

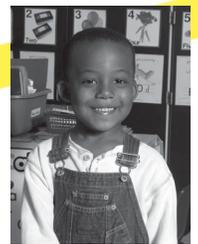
# Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning



Project funded by the Child Care and Head Start  
Bureaus in the U.S. Department of Health and  
Human Services

## **Promoting Positive Peer Social Interactions**

T. Bovey • P. Strain



**SERIES**

**WHAT WORKS BRIEFS**

8

# Promoting Positive Peer Social Interactions

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, parents, and other

caregivers 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.

*Throughout a typical preschool day, there are countless opportunities for children to interact and play with one another. Peer interactions serve a variety of important roles for preschoolers. Throughout the day, as they watch, imitate, model, and interact with each other, preschoolers learn to share, solve problems, and collaborate. They also build friendships that promote positive social and emotional development. These skills don’t all come naturally, however, and some children have difficulty interacting with their peers and building friendships. Some children must be taught the skills necessary to interact with their peers. At the Cherokee Trail Preschool, time is set aside during the daily large group or circle time to learn and practice specific social skills that children can use to interact and build friendships with one another.*

*During circle time, Ms. Colleen takes out a poster and shows it to the children. “See this bug? He wants to get his friend’s attention. His friend isn’t looking at him. I bet you’ve all had times when you wanted to get a friend’s attention, but he or she didn’t listen to you. Today, we’re going to learn something we can do to help get our friend’s attention. First, look at what the bug does. He looks at his friend. Then, he taps his friend on the shoulder. And then he says his friend’s name, ‘Johnny.’ And look, his friend turns around.” As Ms. Colleen describes the sequence of pictures on the poster, the children follow along.*

*Ms. Colleen then re-creates this scenario for the children by acting it out with the help of Ms. Jody, the classroom assistant. First, Ms. Colleen demonstrates the right way to do the steps for the class. Then she demonstrates them again, purposely forgetting to tap Ms. Jody on the shoulder. The children all point and shout out what she forgot to do, and Ms. Colleen corrects her mistake. Ms. Colleen then invites two children to the front of the group to try the strategy with each other, cuing them as needed to ensure that they do all the steps. She goes on to remind the children that the teachers will be watching them during center time to see if they are using the skill when they need to get their friend’s attention. After circle time, the children choose centers and go off to play. Ms. Colleen and the other caregivers watch closely to see if children use the strategy for **Getting Their Friend’s Attention**. The teachers provide positive feedback to children when they see them using the strategy.*

## What Are Positive Social Interactions?

Positive social interactions are interactions that take place between peers that are positive in nature and successful for both children involved. These peer interactions are important because they lead to positive social and emotional development in children. Research has shown that children who can interact successfully with their peers, even during preschool, are more popular, have stronger friendships, and are included more often in classroom activities than children who lack these skills.

Children have many strategies that they use to interact with one another; some of these strategies are appropriate and some are not. Most caregivers have seen children grab toys from peers, push or hit to get what they want, or ignore a friend who is trying to talk to them. Other children may have difficulty interacting with peers because of developmental disabilities, language delays, or social delays. It is important to teach children positive skills that they can use to successfully interact with their peers.

Some skills that are useful for interacting with peers and building social relationships include:

- ⇒ Getting a friend’s attention
- ⇒ Sharing objects
- ⇒ Asking peers to share objects
- ⇒ Providing a play idea to a peer
- ⇒ Saying something nice to a friend

Children can be taught to initiate positive interactions with their classmates during large group activities such as circle time or story time. Using role play and rehearsal (as Ms. Colleen did in the example above), children learn to get each other’s attention, to share toys and materials, to make suggestions for play, to assist each other, and to say nice things to one another. Once a group of children has been taught these positive social skills, teachers provide the children with opportunities throughout the day to interact with each other using the targeted skills. During these play periods, caregivers circulate among the children,

---

encourage positive peer interactions (e.g., “Danielle, ask Joshua for a paintbrush.”), praise interactions that occur (e.g., “Thank you for handing Danielle a paintbrush.”), and provide suggestions to keep children’s play interesting (e.g., “You two can finish painting the house together using the rollers.”).

In addition to verbal praise, material reinforcers may be used to increase the likelihood that positive peer interactions will take place again in the future. One such system is the use of Superstars. Superstars are necklaces the teachers and children have made out of laminated construction paper and yarn. In the example above, when Ms. Colleen or one of the other teachers observes a child using a targeted social skill naturally during play, the teacher could reinforce this behavior by giving the child a Superstar. The child is told exactly what he did to earn the Superstar and then given the necklace to wear until the end of the day. During the last group activity of the day, children are

---

### Systematically embedding additional planned social interactions throughout the classroom day provides increased opportunities for learning positive social behaviors.

---

invited up in front of the group to tell their friends what they did to earn their “Superstar.”

Caregivers should initially allocate 10 to 15 minutes a day for approximately 2 weeks to teach peer interaction skills. During daily peer play sessions that follow, adults can maintain high levels of positive peer interactions by providing positive feedback (through verbal praise and positive feedback) and suggesting play ideas at least once per minute (e.g., “Why don’t you hand Billy a block. Remember to look at him, tap him on the shoulder and say his name, then give him the block.”). Systematically embedding additional planned social interactions throughout the classroom day (e.g., passing out names for jobs at circle, passing out napkins at snack) provides increased opportunities for learning positive social behaviors.

