

The Autism Classification System of Functioning: Social Communication (ACSF:SC) tool

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Study team The lead on the ACSF:SC project is **Peter Rosenbaum, MD** (*CanChild* and McMaster University) and the co-investigators are **Briano Di Rezze PhD** (candidate), (*CanChild* and McMaster University), **Lonnie Zwaigenbaum, MD** (University of Alberta and *CanChild*), **Mary Jo Cooley Hidecker, PhD** (University of Central Arkansas), **Mary Law, PhD**, (*CanChild* and McMaster University) **Paul Stratford, MSc** (McMaster University) **Peter Szatmari, MD** (McMaster University and Offord Centre for Childhood) The project coordinator and knowledge broker is **Martha Cousins, M Ed.** (*CanChild* and McMaster University).

What's the ACSF:SC project about? This project will develop a new classification system to categorize autism 'severity' by exploring levels of preschool children's social communication function (what children can do) in a standard way. Parents, educators and health care practitioners will be asked to provide their feedback at different stages in the classification system's development, and by so doing will improve our team's ability to understand and differentiate between levels of function in children with autism. Multiple methods of testing will be used to determine if the measure is able to do what it has been designed for (i.e., by assessing its validity and reliability). This classification system will provide the first valid and reliable standardized, evidence-based way to classify preschool children with autism by a key aspect of function. This will make it possible to categorize functionally similar groups of children with autism, and thus identify and explore disability trends, treatment needs and outcomes.

What's been done? We are knee deep in Phase I of our study, which is focused on ensuring that the foundational content of the ACSF:SC is valid, meaning that it accurately describes social communication function in children. For the last 4 months we have been running focus groups with clinicians (pediatricians, psychologists, speech pathologists, occupational therapists), educators (daycare resource teachers) and parents of preschool-aged children with autism to find out what social communication looks like and how can it be described. In total 31 individuals have participated. All focus groups were digitally recorded, transcribed and then analyzed to begin to develop categories and main themes related to social communication function. I am pleased to tell you that this month we began the second round of focus groups with the objective to review the concepts and definitions derived from the groups and gather feedback around their importance in capturing social communication of preschool aged children with autism. Once this process has been completed, combined with our review of current literature and measures related to social communication function we will create a draft of the ACSF:SC classification tool for review in the third and final round of focus groups (dates to be determined).

Next steps On May 16th, in conjunction with the **International Meeting for Autism Research** (IMFAR) we will be conducting a feedback session (called a Group Nominal Process) with a first draft of the ACSF:SC classification tool. 10 participants from each perspective, clinicians, educators and parents will be asked to participate in 2-hour session, either in the morning or the afternoon. If you are interested in participating and would like more information please contact the ACSF:SC project coordinator and knowledge broker:

Martha Cousins at 905-525-9140 ext. 27849 or mcousin@mcmaster.ca and you can check out the *CanChild* Centre for Childhood Disability Research website at <http://www.canchild.ca>, at McMaster University.