Developing social skills and social competence in adults with autism

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Abstract. This research conducts a systematic literature review to identify and analyze approaches and programs developed and studied over the past two decades aimed at enhancing social skills and social competence in adults with autism. Utilizing various academic resources, including Google Scholar and Scopus, relevant articles, books, reports, and studies were identified based on specific keywords. The selection process was guided by inclusion criteria focusing on relevance, scientific significance, methodological reliability, and alignment with the research topic. The chosen materials were then analyzed to identify key approaches and programs used for developing social skills in adults with autism. Additionally, synthesis and summarization of literature analysis results were conducted to identify key trends, issues, and perspectives in this research area. The research question explores specific approaches and programs for developing social skills and social competence in adults with autism, while the research problem highlights the insufficiency of existing programs and approaches, leading to difficulties in social integration and realization of potential among adults with autism. The practical significance of the study lies in its potential to inform the development and improvement of educational programs and methodologies tailored to the individual needs of adults with autism, thereby enhancing their integration into society, employment opportunities, and overall quality of life. Finally, the synthesis of research underscores the importance of tailored interventions and ongoing research to address the complex social challenges faced by individuals with autism spectrum disorder, ultimately promoting their integration, empowerment, and well-being within society.

Keywords:
- autism
- social skills
- social competence
- adults with autism
- intervention programs
- social integration
Introduction
Autism is a neurological disorder that affects an individual's ability to communicate, engage in social interaction, and perceive the world around them. Individuals within this spectrum often encounter difficulties in developing social skills and social competence. In light of this, the development of approaches and programs aimed at improving social skills in adults with autism remains a relevant and important task. One of the main challenges faced by adults with autism is their limited ability to understand nonverbal cues such as facial expressions, gestures, and vocal intonations. This limitation restricts their ability to empathize and effectively communicate with others. Difficulties in understanding social norms and rules are also frequently observed, which can lead to conflicts and misunderstandings. Given these challenges, the development and implementation of programs aimed at enhancing social skills in adults with autism becomes necessary. Such programs may include various methodologies focused on teaching the fundamentals of social interaction, expanding emotional vocabulary, training nonverbal communicative skills, and increasing levels of empathy. A key element of a successful program is the individualization of the approach to each person with autism, considering their level of functioning and developmental characteristics. This allows for the most effective use of existing resources and the achievement of optimal results. It is important to consider not only social skills but also self-perception and self-confidence in adults with autism. Supporting and acknowledging their successes in developing social competence contributes to the formation of positive self-perception and increases motivation for further development. Moreover, it is necessary to provide access to resources and opportunities for practicing new social skills in real-life situations. Group activities, communication training, role-playing games, and other forms of active practice can be effective methods for developing social skills and self-assertion for adults with autism. The development of social skills and social competence in adults with autism remains a relevant task that requires a comprehensive approach and individualized programs. Increasing the level of social
adaptation among this group of individuals contributes to their successful integration into society and enhances their quality of life.

The aim of the research is to conduct a review of scientific literature to identify and analyze approaches and programs developed and studied over the past two decades aimed at enhancing social skills and social competence in adults with autism.

Research Methods
This study employed systematic literature review methods to investigate various aspects of social skills development in adults with autism. The research was based on a review of academic resources, including Google Scholar, Scopus, and other scholarly sources, to identify relevant articles, books, reports, and studies. Keywords used for the search included "autism," "adults with autism," "social skills development," and "social competence programs." Selected materials underwent a selection process based on inclusion criteria, including relevance, scientific significance, methodological reliability, and relevance to the research topic. Following selection, the chosen materials were systematized and analyzed to identify key approaches and programs used for developing social skills in adults with autism. Additionally, synthesis and summarization of literature analysis results were conducted to identify key trends, issues, and perspectives in this research area. This phase aimed to identify the main directions of research and programs that may be most effective in enhancing social competence in adults with autism.

