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Teen socialization programs for autistic youth blend research, mentorship and a place to connect

Two programs at UC Santa Barbara’s Koegel Autism Center at the Gevirtz School of Education are giving local teens something many families struggle to find: a place to build social skills, make friends and spend time together in a supportive environment. Designed for adolescents on the autism spectrum and related neurodivergent profiles, the initiatives combine structured skill-building with something just as essential — time to simply hang out.

“Social Tools And Rules for Teens (START) was developed in direct response to the growing need for socialization support in the local community,” said Ty Vernon, director of the Koegel Autism Center and an associate professor of clinical psychology within the Gevirtz School of Education. “We wanted to completely reimagine how to approach the complexities of improving the social motivation, insights and skills of autistic youth transitioning from children to adulthood.”

As co-investigators on the project, Vernon works closely with clinical psychology doctoral student Anielia Bordofsky, who is currently studying START adolescent social outcomes as the focus of her dissertation. Bordofsky served on the original pilot project over 10 years ago as a high school volunteer. After being accepted to UCSB, she remained actively involved — first as an undergraduate research assistant and later as a graduate student researcher.

“We ended up creating a neurodiversity-affirming, club-like program that teens actually want to attend,” said Bordofsky. “There is a core emphasis on experiential learning, which is the act of learning by actually doing the thing you want to master. By actually being immersed in a safe, friendly setting where you are free to be yourself, experiment with different social strategies and still be accepted no matter what, you become empowered and begin to experience transformational change.”

START is an eight-week program that brings together teens ages 12–18 from across Santa Barbara County. Meeting twice weekly, participants work with trained undergraduate clinicians, many studying psychological and brain sciences or biology, to build social confidence and practical communication skills.

Each session follows a consistent rhythm. Teens check in one-on-one with a clinician, then gather as a group to talk about their week before moving into a focused topic — everything from teamwork and humor to navigating social media or handling criticism. Activities and games reinforce those lessons, giving participants a chance to practice in real time. Families are also looped in, with parents joining at the end of sessions to support progress at home.

“It’s a socialization group where we explore different topics that are really important as teens move into high school and the adult world,” said Kiera Roux, a fourth-year psychological and brain sciences major and START program coordinator.

What sets START apart is its dual role as both a clinical service and an active research study. Undergraduate clinicians don’t just facilitate sessions, they also contribute to behavioral research by coding video data and tracking how participants’ social interactions evolve over time. The program has also examined differences between in-person and online formats, offering insight into how environments can shape outcomes.

That research component is part of the draw for students running the program. Unlike more abstract lab work, this is applied science with immediate impact. Clinicians see changes week by week: a teen who was initially hesitant begins asking more questions, engaging with peers and showing greater confidence.

“You see the improvements on a day-to-day, week-to-week basis,” said Ashley Barth, a fourth-year biological sciences major and undergraduate clinician. “They’re leaving having learned something new or had an experience they otherwise wouldn’t have had.”

While START is structured, organizers recognized a need for something more flexible — a lower-pressure environment where teens can socialize without a formal agenda. That idea led to the development of a “Teen Hangout” program.

The hangout is intentionally informal: an hourlong weekly gathering, likely in the early evening, featuring rotating activities like game nights, arts and crafts or small group conversations. It’s open to neurodivergent teens and their peers, creating a welcoming space to make friends and explore shared interests.

The goal is to support what clinicians describe as “unmasking” — allowing teens to be themselves without the pressure to conform to neurotypical expectations. For many, that shift can reduce anxiety and open the door to more authentic relationships.

“It’s a safe space to make friends, practice social skills and just be yourself,” Barth said.

Both programs emphasize that social growth takes time. The first sessions can feel awkward for any teenager but Roux and Barth say that discomfort often gives way to connection. “By pairing research-backed methods with peer mentorship and a sense of community,” Roux added, “the programs teach skills while offering a foundation for confidence and belonging.”

UCSB’s Koegel Autism Center offers a number of neurodiversity affirming socialization programs for children, teens and adults. To learn more, visit their [website](#).

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