Incorporating Typical Peers Into the Social Learning of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders

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For many years, research has investigated the role that typically developing peers may be able to play in the social learning of children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD). This strategy asserts that by nudging adults into secondary roles, peers are then able to model social skills in a naturalistic setting. Now, Peer-Mediated Instruction and Intervention (PMII) is on the National Professional Development Center on Autism Spectrum Disorders list of evidence-based practices. As a result, there are currently many evidence-based social skills training paradigms that involve training peers to work as “buddies” or “tutors” with their classmates on the autism spectrum. Some of the approaches involve training a group of students, the entire class, or assigning an individual student to work with a target classmate with ASD. Generally, children 3 – 8 years of age may benefit best from peer-initiation training that encourages typical peers to organize play, share, help, and praise their peers with ASD. These behaviors encourage the development of communication, language, and basic social skills. Older students, 9 to 18 years old, may focus more on social networking strategies that can be implemented between classes, at lunch, or in other non-classroom settings. Overall, peer-mediated instruction and intervention both adhere to the same principle that by teaching typically developing peers ways to interact with their classmates with ASD more social opportunities for learning can be created. However, there are multiple strategies that can be implemented depending on the needs of a particular student or resources available to a classroom.

Types of Peer-Mediated Instruction and Intervention

**Integrated Play Groups.** In this type of intervention an experienced adult guides typical peers and children with ASD in a structured and supportive environment through activities purposefully chosen to encourage interaction. The role of the adult is to establish a consistent schedule, coach the peers through play sessions, and encourage the children on the autism spectrum to stay engaged using cues that the child is familiar with. The involvement of the adult can vary and some groups choose to spend time educating typically developing peers about ASD before the play group begins.

**Peer Buddy and Peer Tutors.** In this more individual approach, typically developing peers are assigned to be a “tutor” or “buddy” to a specific child on the autism spectrum in their class. The typically developing peer is trained to keep a close eye on their buddy; talking to them, playing with them, and staying by their side. This strategy hopes to create opportunities for natural interactions between children with ASD and their typical peer that encourage incidental learning about social behaviors.

**Group-Oriented Contingency.** Unlike a buddy or tutor system, this strategy involves training an entire classroom of children on some social skill behaviors and techniques in hopes of promoting supportive behaviors among all of the students in a classroom with one or more children with ASD. This option can be useful when teachers have limited additional personnel, but would like to provide encouragement for the social growth of a student with ASD.

**Peer Networks.** This intervention trains a group of peers to form a social “network” to provide support for children with ASD in their classroom. Peer networks may learn things such as the
communication system used by the child with ASD, how to initiate and maintain conversations, and how to help provide instructions.

**Pivotal Response Training (PRT).** In PRT, adults can intervene by using role-play to train peers to engage in specific behaviors with children with ASD such as: taking turns, providing narration for play activities, encouraging conversation, and modeling appropriate social behaviors.

**Peer Initiation Training.** This intervention involves training peers specifically on techniques for initiating interactions with children with ASD such as offering to share, requesting assistance, and strategies for gaining the child’s attention.

**Starting a Peer-Mediated Instruction and Intervention Program in Your School**

If you are interested in starting a peer-mediated intervention and instruction program, there are a variety of steps to consider as you work to lay the groundwork for this type of program.

- Gain support from school administrators
- Identify staff that are passionate about helping children with autism spectrum disorders and form a team of adult facilitators
- Identify students with social needs that may benefit from participation in the program
- Work with general education teachers to identify typically-developing peers to participate
- Formally invite typically-developing peers to participate
- Keep training sessions short and at a convenient time (i.e., during lunch)
- Continue meeting with peers so they have a chance to discuss any issues that come up
- Encourage participating peers to extend what they have learned into all parts of their day (i.e., in the hallways, at lunch, and during after school activities)

**Who Should Be a Trained Peer?**

One important step in establishing peer-mediated instruction and intervention in your school is identifying peers to participate. Participating staff need to consider how they will choose typical peers to train and support their classmate(s) on the autism spectrum. While making their choices, staff should use their judgment to discern which students might be a good fit for the program. They may also consider if there are typical peers that can benefit from participation. When looking for guidance, adults should consider peers that exhibit the following traits:

- Excellent social skills, language, and play skills
- Positive social history with the target child or children with autism spectrum disorders
- Well-liked by the majority their classmates
- Follows teacher and adult instruction
- Ability to attend to tasks and activities for at least 10 minutes
- Willingness to participate
- Good Attendance

**The Benefits for Trained Peers and Teachers**

While this training is obviously beneficial for students with ASD, the benefits for general education students should not be overlooked. There are numerous positive impacts for the peers and schools involved in peer-mediated instruction and intervention. For example, this
type of instruction encourages teamwork and teaches students to develop socially acceptable skills for helping their peers (with autism spectrum disorders or not). This type of instruction promotes understanding and tolerance of those that are different and may even play a role in reducing bullying. Teachers benefit as well by encouraging their students to help each other rather than having all instruction coming from teachers and paraprofessionals.

As it turns out, students enjoy participating as well! One study surveyed children that participated in peer-mediated instruction and intervention as trained typically-developing peers. Eighty-three percent of the children indicated that they “enjoyed it very much,” while the remaining 17% said they “enjoyed it.” Even more encouraging is that 89% reported that their experience as a peer tutor had helped them as well. Children reported a myriad of lessons learned including: a better understanding of autism spectrum disorders, to be more patient, an understanding of people’s differences, self-confidence, responsibility, and to not take things for granted. The positive impact was recognized by their parents as well. Fifty-seven percent of parents indicated that the experience was “important” for their child, while 36% said it was “extremely important,” (Jones, 2007).

**What We Know and What We Don’t Know**

Peer-Mediated Instruction and Intervention is an evidence-based practice. This means that multiple studies have delivered statistically significant results providing evidence that this method produces positive gains in children with ASD. This does not assume that PMII will work for every child in every circumstance. What we know is that is has been proven to work for many children with ASD. In fact, PMII is one of the best researched interventions for children with ASD and at its core displays the benefit of inclusion for children on the autism spectrum.

Despite the positive evidence in support of PMII, there are certainly still unanswered questions that require further investigation. Most importantly, how well do the skills that students with ASD learn with their trained peer(s) extend to other environments and other interactions? It is important for researchers to continue to investigate the extent which children with ASD can show longer lasting effects, in particular with untrained peers. In doing so, we can hope to ameliorate continuous need for trained peers.

**For More Information:**

The National Professional Development Center on Autism Spectrum Disorders, Peer-Mediated Instruction and Intervention and as Evidence-Based Practice

[http://autismmpdc.fpg.unc.edu/content/peer-mediated-instruction-and-intervention](http://autismmpdc.fpg.unc.edu/content/peer-mediated-instruction-and-intervention)

**Article Sources**