Research Question:
What specific approaches and programs for developing social skills and social competence in adults with autism have been proposed and studied in scientific literature over the past two decades, and what are the results and conclusions drawn from these studies?

Research Problem:
The problem in the field of social skills development in adults with autism lies in the fact that existing programs and approaches to education and social adaptation are often insufficiently effective or inaccessible to this group of
individuals. As a result, adults with autism encounter difficulties in establishing and maintaining social connections, integrating into society, and realizing their potential. This problem is significant considering that successful development of social skills in adults with autism is crucial for their quality of life, self-determination, and participation in various spheres of social activity. Moreover, a lack of social skills can lead to social isolation, increased stress levels, and psychological issues in this group of individuals.

**Practical Significance:**

The practical significance of the study lies in the fact that its results can help develop and improve educational programs and methodologies aimed at developing social skills in adults with autism. These programs can be adapted to the individual needs of each person with autism, allowing them to more successfully integrate into society, find suitable employment, and ensure their independence. Thus, the study has practical significance for improving the quality of life for adults with autism and their inclusion in society.

**Results and Discussion**

Howlin P., Yates P., Dubreucq J., Haesebaert F., Plasse J., Dubreucq M., Franck N. articles highlight the importance of social skills in adults with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and discuss the results of research conducted to address this issue. Howlin and Yates emphasize the lack of adequate support for adults with autism, particularly those with higher abilities. They suggest that groups organized to teach social skills can play a significant role in promoting the development of more effective social strategies in individuals with autism, potentially leading to improved integration and personal development. Their study involved 10 adult men diagnosed with autism or Asperger's syndrome, with an average age of 28.4 years. Participants attended monthly meetings lasting about 2.5 hours, focusing on improving communication skills and encouraging greater independence in various areas of life. The group utilized various teaching methods, including role-playing, team activities, structured games, and video analysis of sessions. One of the main findings was the limited application of acquired skills in
real-life situations among group participants. For instance, although participants demonstrated a good understanding of social rules and emotions within the group, they found it challenging to apply this knowledge outside the group context. Additionally, improvement in assertiveness skills had limited effects, as participants struggled to express their needs due to fears of offending others. Overall, the article underscores the importance of group programs for teaching social skills to adults with autism, while also indicating the need for further research to optimize the effectiveness of such programs and ensure their sustainability and generalization into everyday life (Howlin, 1999; Dubreucq, 2022).

On the other hand, Dubreucq et al. discuss the social deficits associated with ASD, highlighting their detrimental effects on functional outcomes, even without accompanying intellectual disability. They note the increased risk of bullying, early school dropout, limited access to higher education, employment, independent living, long-term friendships, close relationships, and overall decreased quality of life among individuals with ASD. Additionally, they point out the prevalence of co-occurring social anxiety in individuals with ASD, associated with increased use of avoidance strategies, poor social skills and functioning, reduced social motivation, and participation in community life. Social isolation and loneliness are linked to increased symptoms of depression and suicidal thoughts in adults with ASD. The researchers acknowledge the recent increase in research on social skills training for adults with ASD, allowing for a more detailed examination of its impact on this patient population. They conducted a meta-analysis of controlled studies to assess the effects of social skills training on social reactivity, a measure of social functioning in adults with ASD. The study hypothesis was that social skills training would improve social reactivity in adults with ASD. The authors caution that the interpretation of their findings should be approached with caution due to the moderate quality of available evidence and the lack of active control groups, which complicates determining whether improvements after completing training are specific to this method or due to common factors across all types of psychotherapy (Dubreucq,
Ke F., Whalon K., Yun, J. discuss the importance of developing social skills in adults with autism spectrum disorder and note that these skills play an important role in both adolescence and adulthood. They emphasize that social competence is highly context-dependent and that there is no one-size-fits-all intervention method for all RRA adults. In this regard, the authors note that early intervention and continued work on social skills development throughout adulthood are necessary. The authors point out that although there are systematic surveys of research on the development of social skills in people with ASD, they often focus on specific intervention methods such as group training in social skills or cognitive behavioral therapy, and do not include adults or focus on young children. It is also noted that previous attempts to synthesize social skills interventions for people with ASD typically focus on only one research method (e.g., single case or group comparison design). The authors stress the importance of an individual approach to the development of social skills in adults with PAC and the need for further research and development of effective intervention methods for this group of people (Ke, 2018).

