

**Evidence Based Practice Day**  
Department of Rehabilitation Sciences, Recreation Therapy Program  
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Using Adventure Therapy Interventions to Promote Social Skills in Children and Adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorders

Search Terms: Autism AND child\* OR adolescent AND adventure / Autism AND child AND adventure therapy / Autism AND child AND outdoor adventure AND social\*

Years: 2002-2013

Databases: Academic Search Premiere, CINAHL, Education Full-Text, ERIC, MasterFILEpremiere, MEDLINE, PsycINFO, Google scholar, Summon (Paley Library), Education Academic OneFile

Number of Articles: 4 articles / 11 articles / 62 article / 4 articles

Summary of Research Findings:

Findings from a literature review of nine sources indicate that adventure therapy interventions represent a broad modality of recreation rooted in the interactions between persons and their external environment. These interventions can encompass many aspects of a person's health, and have been found to foster social development (Staempfli, 2009), basic social skills (McAvoy, Smith & Rynders, 2006; Tucker, 2009) and increased peer interactions (Brannan, Arick & Harris, 2000; Sutherland & Stroot, 2009; Sutherland & Stroot, 2010) in adolescents. They also have been found to lead to increased recreational skills competencies and involvement (Brannan, Arick & Harris, 2000; McAvoy, Smith & Rynders, 2006; Wells, Widmer & McCoy, 2004). Furthermore, participants have expressed satisfaction and enjoyment with the interventions (McAvoy, Smith & Rynders, 2006).

These findings may be particularly relevant for children and adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorders given their limited social relationships and recreational involvement (Orsmond, Wyngaarden Krauss & Mailick Seltzer, 2004). However, despite evidence supporting the effectiveness of social skills training programs for this population (Rao, Beidel & Murray, 2008), few studies to date have focused specifically on the benefits of adventure therapy interventions for individuals with autism spectrum disorders (Sutherland & Stroot, 2009; Sutherland & Stroot, 2010).

Additionally, it is somewhat difficult to generalize current findings due to the unique features of different adventure therapy interventions utilized and the heavy reliance on case studies and qualitative data. Therefore, despite initial promising results, additional research in this area is needed.

Knowledge Translation Plan:

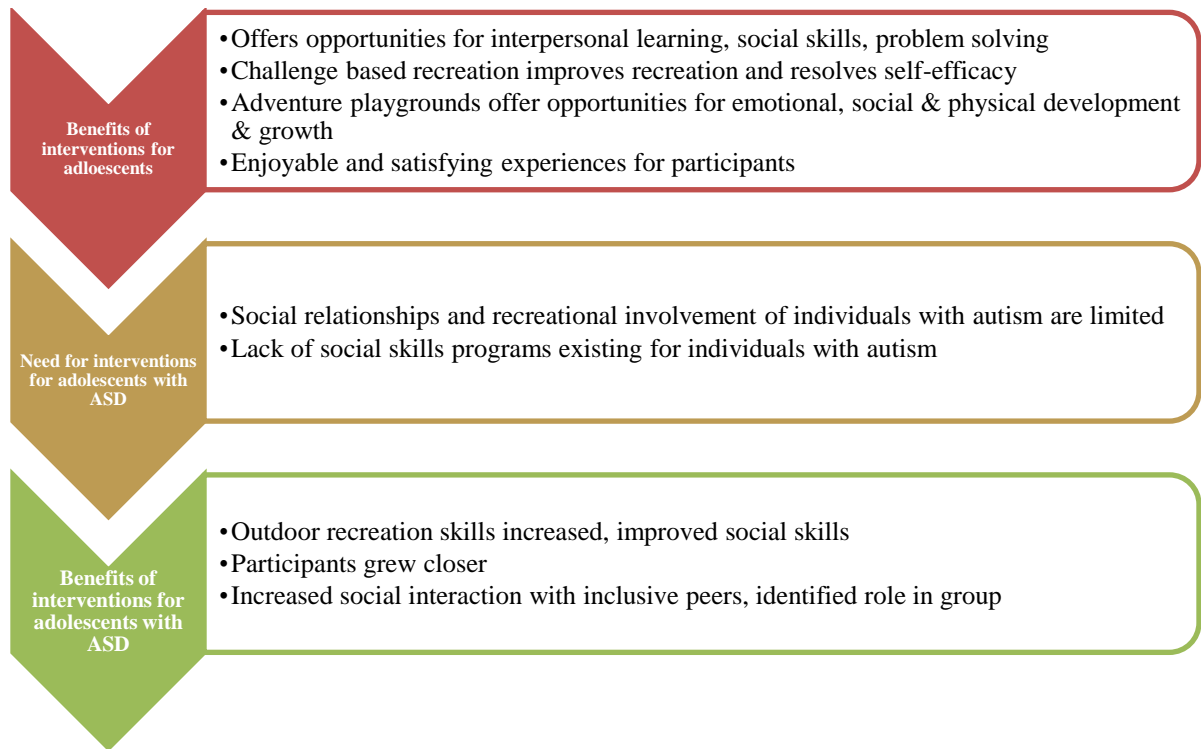
Despite limited research specifically focused on the benefits of adventure therapy interventions for children and adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorders, Certified Therapeutic Recreation Specialists (CTRS) should consider utilizing these interventions with this population. The reciprocal interaction between an individual with ASD, their external environment and their peers can serve as a vehicle not only to promote increased socialization, but also to facilitate participation in the group development process. For practitioners working with youth on the autism spectrum, this information can be vital in finding interventions to address goals related to improving social skills, communication and/or peer relations.

Qualitative data from existing studies may assist a CTRS in setting program goals and documenting outcomes. For example, upon completion of an adventure therapy program, adolescents with cognitive disabilities verbalized, "I learned how to handle myself around a crowd of people"; "I remember the games we played together. It was fun to do with all the other people" and from a support staff, "She likes to be a part of the group...it's a success thing for her" (McAvoy, Smith & Rynders, 2006). Additionally, Sutherland and Stroot (2009) discuss the outcomes of inclusive adventure therapy interventions for a 13 year old client with high functioning autism. "...as the group went through the 'getting to know each other process, Brad became more comfortable and began to interact more with the other group members...the reaction to the public recognition by [another participant] points to an increase in Brad's social self-efficacy" (p. 35).

Since it has been determined that there is not only a need for social skills programs for individuals with autism but also for recreational involvement in this population, recreation therapists should be aware that they stand to make a significant impact by collecting data on interventions they use in treatment. The diverse nature of adventure therapy interventions warrants research on specific interventions and approaches not yet explored. This includes facilitation techniques the therapist may utilize to engage participants as information on this is lacking in the current literature. However, adding quantitative measures and involving additional participants in interventions already explored would also be beneficial.

Figure 1 depicts current literature findings that support the use of adventure therapy interventions to promote socialization in adolescents with autism spectrum disorders.

**Figure 1: Rationale for Using Adventure Therapy Interventions to Promote Social Skills in Children & Adolescents with Autism Spectrum Disorders**



#### References

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