



Understanding the Relationship between Social Anxiety and Bullying against Others in Adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorder

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BACKGROUND

- Bullying is an epidemic that currently affects over five million adolescents in the U.S., often resulting in prolonged negative outcomes for perpetrators and victims (Fried & Sosland, 2009).
- Bullying includes negative behaviors toward others, which include physical, verbal, or social aggression (Fried & Sosland, 2009).
- Research has identified several factors that contribute to the act of bullying others, including social anxiety. Fear of negative evaluation, a subcategory of social anxiety, focuses on concerns that adolescents will not be accepted, that their peers will mock them, or that they will embarrass themselves (La Greca & Lopez, 1998).
- Adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) are known to frequently experience social anxiety (Wood et al., 2009) and are often involved in the bullying dynamic (Sterzing et al., 2012), yet the extent to which social anxiety in ASD relates to bullying others has yet to be examined.

OBJECTIVES

The present study examines the relationship between bullying behaviors against others and social anxiety, specifically fear of negative evaluation by peers, in adolescents with ASD.

PARTICIPANTS

- $N=175$ adolescents with a previous diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder, confirmed by a Total Score ≥ 65 on the Social Responsiveness Scale (SRS; Constantino, 2005)
- $M=81.99$, $SD=9.01$
- Age: $M=13.9$, $SD=1.9$; Range: 11-18 years of age
- Gender: 75% male ($n=131$); 25% female ($n=44$)
- Ethnicity: 60.6% Caucasian ($n=106$); 10.9% Hispanic ($n=19$); 5.7% African American ($n=10$); 13.1% Asian ($n=23$); 0.6% Native American ($n=1$); 1.7% Middle Eastern ($n=3$); 7.4% Other ($n=13$)

MEASURES

- Social Anxiety Scale (SAS; La Greca, 1998)
 - Measures parent-reported perceptions of anxiety in the adolescent using a total social anxiety score and three subscales: fear of negative evaluation (FNE), social avoidance and distress specific to new situations (SAD-New), generalized social avoidance and distress (SAD-General).
- Social Skills Improvement System (SSIS; Gresham & Elliot, 2008)
 - Measures parent-reported perceptions of social skills in the adolescent related to social communication skills and problem behaviors, which includes a bullying subscale.

