

Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning



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Using Classroom Activities & Routines as Opportunities to Support Peer Interaction

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5

SERIES

WHAT WORKS BRIEFS



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This *What Works Brief* is part of a continuing series of short, easy-to-read, “how to” information packets on a variety of evidence-based practices, strategies, and intervention procedures. The Briefs are designed to help teachers

support young children’s social and emotional development. They include examples and vignettes that illustrate how practical strategies might be used in a variety of early childhood settings and home environments.

Children with and without disabilities often lack key social skills necessary for success in preschool and later in life. In fact, research has indicated a strong relationship between low peer status in childhood and later problems in adolescence and adulthood. Children with social deficits often show similar patterns of behavior; they may be withdrawn and hesitant to interact with peers, they may be socially aloof and “unaware” of their peers, or they may want to interact with their peers but not have the skills to do so successfully. To help prevent problems later in life, promoting children’s social development is one of the primary goals of preschool. However, simply placing a child with social delays (e.g., a child who is withdrawn, a child who has trouble initiating interactions with friends, a child who rarely responds when peers approach him or her) in an early childhood setting does not automatically result in increasing positive social behaviors or peer acceptance. Actively teaching social skills involves careful planning around routines and activities, arranging the environment to support peer interaction, and implementing strategies such as peer-mediated interventions, adult cueing and prompting, and the use of reinforcement. Specific strategies such as peer-mediated interventions and prompting are discussed in other What Works Briefs. This Brief includes a discussion of ways to support peer interaction during routines and activities that occur frequently within early childhood settings.

Why Is It Important to Create Opportunities to Support Peer Interactions?

Research indicates that by providing planned and systematic opportunities (i.e., opportunities that occur consistently) for peer interactions, children engage in more social interactions throughout the day and have more opportunities to practice emerging social skills. Through interactions during routine activities such as snack, arrival time, and clean up time, children practice targeted social skills more often and learn the skills more rapidly. Research also documents improved generalization of social skills from targeted activities to other times of the day. For example, an extremely shy child who begins talking with a peer as they set up snack together might begin talking with this same peer during center time. Because social interactions are embedded into ongoing activities, children are able to access “natural” reinforcers (e.g., friends), thus keeping motivation to engage in these interactions high.

Throughout the day, there are many opportunities to include peer interactions unobtrusively in ongoing routines within preschool

and child care settings. One strategy is to examine the day and look at what the adults are doing with, or for, the children. By having a child do those tasks instead, caregivers can create many more opportunities for peer interactions. For example, instead of an adult setting up snack, children might work in pairs to put out napkins, cups, and plates, or children might work together to make an art collage or they might pass out book bags at the end of the day.

In Ms. Judy’s preschool classroom, circle time always begins the same way. As the children sit down for circle time, Ms. Judy pulls Thomas’s name out of the job can. Thomas gets up and takes the basket filled with sun pictures and proceeds to pass a sun out to each child in the class. After Thomas sits down, the class sings “Oh Mr. Sun” using the pictures as props for motor movement and imitation. As the song ends, Ms. Judy takes Haley’s name out of the can and has her take the basket and collect all of the suns. Haley, however, has trouble completing this task independently so an adult provides her with some physical assistance to go to every child. An adult also verbally prompts Haley to tell the children to “Put the sun in.” This job of passing out and collecting the suns used to be done by an adult, but the caregivers decided that it was a simple task that a child could easily do. They realized that having a child pass out and collect the materials created two peer social interactions for each child, and that for the child who hands out or picks up the props, it creates 12 to 15 peer interactions in less than one minute. The teachers also know that these interactions will occur every day.

At snack, the caregivers have created a similar situation in which the children pass out the cups, plates, snack (when appropriate), and juice. Instead of having an adult sit at the snack tables with the children, the adults designate a snack captain and drink captain for each table. Monique has been selected as the snack captain for her table. Once all the children are seated and they have sung their snack song, Ms. Judy gives Monique a stack of napkins. Adults then cue the children who need prompting to ask Monique for a napkin. Once the napkins are passed out, Monique is given a plate with the snacks on it. Again, the adults cue the children, as needed, to ask Monique for a snack, and she passes the plate to each child so he or she can take a snack. Meanwhile, Marcus, the drink captain, is given the cups and a small pitcher of juice. While some children are asking Monique for

snack, others are asking Marcus for juice. Teachers facilitate these interactions and make sure everyone asks for snack and juice—whether it’s through a verbal request, gestures, or the use of pictures, signs, or other ways to communicate.

How Are Activities and Routines Used as Opportunities to Support Peer Interaction?

When trying to create opportunities for peer interaction, teachers and other caregivers need to ask themselves a few questions such as:

- ✦ What social skills goals do I have for the individual children in my class? What are my expectations for the children in my care?
- ✦ What do I typically do with, or for, the children?
- ✦ Could a child do this “job?”
- ✦ Is this activity something that happens frequently? This question is important because we want to create opportunities that occur often, thus providing a wealth of opportunities over the course of a day, week, month, and school year.
- ✦ Can I ensure that support will be available so that all children can be successful in carrying out this task?

By asking these questions and looking at their daily schedule, caregivers can identify opportunities during natural activities and routines to support or encourage peer interactions. Ms. Judy and her classroom team have used these strategies successfully through the passing out of the suns before singing their opening song and through their snack time routine.

It is important that caregivers are available to facilitate peer interactions and provide cues (e.g., general or specific verbal cues, gestures, or visual cues) or assistance (e.g., helping a child hand napkins to peers or pass a plate of snacks to a friend) if necessary. For example, an adult assisted Haley in collecting the suns by verbally cueing her to ask the other children for their suns. Also, an adult provided physical assistance as Haley walked around the group collecting the props.

