Structured Academic Partners — An Overview

What are Structured Academic Partners?	Using structured academic partners is a teaching strategy that allows all students to participate in instruction and practice critical lesson content while increasing communication opportunities with peers. When using structured academic partners, teachers match students up to have brief discussions about the learning topic, answer or ask questions, or problem-solve together. Structured academic partners are also referred to as "turn and talks" or "think-pair-share" activities. Structured academic partners are an important part of efficient, dynamic academic lessons because they promote students "retrieving, rehearsing, and practicing the information, concepts, skills, or strategies being taught, thereby increasing the probability of retention" (Archer & Hughes, 132).
Evidence-Based Practice Link	Using structured academic partners is a method to increase student opportunities to respond and to allow opportunities for student responses about lesson content, which is a critical component of **direct instruction.** Direct instruction is an evidence-based practice for autistic students that is a "systematic approach to teaching…usually provided to small groups of learners and includes brisk pacing, student responses, explicit signals to cue student responses, correction procedures for incorrect or non-responses, and modeling correct responses." (Steinbrenner et al., 139). Direct instruction is found to be effective in teaching academic skills for autistic children ages 3 to 11, and cognitive and school readiness skills for autistic children ages 6 through 14. Structured academic partners are complemented by using additional evidence-based practices in conjunction like modeling, peer-based instruction and intervention, prompting, reinforcement, social skills training, task analysis, and visual supports.
When to Use Visuals and Scripts for Academic Self-Advocacy	Ideal times to use structured academic partners with autistic students, or other students with or without disabilities, could include whole or small group instruction pertaining to: • academic content (e.g., reading, math, science, etc.), • social and personal competency lessons, and • self-help, vocational, and self-advocacy lessons.

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Why Use Structured Academic Partners?	• Provides opportunities for peer-to-peer communication • Increases student engagement in academic activities • Allows students to practice critical lesson content, increasing the likelihood of retention
Critical Components of Academic Structured Partners	Academic structured partner discussions should: 1. include a clear directive from the teacher about the topic and expectations (e.g., "Students, you will talk with your partner about the main idea of the paragraph. Use this sentence starter: "The main idea of the paragraph is…"), 2. be modeled by the teacher to promote student accuracy, 3. be included frequently during lessons, and 4. be monitored closely by the teacher to provide affirmative or corrective feedback if needed.
Implementation Tips	1. Print and laminate the academic structured partner visuals that align with student needs. 2. Ensure the visuals are available in the areas in which they are applicable. 3. Consider making smaller versions of the visuals to place on students' desks, in agenda planners or home folders, or in a notebook where the student can access them easily. 4. Model using the visual while demonstrating the expectations for structured academic partners. 5. Provide practice opportunities for students to practice responding with their structured partners using the visuals. 6. Prompt the student to use the visual or script when needed. 7. Provide reinforcement and behavior-specific praise when students use the visuals and participate with their structured partners appropriately.

Considerations for Students with Extensive Support Needs	Students with extensive support needs can benefit from participating in structured partner conversations during instruction, even if they don't always respond verbally in the same manner as their peers. Providing students with extensive communication needs modeling, prompting, and visuals they can use to indicate their thinking when working with a partner can increase the likelihood they will engage meaningfully with peers. The last page in this document is an example of a visual for structured academic partner conversations that could be useful for a student who has extensive support needs and does not reliably communicate with peers using verbal language.
TRIAD Resources to Learn More	• Learn more about upcoming TRIAD training opportunities: https://vkc.vumc.org/vkc/triad/live-training/ • A module about eliciting responses is available here. *Must create a free account to access

Archer, & Hughes, C. A. (2011). Explicit instruction : effective and efficient teaching / Anita L. Archer, Charles A. Hughes. Guilford Press.

Steinbrenner, J. R., Hume, K., Odom, S. L., Morin, K. L., Nowell, S. W., Tomaszewski, B., Szendrey, S., McIntyre, N. S., Yücesoy-Özkan, S., & Savage, M. N. (2020). Evidence-based practices for children, youth, and young adults with Autism. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute, National Clearinghouse on Autism Evidence and Practice Review Team.

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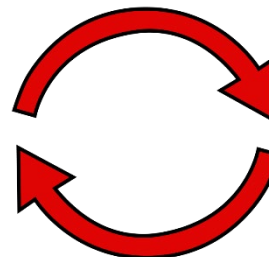
Partner Discussions
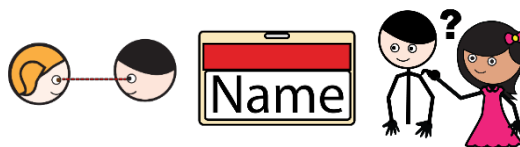
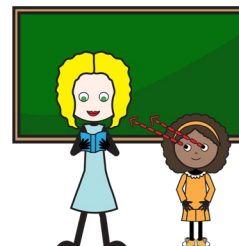|	
1. Get your partner's attention.	
2. One partner talks, one partner listens.	
3. Switch.	
4. When both partners finish sharing, turn and face the teacher.	

Partner Discussions

1. Get your partner's attention. You can look towards your partner, face your body towards them, say their name, or lightly tap them on the shoulder.
2. One partner talks, and one partner listens.
3. Switch.
4. When both partners are finished sharing, turn and face the teacher.

Partner Discussion Reflection

☐ I got my partner's attention.

☐ I answered the question while my partner listened.

☐ I listened while my partner answered the question.

☐ We stayed on topic.

☐ We looked at the teacher when we finished.

Sentence Starters for Partner Discussions

I think _____ because….	
I learned …	
I agree because….	
I disagree because…	
I am wondering….	
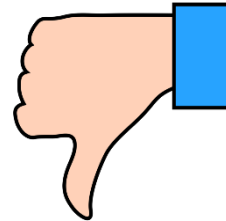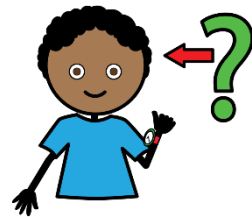
Partner Discussion Expectations

When I am the speaker:	
Get my partner's attention.	
Speak clearly.	
Stay on topic.	
Keep it quick.	

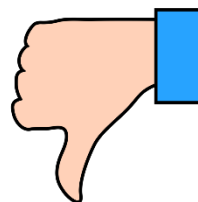| When I am the listener:	
Pay attention to what my partner is saying.	
Mouth is quiet.	
Hands are still.	
Think about the topic and what the speaker is saying.	

Partner Discussions
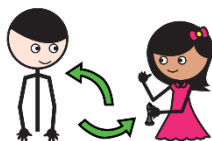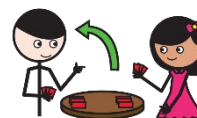
✔ **Yes**	✖ **No**
👍 **Agree**	👎 **Disagree**
I like that	**I don't like that**
My turn	**Your turn**
Tell me more	**I don't know**