

Improving Classroom Behaviors among Students with Symptoms of Autism Spectrum Disorder or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

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What was the research about?

Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, or ADHD, and autism spectrum disorder, or ASD, are health conditions that affect how people learn and relate to others. Students with either condition may have a hard time following classroom rules. These challenges may also make it harder for other children to learn.

In this study, the research team compared the support students with ADHD or ASD usually get with a new program called Unstuck and On Target, or UOT. In UOT, school staff actively teach students how to plan, set goals, and be flexible. The team looked at:

- Students' classroom behaviors after being in the program
- Students' problem-solving skills and parent reports about their behaviors after the program and one year later

What were the results?

After the program, classroom behavior improved both for students who were in UOT and those who received usual support. Across all students, UOT didn't improve students' behaviors more than usual support. For students with ADHD symptoms, both UOT and usual support improved students' classroom behaviors. When only looking at students with ASD symptoms, UOT improved behaviors but usual support didn't.

After the program and one year later, students' problem-solving skills and parent-reported behaviors didn't differ between UOT and usual support. Most of the program benefits remained.

Who was in the study?

The study included 148 students in grades 3–5 at 24 schools in Washington, DC, and northern Virginia. All schools served communities with limited resources. Of the students, 32 percent were Latino, 31 percent were white, 22 percent were African American, 11 percent were multiracial, and 3 percent were Asian. The average age was 10, and 82 percent were boys. In addition, 66 percent had ADHD symptoms, and 34 percent had ASD symptoms.

What did the research team do?

The research team assigned schools by chance to offer the UOT program or support as usual. Teachers chose students with ADHD or ASD symptoms to take part in the study. The team trained parents and school staff in both groups on rewarding flexible behaviors. For students in UOT, school staff led 21 group sessions over six months. Sessions taught students how to plan, set goals, and be flexible. For those getting usual support, school staff led 15 group and 5 in-class sessions. In these sessions, students practiced flexible behaviors but didn't actively learn about them. In the second year, schools could choose to stay with their assigned program or switch programs.

The research team observed students before the program started and again after it ended. The team noted students' behaviors, including

- Social skills
- Rule following
- Taking part in class

Parents took surveys and students did problem-solving tasks before the program started, after the program ended, and again one year later. The surveys and tasks helped the research team learn more about students' behaviors.

Parents, school officials, teachers, and mental health providers gave input on the study and program materials. They also helped choose students to take part in the study.

What were the limits of the study?

During the second year of the study, four schools switched from their assigned group. Results may differ if schools hadn't switched. This study took place in only one area of the country. Results may differ in other places.

Future studies could compare classroom behavior in other places.

How can people use the results?

Schools can use results when considering ways to support students with ADHD or ASD symptoms.

To learn more about this project, visit www.pcori.org/Kenworthy217.