

Excerpted from *Peer Support Strategies for Improving All Students' Social Lives and Learning*

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WHAT ARE PEER SUPPORT ARRANGEMENTS?

Peer support arrangements are a promising approach for promoting access to rigorous, relevant learning experiences; expanding opportunities for students to establish new relationships with their peers; and helping educators and paraprofessionals to support inclusive education more effectively. Put simply, these intervention strategies involve *arranging for one or more peers without disabilities to provide ongoing social and academic support to their classmates with severe disabilities while receiving guidance and support from paraprofessionals, special educators, and/or general educators* (Carter, Cushing, & Kennedy, 2008; Carter & Kennedy, 2006; Cushing & Kennedy, 1997). Recognizing that peers are an underutilized—but widely available—source of natural support in every school, peer support arrangements draw upon the involvement of other classmates to assist in helping students with disabilities participate more fully in the social and learning opportunities existing in inclusive classrooms, extracurricular clubs, and other school activities.

Peer-mediated approaches—in which students assume instructional or other support roles with their classmates—have been a staple intervention strategy in classrooms for as long as there have been schools (Harper & Maheady, 2007). Indeed, countless variations on these approaches exist—ranging from informal, casual pairings of students to more structured, intentional systems (Gillies, 2007). As these strategies have been tested in the classroom and refined through research, a powerful and effective set of techniques have emerged for use with students with disabilities (e.g., Goldstein, Schneider, & Thiemann, 2007; Heron, Villareal, Ma, Christianson, & Heron, 2006; Maheady, Harper, & Mallette, 2001). Although peer support arrangements share the strong theoretical and empirical support of other peer-mediated strategies, they also differ in important ways. First, in peer support arrangements, somewhat greater emphasis typically is placed on exchanging social support, encouraging peer interactions, and promoting social connections. Social goals are often prominent in the IEPs of students with severe disabilities, and general education participation frequently is advocated for as an avenue for meeting these goals. Second, unlike other peer-mediated interventions in which all participating students assume very structured or static roles (e.g., Classwide Peer Tutoring [Greenwood, Arreaga-Mayer, Utley, Gavin, & Terry, 2001], Peer Assisted Learning Strategies [McMaster, Fuchs, & Fuchs, 2006]), educators are encouraged to individually tailor peer support interventions so that they reflect the unique support needs, strengths, and characteristics of participating students with disabilities and their

peers. Third, peer support arrangements usually are not implemented as classwide interventions and thus involve a smaller number of peers. Fourth, most peer-mediated interventions were developed primarily for students with high incidence disabilities such as learning disabilities or emotional or behavior disorders (Gardner, Nobel, Hessler, Yawn, & Heron, 2007). Recognizing that the academic and social support needs of students with severe disabilities may be more intensive, peer support arrangements typically offer a more sustained and focused source of support. Finally, peer support interventions are designed to be implemented in inclusive contexts. Self-contained classrooms or segregated school activities simply do not offer the same depth of natural support available in inclusive environments.

Core Components

Because peer support interventions should be individually tailored to address the instructional and social needs of students with disabilities, they can be implemented in a variety of ways. However, the following steps usually are taken when establishing these arrangements in inclusive classrooms:

- Identifying students with severe disabilities who need assistance to participate in class activities
- Recruiting peers from within the same classroom to help provide some of these supports
- Arranging for students to sit next to each other and remain in close proximity during class activities
- Orienting peers to their roles, explaining the rationale for their involvement, and showing them basic strategies for supporting the academic and social participation of their classmate
- Providing ongoing monitoring, feedback, and assistance to peers and their partners throughout the semester, as needed
- Shifting paraprofessionals to a broader support role in which they assist all students in the classroom or complete other responsibilities as directed by the teacher

How Students Work Together

Peers can help provide a range of academic, social, and/or behavioral supports to their partners with disabilities. For example, students might support the class participation of their partners by working together on assignments, sharing materials, encouraging involvement in cooperative groups, paraphrasing lectures, asking clarifying questions, reviewing work, offering constructive feedback, making sure that needed materials are available, or explaining how to complete part of an assignment. Peers can promote attainment of social-related educational goals by encouraging their partners with

disabilities to interact socially, extending conversational turns, modeling contextually appropriate social skills, reinforcing communication attempts, and redirecting inappropriate conversational topics. They also encourage interactions with other classmates by making initial introductions, highlighting shared interests and other commonalities, and extending interactions outside of the classroom (e.g., lunch, extracurricular clubs, after-school activities). At the same time, students with disabilities are provided avenues to share their strengths and talents within the classroom.

Shifting Adult Roles

Peer support arrangements do not eliminate the need for individualized support but instead encourage paraprofessionals to assume different roles within inclusive classrooms. Paraprofessionals and other educators continue to take overall responsibility for ensuring that the educational needs of students with severe disabilities are being met, but they begin fading their direct support as students with disabilities and their peer partners become more comfortable working together. In other words, the roles of paraprofessionals and special educators broaden within inclusive classrooms, allowing them to provide assistance to, and work with, a wider range of students in the class. However, paraprofessionals continue to seek out ways to foster learning and interaction opportunities for the student with disabilities and always remain available to provide needed feedback and assistance to peers and their partners. Moreover, paraprofessionals assume responsibilities that generally are not appropriate for peers, such as responding to substantial behavioral challenges, addressing medical or personal care needs, documenting IEP progress and learning, and adapting assignments (under the supervision of the special educator).

