

Online tool empowers kids with social learning deficits via real-time, virtual world training and interactions

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Dr. Lara Ashmore presented BrainHealth's Charisma VR tool during the health track of Laval Virtual 2019, one of the most important international VR conferences. Credit: Dr. Lara Ashmore

After five years of proven success with Charisma(TM) for Youth—an evidence-based virtual training program to learn and practice social skills in real time with trained clinicians—the Brain Performance Institute at the Center for BrainHealth has taken the program online. Regardless of where they live, kids struggling socially can now access this science-based social skills training.

To date, more than 350 children have participated in Charisma for Youth. A majority have been kids with autism and ADHD; however, the [program](#) has evolved to benefit kids facing self-assertion challenges (i.e. bullying situations) and other social learning deficits (i.e. not recognizing social cues, difficulty working in groups, extreme shyness).

According to Maria Johnson, Director of Youth and Family Innovations for the Brain Performance Institute, interest in the program is high because it is an intensive, proven solution that is grounded in [cognitive neuroscience](#).

"Many kids have trouble putting themselves out there socially or are facing ongoing social dilemmas that affect their daily lives. Charisma offers a safe learning environment to enhance how they think, play and thrive," said Johnson. "With Charisma, we can empower [children](#) with social struggles to unlock their true potential—and now, this can happen no matter where they live."

The program involves two 45-minute, virtual sessions per week, for five weeks. During the sessions, a Charisma clinician guides the participating child through real-world scenarios in a virtual world setting. The child interacts with others, receives clinician advice and strategies, then applies that coaching in [real time](#). Every child receives a benchmark before and after [training](#).

"When kids are able to face a fear or learn a new social skill in this

virtual world, we have found that it sets them up for real-life social success," explained Johnson.

Grounded in more than 10 years of research, Johnson reinforced the program's evidence-based outcomes. Out of 120 [youth](#) ages 8-16 who completed the Charisma for Youth training:

- 86% were able to better understand others' points of view
- 71% improved their ability to start a conversation
- 100% demonstrated improvements in maintaining conversations
- 90% were able to better recognize emotions
- 86% reported having stronger relationship-building skills after completing the training

"I'm so impressed with the work that [the clinicians] and my son have done. It has helped him tremendously," said the mother of a Connecticut teen. "He even acknowledged it. He, too, notices the improvement and is more open in communicating his feelings. He seems so much more relaxed and comfortable with himself. He carries a big smile and a glow now."

In the teenager's words: "I've learned how to really handle new situations. Before Charisma, I would describe my social self as quiet and polite. Now I know how to show others my kind, sensitive, and compassionate side as well."

More information: brainhealth.utdallas.edu/programs

Provided by Center for BrainHealth

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