Peer-Mediated Support Strategies

WHAT ARE PEER-MEDIATED SUPPORT STRATEGIES?

Peer-mediated support strategies involve one or more peers providing assistance to their classmates. For students with disabilities, this intervention can be an effective alternative to the use of one-to-one paraprofessionals in classrooms, clubs, and other school activities. Peer-mediated support strategies involve teaching peers to promote academic, social, and/or communication outcomes for students with disabilities by supporting skill acquisition or increasing school participation. Peers participate in orientation sessions where they learn social and academic support strategies for use within both teacher-directed and student-initiated activities. As students with and without disabilities gain familiarity with working together, school staff fade back their direct support gradually to promote student independence.[1]

Peer-mediated support strategies can be used in almost any instructional setting (e.g., general education classrooms, cafeterias, related arts activities) at the elementary and secondary levels. These strategies have been effective at teaching students with disabilities a range of skills and behaviors including academic engagement, responding to others, understanding others, interacting with others in larger groups, and reciprocity.[2]

Peer-mediated support strategies should be tailored to meet the individual needs of a student within the classroom context in which he or she is receiving support. Although the steps laid out in this guide are important to consider, each should be personalized based on the needs of participating students.

EFFECTIVENESS OF PEER-MEDIATED SUPPORT STRATEGIES

When designed and implemented well, peer-mediated support strategies can serve as a compelling method for providing academic and social support to students with disabilities. These interventions have been shown to have positive effects on academic, interpersonal, and social development and may have the strongest research support among available social interventions.[3] Peer-mediated support strategies appear to provide students with disabilities enhanced opportunities to learn from their peers and broaden their peer networks.[4]

Students with a variety of disabilities have benefited from peer-mediated support interventions, including students with intellectual disability, autism spectrum disorder, and ADHD.[5]

General education peers also benefit from these interventions through opportunities to change attitudes toward and raise expectations for their classmates with disabilities. Participating in peer-mediated support strategies can also promote academic gains for students without disabilities. Academic engagement, assignment completion, and classroom participation may improve for students without disabilities who serve as peer supports in general education classrooms.[6]

TYPES OF PEER-MEDIATED SUPPORT STRATEGIES

Peer-mediated support strategies refer to a wide variety of intervention approaches. This guide highlights three such approaches:
(a) classroom-wide peer tutoring,
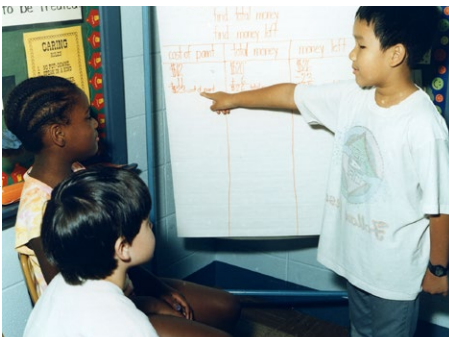(b) peer support arrangements, and
(c) lunch bunches.

Classroom-Wide Tutoring:

Classroom-wide tutoring involves dividing the classroom into small, heterogeneous learning groups. Teams should consist of at least one high-performing student, one average-performing student, and one low-performing student or student with a disability. Thus, while there is heterogeneity within groups, groups are similar across the class, allowing the educator to capitalize on the groups' complementary knowledge and achieve higher-level, collaborative objectives.[7]

The educator explains to students that each team as a whole is responsible for helping all teammates learn the content from previous instruction. Team members should be given opportunities to work together to solve problems or understand material, with each having the chance to be the designated "tutor" of the group. While classroom-wide tutoring primarily provides increased academic engagement and academic skill acquisition, students also have the opportunity to interact socially and develop team-building skills with peers.

Peer Support Arrangements:

Peer support arrangements involve equipping one or more general education students in an inclusive classroom to provide both academic and social support to students with disabilities.[8] General descriptions of individualized academic goals (e.g., collaborating, reviewing course content), participation goals (e.g., contributing to discussion, self-management), and social interaction goals (e.g., talking about shared interest, making introductions to classmates) for the student with a disability are shared with the peers. Special education educators or paraprofessionals provide the peers with the guidance to support their classmate with disabilities as that student moves toward those goals. Unlike some other peer-mediated support strategies, peer support arrangements are individually tailored to reflect the strengths and needs of the student with disabilities and his or her peers, and are not implemented class wide. Primarily, this approach is used for students with severe disabilities, such as an intellectual disability or autism.