Reichow B., Steiner A. M., Volkmar F. noted the importance of social skills in adults with autism, noting that the main difficulties in communication were identified as defining the trait of individuals with autism spectrum disorders. These challenges include the significant heterogeneity of social disorders in people with autism. For example, a person with Asperger’s syndrome may have a strong desire to communicate with peers and often be close to them to talk to them, but lack the skills to communicate effectively in social situations, for example, he may say relentlessly, without controlling the interest of the interlocutors in the topic or participation in the conversation. On the other hand, another person may have very little desire to communicate with others and may avoid social interactions at all. Social hardship usually remains an area of great vulnerability, even for the most cognitively capable people with autism spectrum disorders. Social skills training is therefore an important aspect of intervention planning. There are a number of
treatments, including social stories, peer mediation, scripts and the gradual disappearance of scripts, social skills groups, video modeling. However, complete elimination of social skills deficits has not been demonstrated, and social difficulties remain even in people who have received successful treatment (Reichow, 2012).

Some studies describe several social skills in people with autism, including difficulties in social interaction, empathy, communication, social adaptation, and group participation. The authors consider the influence of group interventions on the development of social skills on the ability to understand and interpret idiomatic language. This study highlights the need for further research to determine the positive impact of group interventions on this aspect of social functioning. It is noted that the surveys included in the review measured social competence using various scales of assessment such as the Social Skills Rating System (SSRS), Social Skills Rating System (SRS), and Social Competence Inventory (SCI) (Table 1). The authors draw attention to the need to use and report on the results of different scales of assessment within one construct and recommend taking into account a wide range of indicators related to socialization, such as social communication, friendship, and loneliness (Carter, 2005; Howlin, 2005; Shea, 2005; Paul, 2003; Reichow, 2010).

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<th>№</th>
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| 1 | Social interaction skills | - ability and willingness to initiate and maintain contact with others.  
- the ability to understand non-verbal signals such as gestures, facial expressions, tone of voice.  
- the ability to engage in social games and communicate with other participants.  
- developing empathy and understanding of other people’s feelings and emotions. |
| 2 | Communication skills   | - development of oral and written language for effective communication.  
- asking questions, expressing your thoughts |
Table continuation 1

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| 1 | and feelings.  
- understanding and using non-verbal means of communication such as gestures, facial expressions, intonation.  
- the ability to adapt your communication style depending on the situation and interlocutor. |
| 2 | Social     
adaptation skills |
- adapting to social norms and rules of behaviour.  
- developing self-control and emotional management skills in social situations.  
- the ability to respond adequately to changes in the environment and interact with different people. |
| 3 | Group     
activities skills |
- the ability to work in a team and cooperate with other members of the group.  
- developing conflict resolution and dispute resolution skills.  
- the ability to participate in public and collective activities. |

Table 1 presents the main social skills that can be developed in individuals with autism through special programs and trainings, including group social skills, social stories, video modeling, and other intervention techniques. Developing these social skills for people with autism helps them to better adapt to society, improve their relationships, and successfully participate in various social situations.

Morrison K.E. shows that social skills in adults with autism, noting that they often experience non-standard social behaviors when interacting with others. These differences may include atypical use of sight, less visible participation in conversation, reduced oral fluency, atypical expressions of emotion, and fewer questions to a communication partner. Research shows that social skills in autistic adults differ significantly from the norm, and this can create difficulties in social interaction. In addition, the authors note that traditionally social skills in adults with autism are often seen as objects for improvement in psychosocial interventions to improve social interaction in real life. However, recent studies show that productivity in social cognitive and social
skills in adults with autism on standardized tests shows little association with their functional outcomes beyond other factors (Morrison, 2020).

