

New combination therapy helps children on the autism spectrum learn social skills

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Video Abstract

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Abstract

A new combination therapy may help children on the autism spectrum not only develop better social skills but also maintain them over the long term. Researchers working in the US have discovered that giving young people with autism the drug D-cycloserine before teaching them social skills improves their social functioning for months. Training in social skills is widely used to help people with autism overcome social impairment, the defining diagnostic characteristic. Although such training is very effective when delivered, the benefits are often lost once it's stopped. To help prolong the training effects, the researchers looked at whether D-cycloserine could help children with autism remember lessons about social skills. D-cycloserine has been shown to boost long-term responses to behavioral therapy, but its impact on autism had not been explored. The team held weekly group training sessions for 68 children with autism. The sessions included lessons in greeting others, understanding emotions, creative play, and social conversations. Half the children were given a placebo before each session, and the other half were given D-cycloserine. After ten weeks of training, the two groups showed similar improvements in social functioning. However, 3 months after the training was stopped, the children who received the medication showed continued interest in socializing with others, whereas this interest diminished in those who received the placebo. This suggests that the children receiving D-cycloserine were more successful in gaining new social skills. The drug also caused no notable side effects, making it a potentially safe option. These findings offer new hope for families faced with managing autism. Although it is not known exactly how D-cycloserine works, the fact that it boosts learning opens a new avenue for improving the lives of children with autism. More research is needed to confirm these findings and to thoroughly explore any safety issues.