Lunch Bunches:

The "lunch bunch" strategy connects a student with a disability to a group of students without similar disabilities or students without disabilities to join him or her for lunch, with an emphasis on social conversation during that lunch time.[9] Prior to participating in the group, general education students receive social skills training consisting of explicit teaching of the social skills the strategy will target (e.g., compromising, turn taking), modeling those skills, and role playing. Students can take turns talking about different topics of interest to the group, in addition to asking and answering questions with one another. A lunch bunch can occur multiple times during the week, with the special education educator or another staff member facilitating interactions at first and then fading back into an observatory role as students get to know one another. Similar to peer support arrangements, this strategy is typically used for students with severe disabilities.

STEPS TO IMPLEMENTATION

STEP 1: PLANNING SUPPORTS IN CONTEXT

Meaningful planning is an essential element of adapting peer-mediated support strategies to meet the needs of students and match the context of support. The chosen strategy should be aligned with the specific learning or social goal for the focal student (the student with disabilities receiving the intervention) and the opportunities for meaningful peer interaction within those settings. When implementing peer-mediated strategies in a classroom, the planning process should address (a) the specific standards informing curricula, instruction, and assessment, (b) the expectations general educators hold for all students in their classrooms, (c) the IEP goals a student will work toward in a specific class, and (d) the avenues through which the student will be supported to participate in the array of learning and social opportunities existing within that classroom.[1] When the strategies are implemented elsewhere, the planning process should address (a) the targeted social or behavioral skills for the intervention, (b) the setting where the intervention will occur (e.g., lunchroom, after school), and (c) how interactions will be initiated.

> ▶ **Variation Based on Context:**
> The number of peers involved in each approach should be carefully considered to facilitate the most effective intervention outcomes. While peer support arrangements may only involve two peers who sit next to the student with disabilities in the classroom setting, the lunch bunch is typically most effective at promoting social interactions when there is a group of four to six students.

STEP 2: SELECTING PEERS

The specific peers chosen to participate and provide support as part of any peer-mediated intervention should be carefully selected based on their relevant skills and their previous contact with the focal student. When peers are being asked to provide social and academic support for students with disabilities, it may be helpful to consider the extent to which the peers demonstrate (a) good social and interpersonal skills, (b) shared interests with the focal student, (c) consistent attendance, and (d) a history of being reliable and responsible. The number of peers selected should be determined by the individual needs of the student with a disability, the type of peer-mediated support strategy used, and the setting in which it will be implemented.

> ▶ **Variation Based on Context:**
> Different strategies may be used depending on the nature of the student's educational goals, whether academic or social. Classroom-wide tutoring may be an appropriate strategy for students who struggle to stay engaged academically or for students needing more opportunities to develop teamwork and collaboration skills. On the other hand, a lunch bunch might be more suited for a student with disabilities who has limited social interactions with peers.

STEP 3: PREPARING PEERS

Educators or paraprofessionals should provide peers with some targeted training prior to beginning their support role with a student with disabilities. An orientation helps explain the overall goals of the peer-mediated support strategy to the peers and provides an opportunity to learn the best way to support the focal student in specific school settings. The educator should begin by explaining how students learn from one another in a classroom or other school setting so peers are oriented toward a goal for the focal student and the intervention group as a whole. Then, the educator should introduce strategies the peers will use to support the focal student and provide an opportunity for the peers to practice with the educator or one another. This part of the training process may require multiple sessions before the peers reliably learn the various strategies. Regardless of the age group, the educator should provide direct instruction to the chosen peers about the primary needs for the focal student and what a meaningful interaction may look like.

> ▶ **Variation Based on Context:**
> Peer training takes different forms depending on the type of approach used and the school level. A social intervention at the elementary school level will have a different training process than an academic intervention at the middle school or high school level. For young children in a peer support arrangement, training might emphasize basic cooperative behaviors such as sharing, helping the focal student stay on task, providing praise through high fives or encouraging words, or suggesting play activities. For a middle school or high school student participating in classroom-wide tutoring, emphasis might be on goal setting with the focal student providing positive feedback and brainstorming how peers can provide the best assistance.