In general, more sensitive research also shows differences in social skills in people with autism. Research findings, Morrison et al. (2017), Chevallier et al. (2012), Sasson et al. (2020) and DeBrabander et al. (2019), certainly point to differences in social skills among autistic adults. These studies draw attention to various aspects of social behaviour and social cognition in persons with autism spectrum. For example, the works note atypical use of the gaze, less active participation in the conversation, reduced oral fluency, as well as atypical expression of emotions and a limited number of questions in the communication process.

It is interesting to note that these conclusions are confirmed not only by one study, but also by the many works of various authors, which indicates a consensus in the scientific community on this issue. Each new study complements and expands our knowledge of the specific features of social behavior in people with autism. The results are instrumental in understanding and supporting autistic spectrum individuals. Understanding and recognizing their characteristics in social interaction can help to develop more effective methods of education and support, as well as to improve the quality of life of the group. Each of these studies and work contributes to understanding differences in social skills among people with autism and helps to clarify these differences for further research and development of approaches to support this group of people.

**Social skills and competence development programs for Autism patients**

Learning and implementing social skills development programmes for people with autism is essential to improving their quality of life, integrating into society and supporting families. Programs help people with autism learn to communicate by improving their opportunities for education, work and social engagement, and reducing stigma. Social skills development also makes it easier for families to educate and support their autistic relatives. The results of the literature analysis show the effectiveness and application of
several programs for the development of social skills and competencies in persons with autism spectrum disorder:

1. JobTIPS (Job Training, Internship and Placement Software) is a multimedia employment training program, completed by participants on their computers in a self-study mode. This program includes step-by-step instructions, video models, worksheets and printed scripts. Adults trained through JobTIPS showed more adequate verbal responses to interview questions than the untreated control group, but there was no improvement in non-verbal communication (Hinton Keel, 1997; Hedley, 2017; Gorenstein, 2020).

2. The JOBSS Curriculum is a learning guide developed by a team of authors and integrating concepts from the Individualized Social Curriculum and JobTIPS. JOBSS is a 15-week group intervention that combines vocational training and social skills aimed at increasing the socio-pragmatic skills needed for employment. The programme is designed to be used by people without specialized training. It includes scripts for each class, worksheets, and visual aids using cognitive behavioral therapy, which has proven effective in improving the quality of life in adults with autism spectrum disorder (Strickland, 2013; Gorenstein, 2020).

3. Assistive Soft Skills and Employment Training (ASSET), is a guide for group intervention and covers six basic working social skills, or soft skills: communication, attitude and enthusiasm, teamwork, networking, Problem solving and critical thinking and professionalism. The programme covers six basic working social skills:

- communication, the ASSET program helps participants develop effective communication skills, including the ability to express their thoughts and ideas clearly and clearly, listen carefully and respond adequately to the communication of other people;
- attitude and enthusiasm, promotes the formation of a positive attitude to work and training, as well as the development of enthusiasm and motivation to achieve the goals;
- teamwork, the program teaches participants how to work effectively in a group, including the ability to cooperate, share responsibilities, resolve conflicts and achieve common goals;
networking, helps participants to develop skills of building and maintaining social contacts, establishing contacts with colleagues, managers and other professionals;

- problem solving and critical thinking, the program teaches participants how to analyze situations, set goals, find alternative solutions and make informed decisions in work and everyday life;

- professionalism, helps participants develop skills of professional conduct, including responsibility, punctuality, work ethics, respect for colleagues and customers.

The six core working social skills presented in the ASSET program are key to the successful adaptation and integration of young adults with high-functioning autism into the workplace and society at large (Sung, 2018; Hume, 2018; Connor, 2020).

