

Virtual training helps middle schoolers hone social skills

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BrainHealth researchers demonstrate real-world application for Charisma virtual social training. Credit: Center for BrainHealth

Middle school, a time when children's brains are undergoing significant development, is often also a time of new challenges in navigating the social world. Recent research from the Center for BrainHealth at UT Dallas demonstrates the power of combining a virtual platform with live coaching to help students enhance their social skills and confidence in a

low-risk environment.

In this study, BrainHealth researchers partnered with low-income public middle schools in Dallas. Teachers recommended 90 students to participate in virtual training sessions via questionnaires, testing their ability to accurately identify students who are struggling socially. Importantly, participation was not limited to students with a clinical diagnosis.

Next, the team explored the efficacy of using Charisma, a proprietary virtual platform for social training built on a video game platform whose effectiveness has been demonstrated in controlled trials but never before in a school setting.

At the end of the training, students submitted self-assessments of progress, and teachers submitted evaluations based on observations in the classroom. Both sources reported improvement in students' confidence, participation in the classroom, and ability to communicate with peers and teachers, among other benchmarks. The results appear in *Frontiers in Education*.

"The [middle school](#) years are a time of dynamic emotional and [cognitive changes](#) for students," said Maria Johnson, Director of Youth & Family Innovations at the Center for BrainHealth and lead author of the study. "We wanted to see if we could empower middle schoolers to improve their ability to communicate in the classroom and enhance self-assertion."

The study confirmed that teachers are reliable identifiers of students who are struggling socially. The study also validated the feasibility of using this virtual platform for social training in a public school setting. Both students and teachers reported that the social communication and assertion strategies were most beneficial.

With high demands for communication, cooperation and assertion, a middle school classroom is rich with social interaction as well as considerable challenges, including [peer pressure](#), academic competition and social comparison among peers, which may result in decreased connectedness with classmates, teachers and school staff. The potential exists for problematic behaviors that might be misclassified and treated with punishment rather than support.

Johnson continued, "Our findings are significant because using our virtual social training platform can be a key to helping individuals with social challenges soar. Demonstrating the power of this tool in a public middle [school setting](#) can inform future education policy to promote social independence and resiliency at a high level."

More information: Maria Teresa Johnson et al, Improving Classroom Communication: The Effects of Virtual Social Training on Communication and Assertion Skills in Middle School Students, *Frontiers in Education* (2021). [DOI: 10.3389/educ.2021.678640](https://doi.org/10.3389/educ.2021.678640)

Provided by Center for BrainHealth

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