STEP 4: MONITORING AND PROVIDING FEEDBACK TO PEERS

After the initial orientation process, peers begin working with the student with disabilities on a regular basis. As peers become more comfortable interacting with and supporting the focal student, they often take on a more independent role in assisting the student with a disability in a variety of instructional formats and in interacting socially during appropriate times. At the same time, the educator or paraprofessional carefully decreases their direct support for the student with disabilities and transitions into a broader support role. Peers should also receive feedback from the educator on how to best carry out their roles in ways that are most effective.

> ▶ **Variation Based on Context:**
> Although regular feedback should be provided to peers regardless of the approach, the type and extent of prompts may differ based on the needs of the peers and the specific intervention. An educator may provide only subtle reinforcement (e.g., thumbs up, pat on the back) in an academic setting so as not to disrupt the flow of student learning. However, the educator may provide more explicit reinforcement (e.g., saying, "I like the way you asked Robert a follow-up question about his favorite sport to continue the conversation topic.") during a lunch bunch to model providing praise.

SUMMARY

Peer-mediated support strategies can be helpful in equipping students with disabilities with social and academic skills to be successful in an inclusive classroom setting. Additionally, this strategy can positively impact students without disabilities, both academically and socially, in terms of appreciation of diversity and personal growth. When considering this type of intervention, it is important to remember that the intervention should be specifically tailored to the needs and goals of the student with disabilities.

COURTESY PALS, VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY

COURTESY PALS, VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY

ONLINE RESOURCES

Peer-Mediated Instruction and Intervention: http://aim.cast.org/learn/history archive/backgroundpapers/ peer-mediated_instruction

Peer-Mediated Intervention: An Effective, Inclusive Strategy for All Young Children: www.pakeys.org/uploaded Content/Docs/Higher%20Ed/ 2011%20Conference/P%20 Harris-Kathleen%20Building %20A%20Learning%20 Community%20Handouts.pdf

Peer Supports in Inclusive Settings: http://library.constantcontact. com/download/get/ file/1102181436376-67/ ISN+Tip-2011-06.pdf

Overview of Peer-Assisted Learning Strategies for Reading: http://iris.peabody.vanderbilt. edu/palsk1/palsK1_01.html

Peer-Mediated Instruction and Intervention (PMII) Module: www.autisminternetmodules. org/user_mod.php

FOR FURTHER READING

Smith, T. (2012). *Making inclusion work for students with autism spectrum disorders: An evidence-based guide.* New York, NY: Guilford Press.

Carter, E. W., Cushing, L. S., & Kennedy, C. H. (2009). *Peer support strategies: Improving all students' social lives and learning.*

Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes.

Hughes, C., & Carter, E. W. (2008). *Peer buddy programs for successful secondary school inclusion.* Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes.

ENDNOTES

[1] Carter, E. W., Sisco, L. G., & Chung, Y. (2012). Peer-mediated support strategies. In P. A. Prelock & R. McCauley (Eds.), *Treatment of autism spectrum disorders: Evidence-based intervention strategies for communication and social interactions* (pp. 221-254).

[2] DiSalvo, C. A., & Oswald, D. P. (2002). Peer-mediated interventions to increase the social interaction of children with autism: Consideration of peer expectancies. *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities, 17*, 198-207.

McMaster, K. L., Fuchs, D., & Fuchs, L. S. (2006). Research on peer-assisted learning strategies: The promise and limitations of peer-mediated instruction. *Reading & Writing Quarterly, 22*, 5-25.

[3] Bass, J. D., & Mulick, J. A. (2007). Social play skill enhancement of children with autism using peers and siblings as therapists. *Psychology in the Schools, 44*, 727-735.

[4] Carter, E. W., Asmus, J. M., & Moss, C. K. (in press). Peer support interventions to support inclusive education. In J. McLeskey, N. Waldron, F. Spooner, & B. Algoz-

zone (Eds.), *Handbook of research and practice for effective inclusive schools.* New York, NY: Routledge. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes.