4. The UCLA PEERS program is a group intervention to develop social skills and has been researched using rigorous methods, including studies with true experimental design (e.g. randomized controlled research). PEERS focuses on general social functions such as friendship, social events, sporting correctness and effective communication, which eliminates an exclusive focus on working social skills (Laugeson, 2015; Laugeson, 2017; Sasson, 2021).

5. PEERS-YA-K (Program for the Education and Enrichment of Relational Skills for Young Adults) for young adults with autism spectrum disorder. PEERS-YA-K is an adapted version of the PEERS program for young adults with RAS, which was developed to improve social skills and relationships in this age group. This is an empirical programme designed to improve the social skills of children, adolescents and young adults with ASD. It focuses on learning the specific skills needed for successful interaction in social situations, such as initiating and maintaining friendships, communication and conflict resolution (Yoo, 2014; Oh, 2021).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the literature analysis highlights the significance of social skills development programs for individuals with autism spectrum disorder in enhancing their quality of life, fostering societal integration, and providing support to families. The effectiveness and
applicability of various programs have been demonstrated, each catering to different age groups and focusing on distinct aspects of social skills enhancement. JobTIPS, the JOBSS Curriculum, ASSET, UCLA PEERS, and PEERS-YA-K are all notable programs that address specific needs and challenges faced by individuals with ASD. JobTIPS and the JOBSS Curriculum emphasize vocational training and social skills development, showcasing promising results in improving verbal responses to interview questions and socio-pragmatic skills necessary for employment. ASSET focuses on six core working social skills essential for successful adaptation into the workplace and broader society. Furthermore, UCLA PEERS and PEERS-YA-K target general social functions and relational skills, contributing to improved social interactions, friendship initiation, communication, and conflict resolution. These programs utilize rigorous research methods and empirical approaches to ensure effectiveness and relevance to the needs of individuals with ASD. The implementation of social skills development programs holds immense potential in enhancing the educational, vocational, and social outcomes of individuals with ASD, ultimately promoting inclusivity, empowerment, and holistic well-being within society. Further research and dissemination of these programs are warranted to maximize their impact and reach.

The analysis of various studies sheds light on the complexity of social skills in individuals with autism spectrum disorder and underscores the necessity for tailored interventions to address their specific needs. Studies have identified a range of social difficulties experienced by individuals with ASD, including challenges in social interaction, empathy, communication, social adaptation, and group participation. Additionally, research emphasizes the importance of understanding idiomatic language and the potential positive impact of group interventions on social functioning, urging further investigation in this area. Furthermore, the review emphasizes the importance of using comprehensive assessment tools to measure social competence accurately, advocating for the incorporation of various scales such as the Social Skills Rating System, Social Skills Rating System and Social Competence Inventory. It highlights
the need for a holistic approach to assessing socialization, encompassing aspects like social communication, friendship, and loneliness. Moreover, studies focusing on social skills in adults with autism reveal notable differences in social behaviors compared to neurotypical individuals, including atypical use of sight, reduced oral fluency, and unique expressions of emotion. These findings challenge traditional views on social skills improvement through psychosocial interventions and underscore the importance of recognizing and accommodating these differences in real-life interactions. The consensus among various studies confirms the multifaceted nature of social skills in individuals with ASD and emphasizes the importance of ongoing research to deepen understanding and refine support strategies. The literature underscores the significance of social skills development programs tailored to different age groups and specific needs, such as those highlighted in the analysis, including JobTIPS, the JOBSS Curriculum, ASSET, UCLA PEERS, and PEERS-YA-K. These programs offer promising avenues for enhancing social interactions, vocational skills, and overall quality of life for individuals with ASD. The synthesis of research underscores the critical role of social skills development interventions in improving outcomes for individuals with ASD. It highlights the importance of tailored approaches, comprehensive assessment tools, and ongoing research to address the diverse social challenges faced by individuals with ASD and promote their integration, empowerment, and well-being within society.

References:


