, JOIN OUR ONLINE CERTIFIED TRAINING TO LEARN HOW TO CONFIDENTLY IMPLEMENT THIS INTERNATIONALLY RECOGNIZED PROGRAM.



Training Dates

JAN 21-23, 2026 & JUL 22-24, 2026

PEERS® FOR PRESCHOOLERS TRAINING

FEB 18-20, 2026 & SEP 23-25, 2026

PEERS® FOR YOUNG ADULTS TRAINING

APR 15-17, 2026 & NOV 4-6, 2026

PEERS® FOR ADOLESCENTS TRAINING

JUN 10-12, 2026

PEERS® SCHOOL-BASED TRAINING



For more information



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Telehealth certification
for UCLA trainings



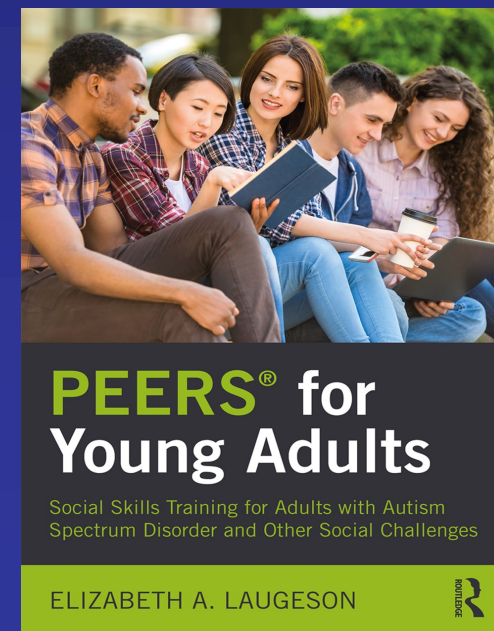
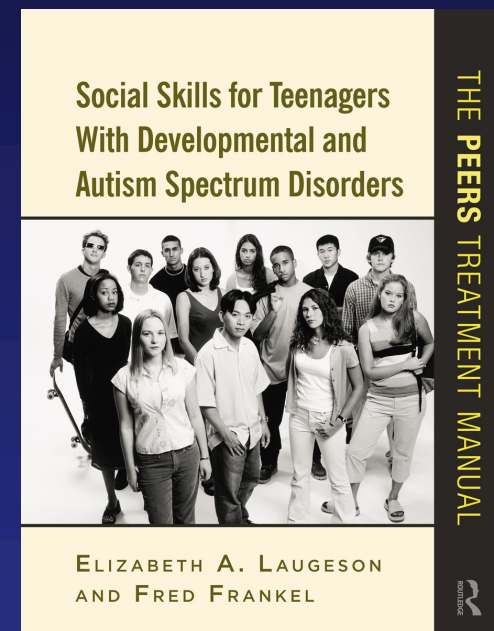
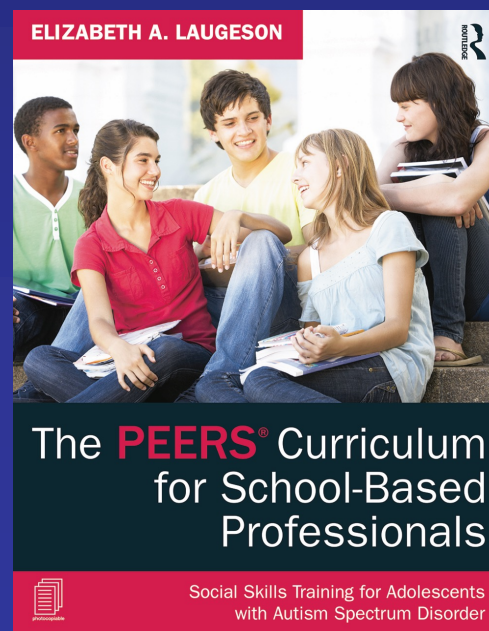
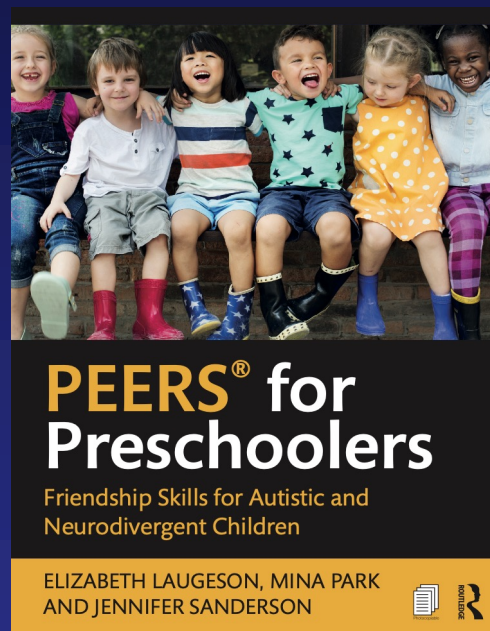
For information, please contact:
peersclinic@ucla.edu



www.teams.semel.ucla.edu/peers

Published Evidence-Based Manuals

- PEERS® for Preschoolers
- PEERS® for Adolescents
- PEERS® for School-Based Professionals
- PEERS® for Young Adults





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