

Peer-mediated Intervention to Promote Positive Behavior Skills

Module 20

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Mrs. Miller is a special educator who works with six students with emotional disabilities in an elementary self-contained classroom. One of her students, John, a fourth grader, also takes part in some general education classes such as social studies and science. Through informal observations during class, Mrs. Miller noticed that John has limited interactions with the students due to his inappropriate behavior (i.e., yelling out answers, walking around the room, and being off-task). Mrs. Miller thinks that a peer-mediated intervention called peer coaching might be helpful for promoting positive social interactions for John and his peers.

During her observations, Mrs. Miller noticed Stephen, who is very social and often attempts to initiate interactions with John. She decided he would be a great peer for John to work with for this intervention. After receiving approval from Stephen and his parents, Mrs. Miller provided training sessions for Stephen with a brief introduction of peer coaching, including why he needed to be involved, what is expected of him during the activities, and information on how to provide positive prompts and reinforcement to John. To keep John on task and following appropriate classroom behaviors would be prompted and reinforced: 1) raising hand to answer questions; 2) staying in seat during instruction; and 3) staying focused and on-task during one-on-one activities. Mrs. Miller assures Stephen that she will be there to support him as the intervention is implemented, but will provide less support as John becomes more adapted to the appropriate behavioral interactions.

During the next few days during social studies and science, Stephen implemented the prompting and reinforcement strategies developed during training. Stephen made sure to prompt John if he did not initiate one of the required behaviors and he positively reinforced the appropriate behavior with verbal praise. As the semester continued, Mrs. Miller collected data to determine

John's progress on his behaviors. The data showed that John had a decrease in inappropriate behaviors, while his appropriate social behaviors increased over time. Mrs. Miller decided that peer coaching was a great intervention for student behavior and began looking at other students that could benefit from the intervention.

Description of Peer-mediated Intervention

Students with mild disabilities, including those with communication disorders, learning disabilities, mild or moderate intellectual disabilities, and emotional disabilities often encounter difficulties in at least three broad domains: (a) basic academic skills (e.g., reading, writing, spelling, mathematics), (b) academic related behaviors (e.g., school survival skills, metacognitive strategies, study and organizational skills), and (c) behavioral and interpersonal interactions (e.g., motivation, prosocial behavior) (Maheady, Harper, & Mallette, 2001; Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2000). Peer rejection has been linked to delinquency, poor psychosocial adjustment, and mental health problems in later adolescence and adulthood (Mathur & Rutherford, 1991). As for children and youth with emotional disabilities, positive peer relations are crucial for developing adaptive prosocial skills.

For children with disabilities to be successful in inclusive settings researchers have proposed that the development of academic skills and social competence, particularly with peers, become a major focus of school-based programs (Greenwood, Terry, Delquadri, Elliott, & Arreaga-Mayer, 1995). There is increasing recognition that children's overall adjustment and success at school requires a willingness and an ability to meet social as well as academic outcomes (Hinshaw, 1992; Wentzel, 1998). Deci (1992) suggests that interpersonal relationships provide students with a sense of belongingness that can be a powerful motivator of children's interests in school. Research has demonstrated that effective participation in social interactions with peers contributes directly to the acquisition of cognitive, academic, and social skills development (Mathur & Rutherford, 1991; Wentzel, 1998).

In addition, it is important for educators to understand that peer culture also changes substantially during adolescence, as peer relationships assume a more prominent role in the lives of youth (Carter & Kennedy, 2006). Peer interactions increase in complexity, take place within dynamic peer systems, move beyond the immediate purview of adults, and often develop beyond the school day (Brown, 2004; Carter & Kennedy, 2006). Not surprisingly, research supports the use of peer-mediated interventions to facilitate learning and prosocial behaviors.

Numerous researchers have used peers successfully as change agents to assist fellow students in various ways, such as academic tutoring, conflict mediation, positive reinforcement, and social skills acquisition (Christensen, Young, Marchant, 2004; Gable, Arllen, & Hendrickson, 1994; Mathur & Rutherford, 1991; Strain, 1981; Topping, Holmes, & Bremner, 2001). These strategies referred to as peer-mediated instruction and intervention, are a form of alternative teaching

arrangements in which students serve as the instructional assistant for classmates. Peer-mediated interventions tap into the positive side of peer-group influence and provide a powerful context for students to work together in cooperative pairs to achieve common goals, such as completing academic assignments and using prosocial behavior (Utley, Mortweet, & Greenwood, 1997).

Peer-mediated interventions emphasize the involvement of classroom peers as socially competent facilitators to promote appropriate social behaviors (Mathur & Rutherford, 1991). According to Harris, Pretti-Frontczak, and Brown (2009), there are several advantages to using peer-mediated interventions. First, there is never a shortage of peers. Data from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development states that the average public school class size is 23.1 in the United States (Rampell, 2009). Therefore, there will always be students to implement the intervention. Second, students are influenced through observational learning by what they see their peers doing. Observational learning occurs when an observer's behavior changes after viewing the behavior of a model. Much of peer-mediated instruction is based on peer observation. Finally, students are often less intimidated by a peer than they are a teacher, which makes instruction and feedback from peers potentially more effective.