### Who Are the Children Who Have Participated in Research on Teaching Peers to Promote Social Interactions?

This strategy has been used to increase the positive peer interactions of a wide variety of children, including 3- to 5-year-olds who are typically developing; young children who are withdrawn; and young children with mental retardation, autism, conduct problems, and emotional disturbances. This type of intervention has been used successfully across a wide variety of settings, including Head Start, inclusive child care programs, and early childhood/special education settings. Moreover, this intervention has been used successfully with boys and girls from diverse racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. When this intervention is conducted in inclusive settings with children with special needs, typical children also benefit in that they become more accepting of children who are different from them. As always, when looking at any strategy, care must be taken to make necessary adaptations to meet the

individual, ethnic, and cultural differences of the children in a teacher’s care.

### Why Is It Important to Teach Positive Social Skills?

Research suggests that the use of positive social skills with peers early on can lead to the development of positive peer relationships, acceptance, and friendships. Although many children develop these positive social skills naturally, some children do not. Children who are withdrawn as well as young children with mental retardation, autism, conduct problems, and emotional disturbances often have difficulty interacting appropriately with their peers and are thus at risk for later social problems. By teaching children appropriate social skills, providing them with willing and accepting peers to use the skills with, and creating opportunities for children to practice these skills, teachers can improve all children’s social behaviors, potentially for a lifetime.

*Visiting Ms. Colleen’s classroom later in the year, we see children interacting and playing throughout the classroom and using positive social interactions naturally during play. At the sand table, two children are playing, but the materials (shovels, buckets, etc.) have been purposefully limited to encourage sharing. Jacob leans across the table, looks at his friend Max, taps him on the shoulder, and asks for the shovel. Max takes one last scoop of sand, pours it in his bucket, and hands the shovel to Jacob. In the housekeeping area, children are playing Animal Hospital with stuffed animals and doctors’ equipment. Sierra is keeping all the doctors’ tools in the bag and not letting other children play the role of the doctor. The teacher monitoring the area simply states, “Remember to share with your friends.” Hearing this general prompt, Sierra reaches into the bag and takes out the stethoscope. She then looks at Juan, taps him on the shoulder, says his name, and offers the stethoscope by holding it out and saying, “Here.” Meanwhile, in the art area, Hannah is using the easel to paint a picture. Ms. Colleen knows that Richard (a child with a language delay) loves to paint also but hasn’t had a chance yet. She also knows that Richard is shy and that he won’t independently go and ask for a turn. So, Ms. Colleen brings Richard over to the easel and assists him in picking the art area picture from his communication book, tapping Hannah on the shoulder, and handing her the picture. Hannah looks at the picture and says, “Oh, you want to paint.” She then hands him her paintbrush. All of these examples illustrate positive peer interactions. The teachers know that they will occasionally need to prompt children, as Ms. Colleen did with Richard or as Ms. Judy did with Sierra. But everyday, teachers see more children using these important social skills with each other naturally during play. In addition, the teachers have noticed a decrease in negative peer interactions such as grabbing, pushing, and name calling, and parents have commented on their children’s use of the positive skills at home.*

---



**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 the CSEFEL Web site (<http://csefel.uiuc.edu>) for additional resources

There are many articles, books, and curricula that provide information on increasing peer interactions. For further information, see the following:

- Chandler, L. (1998). Promoting positive interaction between preschool-age children free play: The PALS center. *Young Exceptional Children*, 1(3), 14-19.
- LEAP Outreach Project. (2003). *Nurturing social skills in the inclusive classroom: Staff workbook*. Tualatin, OR: Teacher's Toolbox.
- Taylor, A. S., Peterson, C. A., McMurray-Schwarz, P., & Guillou, T. S. (2002). Social skills interventions: Not just for children with special needs. *Young Exceptional Children*, 5(4), 19-26.

## ★ **What Is the Scientific Basis for This Practice?**

For those wishing to learn more about the topic, the following resources provide more information:

- Dunn, J. & McGuire, S. (1992). Sibling and peer relationships in childhood. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry and Allied Disciplines*, 33, 67-105.
- Gottman, J. M. (1983). How children become friends. *Monograph of the Society for Research in Child Development*, 48 (3, Serial No. 108).
- Landy, S. (2002). *Pathways to competence: Encouraging healthy social and emotional development in young children*. Baltimore: Brookes Publishing.
- Odom, S. L., Hoyson, M., Jamieson, B., & Strain, P. S. (1985). Increasing handicapped preschoolers' peer social interactions: Cross-setting and component analysis. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, 18(1), 3-16.
- Odom, S. L., McConnell, S. R., McEvoy, M. A., Peterson, C., Ostrosky, M., Chandler, L. K., Spicuzza, R. J., Skellenger, A., Creighton, M., & Favazza, P. C. (1999). Relative effects of interventions supporting the social competence of young children with disabilities. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education*, 19(2), 75-91.
- Odom, S. L., & Strain, P. S. (1986). A comparison of peer-initiation and teacher-antecedent interventions for promoting reciprocal social interaction of autistic preschoolers. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, 19(1), 59-71.
- Odom, S. L., Strain, P. S., Karger, M. A., & Smith, J. D. (1986). Using single and multiple peers to promote social interaction of preschool children with handicaps. *Journal of the Division for Early Childhood*, 10(1), 53-64.
- Strain, P. S., & Kohler, F. W. (1998). Peer-mediated social intervention for young children with autism. *Seminars in Speech and Language*, 19(4), 391-405.

**This What Works Brief was developed by the Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning. Contributors to this Brief were T. Bovey and P. Strain.**

This material was developed by the Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning with federal funds from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families (Cooperative Agreement N. PHS 90YD0119). The contents of this publication do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, nor does mention of trade names, commercial projects, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government. You may reproduce this material for training and information purposes.



### Promoting Positive Peer Social Interactions

## WHAT WORKS BRIEFS