PROCEDURES

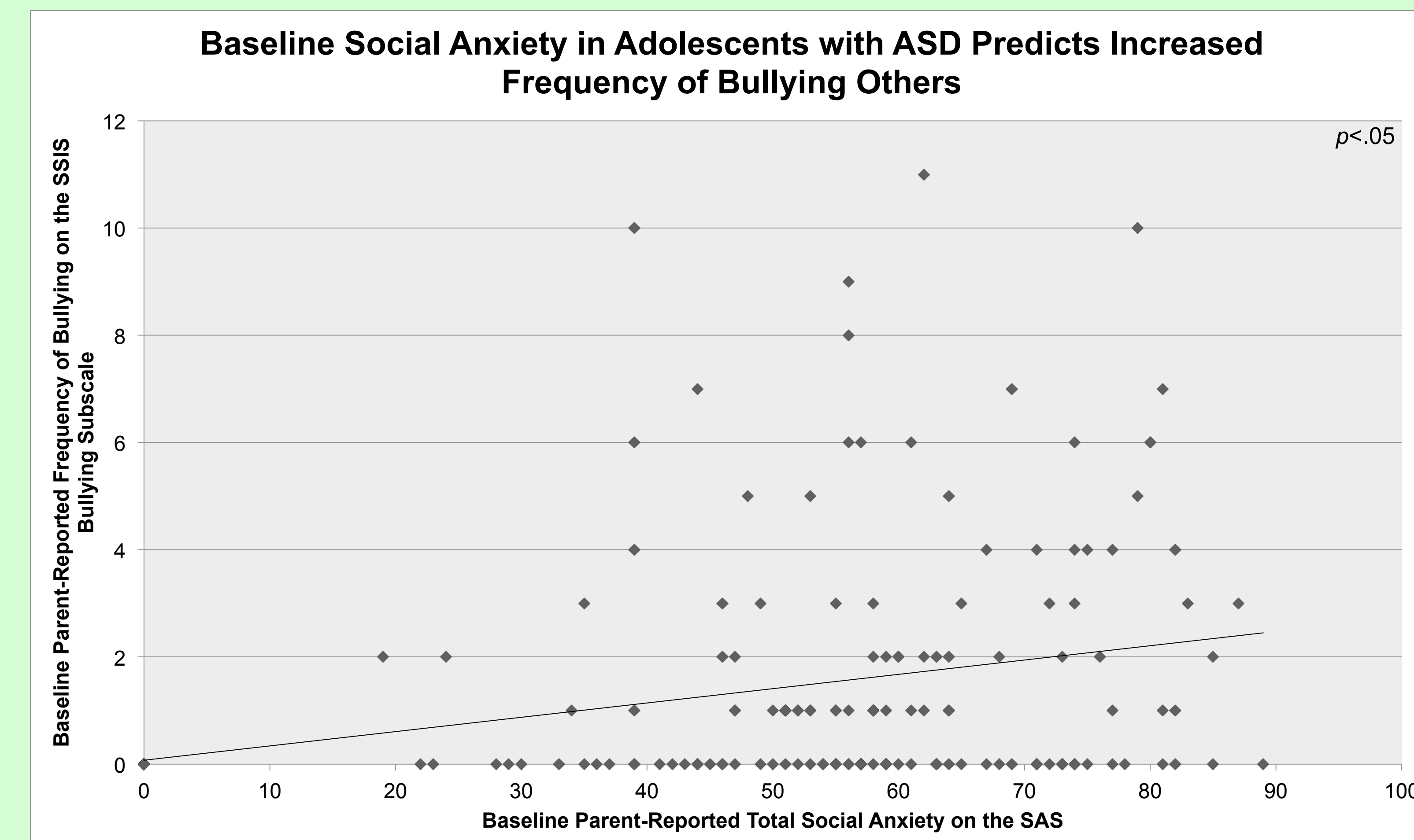
- Participants presented for social skills treatment through the UCLA PEERS Clinic, which is an evidence-based social skills intervention for adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) without intellectual disabilities (Laugeson & Frankel, 2010).
- In order to confirm a diagnosis of ASD, participants completed the Social Responsiveness Scale (SRS).
 - All participants received a total score at or above 65 to confirm a diagnosis of ASD.
- Parents completed the Social Anxiety Scale (SAS) at baseline, rating the level of social anxiety and fear of negative evaluation that they perceived in their adolescents prior to intervention.

PROCEDURES

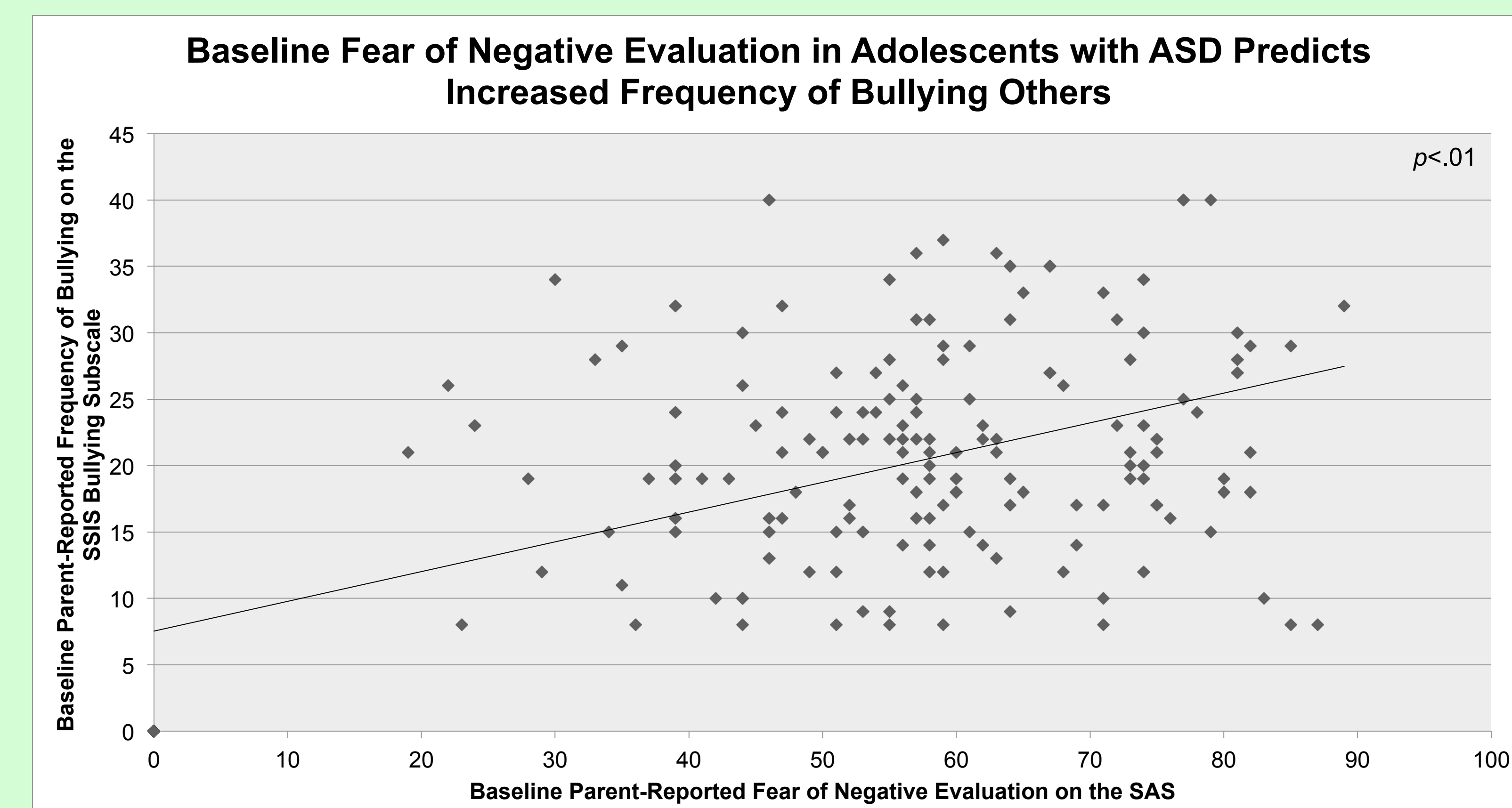
- To assess for bullying behaviors against others, parents of the participants also completed the Social Skills Improvement System (SSIS) prior to intervention.
 - The Bullying subscale was utilized to determine the frequency at which adolescents were bullying others.
- Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated to examine the relationship between parent-reported social anxiety, including fear of negative evaluation, and parent-reported bullying behaviors against others prior to treatment.

RESULTS

- Results suggest that adolescents with higher parent-reported total anxiety on the SAS demonstrate significantly higher frequency of bullying others as reported by parents on the SSIS ($p<.05$).



- Results further indicate that adolescents with higher parent-reported fear of negative evaluation by peers on the SAS exhibit significantly higher parent-reported frequency of bullying others ($p<.01$) on the SSIS.



RESULTS

- Results did not reveal a significant correlation between adolescent anxiety of new or general situations on the SAS and parent-reported frequency of bullying others on the SSIS.

DISCUSSION

- These findings support the hypothesis that adolescents with ASD who bully others may be reacting as a response to social anxiety and fear of negative evaluation from peers.
- This research is important for those working with adolescents with ASD who engage in bullying behaviors against others as it elucidates factors that may influence this behavior.
- These findings also help identify factors that may lead to increased bullying behaviors against others among adolescents with ASD, thereby enabling us to develop more targeted interventions to decrease negative peer interactions.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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CONTACT INFORMATION

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For further information about PEERS, please visit our website at: <http://www.semel.ucla.edu/peers>

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