

Title: Acceptability and Feasibility of the Autism Mentorship Program (AMP)

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Introduction: Relationships with caring, non-parental adults (i.e., mentors) are critical to healthy development (Rhodes, 2002, 2005) and can positively influence a range of outcomes, such as peer and parent-child relationships, identity development, academic achievement, self-confidence, and prevention of problem behaviors (DuBois et al., 2011). While youth and adolescents with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) often experience challenges related to communication, social relationships, and co-occurring emotional and behavioral concerns, there are limited mentoring opportunities available for youth with ASD, and there are currently no mentoring programs that pair youth and adults with autism in mentoring relationships. The Autism Mentorship Program (AMP) program was designed to meet this need. This is problematic because adolescents and young adults with ASD experience decreased access to supports as they age, and individuals who lack quality supports are vulnerable to mental health problems and limited social capital, which strongly affects educational achievement, economic success, wellbeing and quality of life (Putnam, 2016). Additionally, youth with ASD rarely have opportunities to form meaningful relationships with adults with ASD who can share their experience and guidance with youth during an important developmental period in their lives. The current study examined the acceptability and feasibility of the AMP program when delivered within an after-school program setting.

Methods: AMP involves one-to-one mentorship of youth with ASD by adults with ASD. Mentoring sessions consisted of weekly 60-minute meetings within the teens' local high school. Pairs participated in semi-structured activities centered around common interests. Participants completed 12 mentoring sessions over a 4-month period. Participants included 7 mentees (ages 14-17), 7 mentors (ages 19-33), 8 parents of the mentees, and 8 AMP staff. Mentees were recruited from a local high school, and mentors were recruited from a local community transition program for young adults with ASD. All participants had a diagnosis of ASD without co-occurring intellectual disability or language impairment. Multi-informant data was collected through interviews, standardized questionnaires, and focus groups to determine the acceptability and feasibility of the AMP intervention. Program data regarding attendance and satisfaction with weekly sessions were also collected.

Results: AMP was highly acceptable to all participants. Participants demonstrated a high level of attendance, with 11 students attending all sessions and 3 participants attending 11 of 12 sessions. All participants (100%) reported feeling satisfied with the mentoring relationship and agreed that their participation in AMP was meaningful. Most mentors and mentees (85.7%) reported feeling satisfied with their participation in the program and the level of support they received. Most parents (85.7%) also agreed that AMP helped prepare their child for the future.

During interviews and focus groups, mentees described quality relationships, progress toward personal goals, learning about people and communication, learning what it is like to grow up with ASD, and seeing a positive trajectory forward due to having an older person to look up to. Mentors described greater confidence, more patience, and better leadership skills as a result of participating in AMP. Parents described improvements in communication, motivation, attention, confidence and friendships. AMP staff also reported high satisfaction with the program (100%), and indicated that the program was able to be implemented successfully within the school setting.

Discussion: Results from this initial pilot of AMP indicated that the program is highly acceptable to participants and feasible to implement as an afterschool program. Initial results of an acceptability and feasibility study showed enthusiastic support and acceptance for AMP, as well as mutual benefit for both mentors and mentees. A full pilot will take place during the 2019-2020 school year with 12 mentee-mentor pairs to explore additional outcomes.

References:

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