

# Understanding and Preventing Stalking Behaviors by Individuals with Autism

Linda K. Haymes, Ph.D. and Keith Storey, Ph.D.

Graduate School of Education, Touro University – California

## Introduction

Certain characteristics associated with Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) may put these individuals at risk for engaging in stalking behavior. Characteristics such as difficulty in correctly interpreting interpersonal cues (signaling their contact with a person as unwanted), a perseverative focus on a desired person, and a tendency to ignore social or legal consequences puts them at risk to engage in stalking behavior (Haskins & Silva, 2006).

### What is Stalking?

- Stalking is a continuum that can range from harassment to threatening behavior to assault and homicide (Snow, 1998).
- It is often a fine line between acceptable and unacceptable behavior (e.g., sending flowers to someone at work may be interpreted differently by the receiver depending upon their own intentions and assessment of the context).
- There are three main elements of a stalking crime (Proctor, 2003).
- a) harassment -repetitive annoying and disturbing behavior directed towards a person that has no positive or legitimate reason other than to harm the person,
- b) a credible threat -a threat toward a person that causes the person to become fearful of their safety or causes emotional distress, and
- c) a course of conduct -a series of acts over time towards a person that causes emotional stress and/or concern with safety

## Factors that Play a Role in Stalking

### Predictors of Social Functioning

- Stokes, Newton and Kaur, (2007) identified barriers to successful romantic functioning:
- Difficulty making small talk, not understanding the concept of a girlfriend or boyfriend, lack of empathy, lack of understanding in social contexts, and/or difficulty reading social cues.
- It was also reported that parents of individuals with ASD felt their son's or daughter's romantic/sexual behaviors were misunderstood.
- Individuals with ASD pursued a romantic interest longer than typical when there was no response or a negative reaction from the other person.
- Parents reported that it was difficult for their offspring with ASD to know when to stop contact.
- The youths' lack of understanding as to why there was no reciprocity and their feeling that they were doing nothing wrong maintained the unwanted pursuit.
- A significant predictor of successful romantic interaction in the Stokes et al. (2007) study was the extent to which social skills were learned from non-disabled peers. This indicates how important peer education from non-disabled peers is in teaching social skill intervention in this area.

## 3 Steps to Interventions for Stalking

- Determining why the stalking occurs – The function of the stalking behavior and develop a positive behavior intervention plan based upon the function.
- Teach replacement behaviors – social skills, perspective taking, pragmatics, and conversational skills
- Address restricted interests, obsessions and preoccupations.

### Determining the Function of Stalking

- Structured interviews with the individual, teachers, support staff, campus security, parents, co-workers, management.
- Direct observation in the natural setting – track antecedents, triggers, behaviors used, skill needs, consequences of actions.
- Meloy & Gothard (1995) 12% of the offenders with "mental disorders" were motivated due to social incompetence.
- "Incompetent stalkers" displayed loneliness, lack of social skills, and obsessional characteristics similar to those with ASD.

### What is the Function for those with Social Incompetence?

- Gain access to a person
- Seeking attention or a relationship with the person
- But lacks the social competence to form a relationship or unable to recognize other does not reciprocate.
- Motivated by revenge for rejection of relationship
- OR due to lack of perspective taking, it can be perceived rejection.

### Treatment for Stalking: Address Skill Deficits



- If seeking a relationship than teach the skills needed for relationship building
- If the motive is revenge than teach the coping skills for dealing with rejection.
- Basic skills include: conversational exchanges, reading body language, simultaneous facial, body and situational cues.

### More complex skills of:

- perception of others feelings
- recognize wanted & unwanted behavior,
- accepting rejection & next steps after rejection
- vocabulary of relationships & vocabulary for intimacy,
- distinguish between acquaintances and friends
- understanding social rules & norms for approaching individuals
- laws governing stalking behavior

## How to Develop the Skills



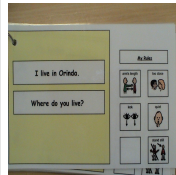
### Social Skill Groups

- Typical peer involvement in instruction and group process
- Commercially available curriculums
- Target skills for outside of group time
- Same skills prompted and supported by peers in school, work and community. Continue to reinforce the appropriate behaviors.

### Video Modeling



- Commercially available or can be created within minutes with iPhones/ iPads/ smart phone
- How Is It Done?
- Create multiple examples of the target response
- Focus on the relevant details for making discriminations
- Create using highly arousing voices (game show host)
- Provide opportunities to perform the skill.



### Self-Management, Visual Supports, Rules and Video Feedback

- VFB different than VM in that the individual and an adult preview actual footage of the individual's behavior.
- Individual learns to assess his/her own behavior
- Recognize which behaviors are appropriate and inappropriate combine with self-monitoring and self.

## Literature cited

- Haskins, B. G. & Silva, A. (2006). Asperger's disorder and criminal behavior: Forensic psychiatric considerations. *The Journal of the American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law*, 34, 374 - 384.
- Meloy, J. R., & Gothard, S. (1995). Demographic and clinical comparison of obsessional followers and offenders with mental disorders. *The American Journal of Psychiatry*, 152(2), 258-63.
- Proctor, M. (2003). *How to stop a stalker*. Arden, NY: Prometheus Books. Rehabilitation Act of 1973, 29 U.S.C 707. Retrieved from <http://www.doi.gov/oaam/regis/statutes/sec504.htm>
- Stokes, M., Newton, N., & Kaur, A. (2007). Stalking and social and romantic functioning among adolescents and adults with autism spectrum disorder. *Journal of Autism Developmental Disorders*, 37, 1969-1986.

## Beyond Obsessions and Restricted Areas of Interests



- Alternative behaviors need to be developed and reinforced to replace obsessions.
- Access to new activities and interests through inclusion, teams and organizations, paired with anxiety reduction techniques.
- Limit access to obsessions by using obsessions as reinforcers. Premack Principle
- Use rules around obsessions, self-management strategies.

## Anger Management and Counseling

- Expertise in ASD
- Clarify, misinterpretations of events, "unfair" rules.
- Coping and compensatory skills based upon cognitive behavioral practices. 3 steps
- Recognition of triggers for anger or anxiety
- Teach self-calming skills
- Self-management

## Summary

- People with Aspergers and Autism have predisposing characteristics that can put them at risk for stalking.
- The conviction rate for crimes is the same as the general population.
- Stalking should be viewed as a failure to develop appropriate social and romantic relations not as pathological.
- This points to need for the development of social skills through direct teaching and the need for understanding.
- Teach social skills and the skills necessary for romantic and intimate relations.
- Need to raise public awareness at school and workplaces as well as law officials about ASD and some unusual responses that can be seen.
- Variety of support people need to be educated about what type of supports are necessary and whom should be involved.
- Need more research on effective preventative and responsive interventions for stalking by individuals with ASD.

## For further information

Please contact [linda.haymes@tu.edu](mailto:linda.haymes@tu.edu) and [keith.storey@tu.edu](mailto:keith.storey@tu.edu). For a copy of this poster or publications related to stalking and ASD from these authors.