[5] Grauvogel-MacAleese, A. N., & Wallace, M. D. (2010). Use of peer-mediated intervention in children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis, 43*, 547-551.

[6] Cushing, L. S., & Kennedy, C. H. (1997). Academic effects of providing peer support in general education classrooms on students without disabilities. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis, 30*, 139-151.

[7] Ashman, A. F., & Gillies, R. M. (2013). Collaborative learning for diverse learners. *The International Handbook for Collaborative Learning*, 297-313.

[8] Carter, E. W., Cushing, L. S., & Kennedy, C. H. (2009). *Peer support strategies: Improving all students' social lives and learning.* Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes.

[9] Smith, T. (2012). *Making inclusion work for students with autism spectrum disorders: An evidence-based guide.* New York, NY: Guilford Press.

CI3T TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PROJECTS BY REGION: 2012-2015

The Tennessee Department of Education has provided funding to seven projects to provide training and technical assistance to schools as they address the academic, social, and behavioral needs of students within comprehensive, integrated, three-tiered (CI3T) models of prevention. To locate the project assigned to your region, see below.
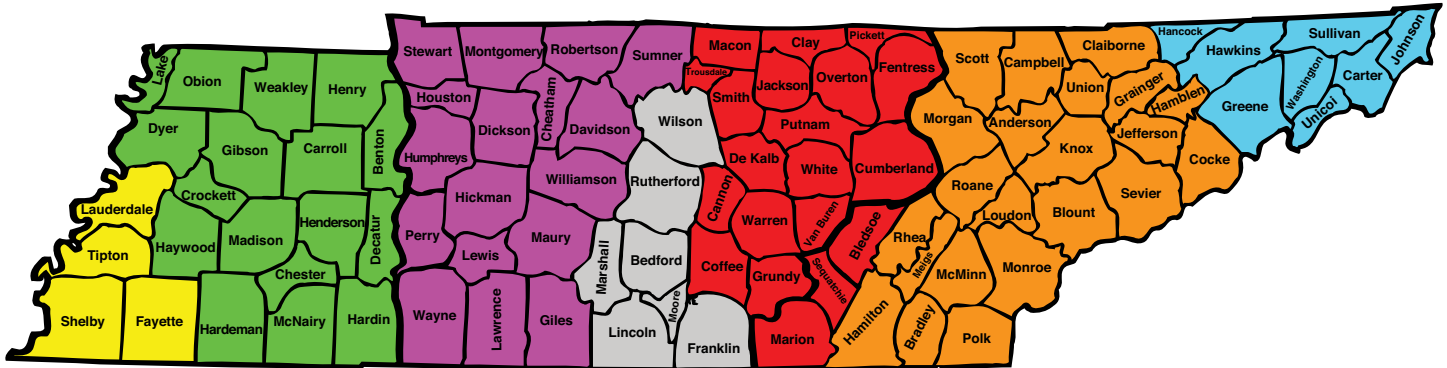
UNIVERSITY OF MEMPHIS (RISE):
Dr. William Hunter
Email: wchunter@memphis.edu
Phone: 901.678.4932

UNIVERSITY OF MEMPHIS, LAMBUTH CAMPUS:
Dr. Renee Murley
Email: reneelee@memphis.edu
Phone: 901.678.5087

VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY:
Abbie Jenkins
Email: abbie.jenkins@vanderbilt.edu
Phone: 615.343.0706

MIDDLE TENNESSEE STATE UNIVERSITY:
Dr. Zaf Khan
Email: zkhan@mtsu.edu
Phone: 916.904.8429

TENNESSEE TECHNOLOGICAL UNIVERSITY:
Dr. Helen Dainty
Email: hdainty@tntech.edu
Phone: 931.372.3116

UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE, KNOXVILLE:
Dr. Tara Moore
Email: Tara.moore@utk.edu
Phone: 865.974.2760

EAST TENNESSEE STATE UNIVERSITY:
Dr. Leia Blevins
Email: blevinsl@etsu.edu
Phone: 423.439.7547
or
Dr. James Fox
Email: foxj@etsu.edu
Phone: 423.439.7556