

# Teacher Toolbox

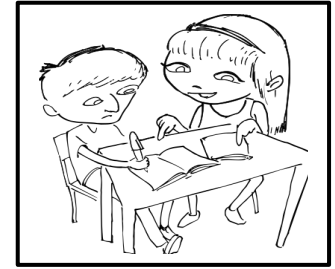


## Teacher Toolbox – March 2024

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### **Students Supporting Students:**

#### *Peer-Mediated Instruction and Intervention*



The saying “*It takes a village to raise a child*” can easily be adapted to “*It takes a village to educate a student with autism*”. When we consider this “village”, our mind immediately conjures up the typical educational team members (depending on your district's resources), often consisting of special and general education teachers, paraprofessionals (education assistants), speech-language pathologists (SLP), occupational therapists (OT), and social workers. Anyone in the educational setting who has worked with a student with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) will tell you that this “village” also extends to other critical staff, such as the school nurse, administrators, members of the front office, cafeteria, and custodial staff – all of which frequently interact with students with ASD and can also positively impact these students by modeling expected behavior and providing them with communication and social interaction opportunities. Wait a minute... Haven't we neglected to consider a crucial majority of individuals at school? Peers comprise most of the population in the school setting, yet we frequently underestimate their abilities and underutilize their skills, as well as their desire to understand and support peers with challenges.

We know that learners with ASD struggle with social impairments and often have limited opportunities to engage in meaningful social interactions with other children without disabilities. Children do not interact the same way with one another when an adult is present; therefore, the autistic child can be excluded from naturally occurring interactions which can inhibit an oftentimes already stunted social repertoire. The National Professional Development Center on ASD states, “*Peer Mediated Instruction and Intervention (PMII) involves systematically teaching peers without disabilities ways of engaging learners with ASD in positive and meaningful social interactions. PMII meets the evidence-based practice criteria with 15 single case design studies. The practice has been effective for preschoolers (3-5 years) to high school-age learners (15-22) with ASD. PMII can be used effectively to address social, communication, joint attention, play, school-readiness, and academic skills.*” Like any intervention, PMII will not work for every child in every circumstance. However, it has been proven to work for many children with ASD and is one of the best researched interventions for children with ASD. PMII increases the frequency that learners with ASD will interact with peers without disabilities. Peers often demonstrate increased levels of tolerance, awareness, and acceptance of differences through this process.

Peer Mediated Instruction and Intervention involves a group of specific interventions that address social skills of learners with ASD by training and utilizing neurotypical peers to support peers with ASD, such as:

**Integrated Play Groups:** An experienced adult guides typical peers and children with ASD in a structured and supportive environment through activities purposefully chosen to encourage interaction. The role of the adult is to establish a consistent schedule, coach the peers through play sessions, and encourage the children on the autism spectrum to stay engaged using cues that the child is familiar with.

**Peer Buddy and Peer Tutors:** Typically developing peers are assigned to be a “tutor” or “buddy” to a specific child with ASD in their class. The typically developing peer is trained to keep a close eye on their buddy; talking to them, playing with them, and staying by their side. This strategy hopes to create opportunities for natural interactions between children with ASD and their typical peer that encourage incidental learning about social behaviors.

**Group-Oriented Contingency:** Unlike a buddy or tutor system, this strategy involves training an entire classroom of children on some social skill behaviors and techniques in hopes of promoting supportive behaviors among all the students in a classroom with one or more children with ASD. This option can be useful when teachers have limited additional personnel but would like to provide encouragement for the social growth of a student with ASD.

**Peer Networks:** A group of peers is trained to form a social “network” to provide support for children with ASD in their classroom. Peer network members may learn things such as the communication system used by the child with ASD, how to initiate and maintain conversations, and how to help provide instructions.

**Pivotal Response Training (PRT):** Adults can intervene by using role-play to train peers to engage in specific behaviors with children with ASD such as: taking turns, providing narration for play activities, encouraging conversation, and modeling appropriate social behaviors.

**Peer Initiation Training:** This intervention involves training peers specifically on techniques for initiating interactions with children with ASD such as offering to share, requesting assistance, and strategies for gaining the child's attention.

Consider the following ways to encourage “students supporting students” in your setting:

- Educate peers, establish learning teams or circles of friends to build a supportive community. If you leave it up to the class to pick groups/partners, students with special needs are often chosen last, causing unnecessary humiliation.
- Identify compassionate, dependable peers who model strong social skills to pair the student with (not always the students who have the highest grades).
- Teach, practice, and give feedback to the selected peers so that they can effectively help teach the identified student the targeted skill.
- Provide peers with strategies for eliciting communication or other targeted objectives but be careful not to turn the peer into a teacher. Strive to keep peer interactions as natural as possible.
- During group activities, define the student's role and responsibilities within the group. Assign a role or help him mediate with peers as to what he should do (for example, ‘Sallie is the note taker today.’) Rotate roles to build flexibility and broaden skills.
- Ask peers to help in supporting transition time. In elementary classrooms, teachers can ask all students to move from place to place with a partner. In middle and high school classrooms, students might choose a peer to walk with during passing period.

- ▶ Pair students with autism spectrum disorder with peers while attending special school events such as school assemblies and clubs.
- ▶ Encourage peer volunteers at the middle and high school level to support their partner by keeping him/her on task with gentle reminders.
- ▶ Support is a two-way street! Assist students with autism in supporting their classmates by utilizing their strengths to build relationships with peers. For example, a student with ASD who excels in computers can teach his/her classmates how to use a computer.

Teaching students how to support one another's needs through patient understanding is a critical role that should be shared by every educator. This worthy investment will positively impact students with and without disabilities in your classroom today – and throughout their lives!

### References

“Peer-Mediated Instruction and Intervention.” *National Professional Development Center on ASD*, 2015, pp. 1–30. *Autism Focused Intervention Resources & Modules*

[https://afirm.fpg.unc.edu/sites/afirm.fpg.unc.edu/files/imce/resources/PMII\\_EBP\\_Brief\\_Packet.pdf](https://afirm.fpg.unc.edu/sites/afirm.fpg.unc.edu/files/imce/resources/PMII_EBP_Brief_Packet.pdf).

<https://www.iidc.indiana.edu/irca/articles/incorporating-typical-peers-into-the-social-learning-of-children-with-autism-spectrum-disorders.html>

**For more helpful strategies to support your students with autism and other needs, access the complementary Technical Assistance Program (TAP), Hot Topic On Demand Library Pre-recorded Webinars at [www.cestap.org](http://www.cestap.org) or register for the next live-virtual Autism Toolbox Series workshop on 3/21/24: ASD Toolbox: Challenging Behaviors Toolkit at [www.ces.org](http://www.ces.org).**

