

Building a Successful Peer-to-Peer Program

A peer-to-peer program is when a student with autism (or any disability) is paired with a neuro-typical student, both in structured teaching settings as well as in the informal social settings of the educational environment. The hope is that the peer interaction will not only provide some help with educational deficits of the students with autism, but also improve their social and communication skills. It can also provide a better understanding of empathy and socially appropriate behavior. Research on this topic points to the benefits of improved cognitive abilities for the children with autism, particularly for younger children. However, the most important outcome is expansion of the child's social circle and an overall broadening of social skills and inherent self-esteem.

For the peer partners, the experience can teach them the many ways they are similar to their friends with disabilities, as opposed to focusing on differences. Peer programming also teaches them how to be a generous and patient friend. It helps them realize that whoever we are, we are stronger together, and we all rely on others to help us along in life.

Ready to get started? Here are some tips:

1. If you are not sure you are ready to start an entire program, test the waters by pairing students who need a little support with peers you think would be skilled at helping.
2. For younger students, reading buddies and lunch buddies work well. Older students can be given more flexibility and options for when and where they spend time with their partners.
3. Be sure to have the support of all staff members involved – students might need permission to depart from their usual schedules and classrooms.
4. Invite, don't tell, neuro-typical students to participate. The most successful peer partners usually feel that their participation is a privilege that comes with some responsibility.
5. Provide information for parents of participating students.
6. Be sure that the peer partners understand the challenges and unusual behaviors of individuals with autism and their partners in particular. It may be helpful to train them – perhaps with a lunchtime workshop – before they begin meeting with their partners.
7. Schedule recreational activities and time just to talk, in addition to usual school activities. This promotes bonding over common interests.
8. Teach the peer partners to take the initiative to help the students with autism learn turn-taking, game play, lunch routines, recess rules, etc.
9. Meet with the peer partners regularly to answer questions or make suggestions for successful communication with the students with autism.
10. Encourage athletic teams to recruit students with autism to be team managers, providing them a place to belong and build relationships.