Opportunities for peer interaction should be identified within different activities throughout the day to provide for practice and mastery of peer-related social skills. By looking at some activities that typically take place in preschool or child care settings, caregivers can see how many opportunities for peer interaction can be created throughout the day. For example:

- ✦ During arrival time, a child could be designated as the class greeter saying “hello” to classmates as they come in and asking them a simple question such as “Who do you want to play with today?” or “Which book do you vote to read today during circle time, *Brown Bear* or *Snowy Day*?”
- ✦ At circle time or story time, a child can pass out and collect props from each child.
- ✦ After completing an activity, a child can invite a peer to take his place at that activity instead of the adult inviting another child (e.g., Angelo might ask Blair if she wants to use the headset to listen to music now that he is done).

- ✦ At snack time, a child can pass out the snack items to each child at the table.
- ✦ Before center time, one child might be “teacher” and ask his or her peers “Where do you want to play?” as children disperse to the centers.
- ✦ Children can ask a playmate to go to a center with them (e.g., Kate might invite Alyssa to go to housekeeping with her).

One convenient aspect of creating opportunities for social interaction within routines is that, outside of the initial planning time, little effort is necessary to create these opportunities. They simply become part of the daily routine. In addition, as outlined above, these “jobs” are typically done by adults, so it is fairly easy for an adult to provide assistance to a child as needed. Also, as caregivers raise their expectations that children will interact with one another, children typically rise to the occasion and begin engaging with and helping one another, taking on more responsibility during activities. Finally, it is important that adults provide feedback so children realize what behaviors are expected from them. It is also important that adults praise children for their efforts to interact with peers.

Who Are the Children Who Have Participated in This Intervention?

Research on using classroom activities and routines as opportunities to support peer interaction has been conducted with a wide range of preschoolers. These strategies have been used to greatly increase the number of positive peer interactions for typically developing children and children with developmental and social delays. Because teachers and other caregivers are present to provide prompting (e.g., verbal, gestural, or visual cues) and assistance as needed, this strategy can be used successfully with children with severe disabilities and children who are nonverbal or who have language delays. Caregivers can make modifications for children with special needs by adapting materials, changing the learning environment, or providing the amount and type of support needed on an individual basis.

Looking back into Ms. Judy’s classroom later in the year, we see that numerous opportunities for peer interaction are still in place and working well. The children have become more independent in many of the skills (e.g., passing out and collecting props at circle time and story time, and acting as snack and drink captains). Adults also have increased their expectations for these social interactions. Earlier in the year, children simply passed out or collected the props at circle time. Now teachers cue the children to use their friends’ names and make short statements such as, “Taylor, take one.” or “James, here.” when they pass out and collect the materials. Additionally, Ms. Judy and the other caregivers have continued to look for and identify new opportunities for supporting interactions. Their latest activity involves having the door holder give “high fives” to all the children as they walk by on their way to and from the playground.



We welcome your feedback on this What Works Brief. Please go to the CSEFEL Web site (<http://csefel.uiuc.edu>) or call us at (217) 333-4123 to offer suggestions.

Where do I Find Information on Implementing This Practice?

(See CSEFEL's Web site at <http://csefel.uiuc.edu>) for additional resources.)

To date, practical information on creating and supporting peer interactions in everyday routines and activities is limited. However, information on embedding curriculum goals and objectives (including social goals) can be found in journals such as *Young Children*, *Teaching Exceptional Children*, and *Young Exceptional Children*, and manuals and curricula available to the public. See the following resources for examples of how to embed peer interactions into ongoing daily classroom activities and routines:

Aspen Systems Corporation (1997). *Individualizing: A plan for success*. Training Guides for the Head Start Learning Community. Head Start Bureau, Administration for Children and Families, Department of Health and Human Services.

Bricker, D., Pretti-Frontczak, K., & McComas, N. (2000). *An activity-based approach to early intervention (2nd ed.)*. Baltimore: Paul Brookes.

Brown, W. H., McEvoy, M. A., & Bishop, J. N. (1991). Incidental teaching of social behavior: A naturalistic approach for promoting young children's peer interactions. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 24(1), 35-38.

Brown, W. H., & Odom, S. L. (1995). Naturalistic peer interventions for promoting preschool children's social interactions. *Preventing School Failure*, 39(4), 38-43.

LEAP Outreach Project, The (2001). *Social Skills: A Classroom Training Packet*. Center for Evidence-Based Practices in Early Learning. University of Colorado at Denver.

Sandall, S. R., & Schwartz, I. S. (2002). *Building blocks for teaching preschoolers with special needs*. Baltimore: Paul Brookes.

What is the Scientific Basis for This Practice?

For those wishing to explore the topic deeper, the following researchers have documented the effect of supporting peer interactions during classroom routines and activities.

Brown, W. H., & Odom, S. L. (1994). Strategies and tactics for promoting generalization and maintenance of young children's social behavior. *Research in Developmental Disabilities*, 15(2), 99-118.

Odom, S. L., McConnell, S. R., & Chandler, L. (1994). Acceptability and feasibility of classroom-based social interaction interventions for young children with disabilities. *Exceptional Children*, 60(3), 226-236.

Strain, P. S., Danko, C. D., & Kohler, F. (1995). Activity engagement and social interaction development in young children with autism: An examination of "free" intervention effects. *Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders*, 3(2), 108-123.

Strain, P. S. & Hoyson, M. (2000). The need for longitudinal, intensive social skill intervention: LEAP follow-up outcomes for children with autism. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education*, 20(2), 116-122.

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