A Flexible Intervention Strategy

Although the above-mentioned core elements—selecting students, orienting peers, pairing students, and adult monitoring—represent the basic ingredients of peer support interventions, these strategies can be implemented flexibly in a variety of ways. Research suggests that peer support interventions represent a fairly robust approach to improving social and academic participation 1) across the grade span; 2) within a wide variety of school environments; and 3) when combined or embedded with other tactics, instructional arrangements, and support strategies.

Across the Grade Span

The educational and social landscape clearly changes as students progress through elementary, middle, and high school. *Academically*, differences across the school levels are evidenced in the focus and complexity of the curriculum, the primary

approaches teachers use to provide instruction, the avenues through which students work together, and teachers' expectations for students' performance. *Socially*, the importance of peers in the lives of children broadens over time, the nature of their relationships evolves, the contexts in which students spend time expand, and the skills needed to successfully navigate peer relations change (Goldstein & Morgan, 2002). *Behaviorally*, teachers' beliefs about what constitutes appropriate behavior varies, their expectations for students' independence and self-determination changes, and different risk factors emerge as more salient influences on children's development (Lane, Pierson, Stang, & Carter, in press). And *structurally*, primary and secondary schools differ substantively in size, teacher–student ratios, team models, staffing patterns, and organization.

Peer support arrangements can readily be tailored to reflect these contextual differences. Indeed, research documenting the effectiveness of peer support arrangements has been implemented from early elementary through high school. In elementary school, inclusion in general education typically is more common, students spend most of their day with the same peers, the presence of adults typically is not a hindrance to peer interaction, and teachers tend to rely more heavily on cooperative learning activities. Peer support arrangements with younger students often involve rotating peers, explicitly targeting especially social times of the school day (e.g., recess, playgroups, station time), and may require more active adult facilitation (Dugan et al., 1995; Laushey & Heflin, 2000; Salisbury et al., 1995). During the middle grades, students begin rotating classrooms, peer affiliations become more important, and students are given greater independence. Peer support interventions drawing upon peer networks appear to be particularly promising for these early adolescents (Garrison-Harrell, Kamps, & Kravitz, 1997; Kamps, Dugan, Potucek, & Collins, 1999). In high school, the emphasis on academic support often becomes more prominent within peer support arrangements and efforts to promote relationships that spill over outside of the classroom usually have to be more deliberate (e.g., Carter, Sisco, Melekoglu, & Kurkowski, in press; Haring & Breen, 1992). It is this flexibility to address the needs of students across the grade span that makes peer support interventions an especially appealing strategy for educators.

Across School Environments

Although increasing participation in core academic classes such as language arts, math, science, and social studies is central to recent school reform efforts, the general education curriculum also can be thought of more broadly as the full spectrum of social and learning experiences available to students within a school (Ryndak & Billingsley, 2004). Peer support strategies can be implemented across a wide range of school contexts, including the following:

- Academic, elective, vocational, and related arts classrooms (Carter & Kennedy, 2006; Shukla, Kennedy, & Cushing, 1998, 1999)
- Service-learning projects (Dymond, Renzaglia, & Chun, 2007; Kleinert et al., 2004)
- Extracurricular clubs (Kleinert et al., 2007)
- Community-based activities (Vandercook, 1991)
- Lunchrooms (Kamps, Lopez, & Golden, 2002; Miller, Cooke, Test, & White, 2003)
- Between classes and before and after school (Gaylord-Ross et al., 1984; Haring & Breen, 1992)

Of course, the roles that peers and their partners with disabilities assume, as well as the ways in which they work and interact together, may look somewhat different across each of these environments and activities.

Combining Strategies

Peer support strategies also can—and often should—be combined with other intervention approaches into more comprehensive support packages. For example, teachers who frequently use cooperative learning within their classrooms may still embed peer support strategies within these groupings. Cushing, Kennedy, Shukla, Davis, and Meyer (1997) offered one example of how peer support arrangements could be woven into cooperative learning groups for two students with severe disabilities enrolled in an eighth-grade English class. Although all students with and without disabilities assumed different roles within these cooperative groups (i.e., organizer, materials manager, checker, recorder), one student in each group volunteered to provide more intentional support by helping promote communication and curricular access for each student with disabilities. Similarly, Gilberts, Agran, Hughes, and Wehmeyer (2001) demonstrated how peer support strategies could be combined with student-directed learning strategies to help five middle school students with severe disabilities participate more actively and independently in Spanish, history, art, and reading classes. Such hybrid interventions demonstrate how educators can tailor these peer support arrangements to promote student participation within their classroom, but to do so in ways that fit well with typical classroom routines.