

Peer-Based Intervention and Autism Spectrum Disorders

TIPS AND RESOURCES FOR TEACHERS

Peer-based interventions are evidence-based practices that teach strategies to typically developing peers for facilitating social interactions with children on the autism spectrum. Peer-based interventions can be used to target communication skills, interpersonal skills, and play skills. The effects of these types of interventions often are beneficial for both the student with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and the peer(s). For example, students with ASD often demonstrate improvements in social interaction skills including increased initiation and responding to peers. Peers often demonstrate increased levels of tolerance, awareness, and acceptance of differences. There are 4 primary steps to implementing a successful peer-based intervention.

Step 1: Select Peers

Peers selected to be part of the intervention should possess key characteristics.

- Peers should be of a similar age and, if possible, share similar interests to the student with ASD.
- Peers should be motivated to participate. Peers who volunteer will be more invested in the process and more responsive to the strategies than those who are unmotivated.
- Peers should possess strong social and communication skills. For example, an outgoing individual who is capable of participating in successful social interactions with a variety of people would be a better intervention partner than a peer who is shy and prefers to keep to him/herself.
- Peers should be dependable. Dependability is important for both the peer and the student with ASD. A student who is frequently absent will miss critical teaching and practice time. Furthermore, the student with ASD will be more comfortable with a student frequently seen around the school than a student who has sporadic attendance.

It is recommended to train more than one peer to avoid burnout and support generalization, but keep the number manageable for the student with ASD.

Step 2: Train and Support Peers

Begin by teaching the peers to recognize and appreciate similarities and differences. Teach the peers to use good disability etiquette (resources on back). Be sure they understand autism generally and address any myths or misconceptions they have about students with ASD. Next, share information about



the student with ASD; likes, dislikes, strengths, and challenges and discuss the goals of the intervention. What do you want the student with ASD to gain from this intervention? What will the peer(s) gain?

Once the peers seem to have an understanding of ASD and the student with ASD, teach specific strategies for initiating and maintaining interactions with that student. Useful strategies to teach peers may include some or all of the following:

- How to gain the attention of the student with ASD.
- How to use developmentally appropriate language.
- How to enhance motivation by offering choices
- How to model appropriate and complex play/ conversation skills.
- How to encourage conversation and turn-taking.
- How to reinforce appropriate social behaviors
- How to use visual supports.

These strategies can be taught through definition, discussion, modeling and role-play with the peers in a small group setting.

Step 3: Facilitate Structured Social Activities

During the initial stages of implementation, have the peer(s) and student with ASD participate in a short, structured social setting. Choose an activity that can be enjoyed by both the peer(s) and the student with ASD. Simple board games or motor activities can be good options. Be prepared to provide frequent prompts and to praise to both the peer(s) and student with ASD in the initial training phases. As the peer(s) gain confidence and the student with ASD becomes increasingly comfortable with the peer(s), interaction opportunities can

Please see reverse.



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be generalized to more natural school settings like lunch and recess. Over time, opportunities may even be expanded into classroom group work or school-based extracurricular activities. Throughout the implementation phase, consider regularly meeting with the peer(s) to provide additional support. Be sure to continually provide reinforcement to both the peers and student with ASD. Praise the student with ASD for the appropriate use of social skills; praise the peer(s) for specific use of peer interaction strategies, patience, persistence, and maturity.

Step 4: Fade Structure and Support

Early on, the adult sets up materials, assigns roles and partners, scripts actions and dialogues, and even actively participates in the peer-to-peer interaction. However, have a plan to fade that support so that both the peer(s) and the student with ASD have the opportunity to independently interact socially. As peers become increasingly comfortable implementing the strategies and as students seem comfortable being together, the adult's role should transition. The adult may offer suggestions, pose leading questions, and comment on the event, but should refrain from active participation in the peer interactions. Eventually, support should be faded to the point that the adult is merely a secure base. As a secure base, the adult should be available for questions and support as needed but generally avoid intervening in social interactions between the peer(s) and student with ASD. However, even when support has faded, it is still important to provide periodic reinforcement (e.g., social praise) to both the student with ASD and the peer(s).

Who We Are and Who We Serve

The **Vanderbilt Kennedy Center (VKC)** works with and for people with disabilities and their family members, service providers and advocates, researchers and policy makers. It is among only a few centers nationwide to be a University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities, a *Eunice Kennedy Shriver* Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities Research Center, and a Leadership Education in Neurodevelopmental and Related Disabilities Training Program. The following are some of the ways the Center's programs and staff can assist families, educators, and other service providers.

Treatment and Research Institute for Autism Spectrum Disorders (TRIAD)

TRIAD is a Vanderbilt Kennedy Center program dedicated to improving assessment and treatment services for children with autism spectrum disorders and their families while advancing

knowledge and training. See TRIAD.vumc.org or call (615) 936-0267.

Vanderbilt Autism Resource Line

Free information and referral service for parents, teachers, and community professionals. Information is available about autism-specialized diagnostic evaluation services, school consultation, parent workshops, and professional training at Vanderbilt for children, adolescents, and adults with ASD. Contact autismclinic@vumc.org, or (615) 322-7565, or toll-free (877) 273-8862.

Tennessee Disability Pathfinder

Tennessee Disability Pathfinder is a free statewide phone, web, and print referral service in English and Spanish. It connects the Tennessee disability community with service providers and resources. Its website database has over 3,000 agencies searchable by Tennessee county and service. Pathfinder is a project of the VKC, TN Council on Developmental Disabilities, TN Department of Health, and the TN Department of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities. Contact www.familypathfinder.org, (615) 322-8529, toll-free (800) 640-4636.

Other Resources

- **National Standards Project (2009)**

Evidence-based practice and autism in the schools: A guide to providing appropriate interventions to students with autism spectrum disorders.
Randolph, MA: National Autism Center.

- **Kids Helping Kids: Teaching Typical Children to Enhance the Play and Social Skills of Their Friends With Autism and Other PDD's: A Training Manual**

Download a free copy in the "Autism Resources" section at <http://autism-center.ucsd.edu>.

- **Disability Etiquette Information**

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