As noted, peer-mediated interventions are designed to support the development and learning of all students and to create opportunities for peers who are typically developing or who have a particular set of competencies to take a peer-to-peer instructional role in promoting learning in social development (Harris et al., 2009). Contemporary research focuses on two types of peer-mediated interventions, indirect and direct. Indirect interventions include: group reinforcement contingencies, peer-modeling, and role-play. This module focuses on direct peer interventions, in which peers directly interact with the target student and influence their social behavior. Peer techniques that fall under direct peer-mediated instruction, peer proximity, peer prompting and reinforcement, and peer initiation (Mathur & Rutherford, 1991; Ryan, Pierce, & Mooney, 2008; Utley et al., 1997). Overall, research has shown that peer-mediated interventions can produce large social and academic gains for students with emotional or behavior disorders and others with and without disabilities (Ryan et al., 2008).

Research Supporting Peer-mediated Intervention

A growing body of literature has reported the success of peer-mediated programs for students with a variety of disabilities. For example, Elbaum, Vaughn, Hughes, and Moody (1999) completed a meta-analysis that investigated the relationship between reading outcomes and grouping formats for students with disabilities. Results found that students with disabilities made better gains when they served in the role of peer coaches. In another study by Blake, Wang, Cartledge, and Gardner (2000), middle school students with serious emotional disturbance (SED) served as student trainers to teach social interaction skills to peers with SED. Study results indicate that peer-based social skills instruction had beneficial effects for both peer trainers and student trainees.

Christensen, Young, and Marchant (2004) used same age peers as change agents to mediate student intervention plans. Analysis shows that the at-risk students had immediate and marked improvement in their socially appropriate classroom behavior and gains remained as the intervention was thinned. Additional research in the area of peer-mediated interventions includes Sugai and Chanter (1988) who found success at the elementary school level using students

identified with learning and behavior disorders as change agents for behavior in their peers and research by Mather and Rutherford (1991) who found that peer-mediated interventions promoting social skills of children with emotional disabilities produced positive effects as well as generalization of the skills. This growing body of literature illustrates the success peer-mediated interventions have on the promotion of positive behavior skills.

When to Consider Peer-mediated Interventions

Promoting peer effort is an important component of peer-mediated strategies. Techniques used include arranging situations or contingencies to promote optimal peer effort and teaching peers' methods of reinforcing target skills. The following are descriptions of peer-mediated interventions that can be implemented within the classroom to facilitate appropriate interactions and develop academic skills.

Peer networks are based on the premise that an enhancement of peer understanding of and interest in, children with disabilities will promote increased interactions (DiSalvo & Oswald, 2002). The primary goal of peer social networks is to promote a positive social environment for students with behavior concerns by creating a support system of friends and socially competent peers (Utley et al. 1997). This form of peer proximity places socially competent peers with target students to enhance the opportunities for direct interaction, allowing a natural transmission of social skills from one group to another (Mathur & Rutherford, 1991). These networks typically are used with older children and adolescents, where students have classes together and know each other informally; and share common interests, hobbies, and activities (Utley et al., 1997).

Peer-initiation training has been the most frequently used peer-mediated interventions for promoting appropriate social skills and prosocial classroom behavior (Mathur & Rutherford, 1991; Utley et al., 1997). Peer initiation involves a teacher training socially competent peers to initiate and respond to social initiations of students with emotional disabilities and maintain desired social behaviors from a target child (Utley et al., 1997). Some common behaviors that peers are taught to use to facilitate prosocial behavior are offering and asking for help, initiating play or conversation, and demonstrating appropriate physical peer interactions. This approach of peer-mediated intervention focuses on the use of play-based skills (e.g., organizing play, sharing) and is more appropriate for young children (i.e., ages 3 to 8 years) (DiSalvo & Oswald, 2002).

Finally, peer-coaching is another type of peer-mediated intervention that focuses on the use of typical peers as change agents for student behavior. Like the other types of peer-mediated interventions, peer-coaching involves peers providing prompts and reinforcement for appropriate behavior of classmates. Studies employing prompts and reinforcement like peer-coaching have demonstrated success in promoting prosocial interactions and peer reciprocity (Brewer, Reid, & Rhine, 2003; Flood, Wilder, Flood, & Masuda, 2002).

Guidelines for Implementation of Peer-mediated Interventions

Implementation of each peer-mediated intervention such as peer-coaching, reinforcement and prompting, and peer initiation training follow the same core interventions components: selecting peers, training peers, supporting peers, implementation, and monitoring. Neitzel (2008) describes the steps needed to implement peer-mediated interventions in elementary, middle, and high

school settings. First, teachers need to select peers who will provide social support to the students with behavior concerns. Teachers should identify students who exhibit good social skills, language, and are well liked by their peers. They should also have shared or similar interests as the target student (Harris et al., 2009). Once students are identified, they should be moved within the classroom so that they are sitting in close proximity of the target student during instructional activities (Carter & Kennedy, 2006).

The next step involves training the peers in implementation. Due to the various ages of the students, peer training sessions will vary in content and activities. However, during the training sessions, specific behaviors are taught to support classmate's prosocial and academic outcomes including providing frequent, positive feedback; modeling age-appropriate behavior and communication skills; and facilitating interactions with other peers (Carter & Kennedy, 2006). Students should be taught how to model, assist, and/or prompt the target student to practice the needed skills. Once peer training is complete it is important for teachers to remember to provide supports for the peers. Teachers should make individualized curricular and instructional adaptations, with some input and involvement from peers, to ensure students are able to participate fully in the classroom (Harris et al., 2009). As peers evidence greater confidence in their role and demonstrate their capacity to deliver appropriate support, active adult involvement is systematically faded (Carter & Kennedy, 2006). Thus, peers assume the primary support role which may include clarifying instructions, asking comprehension questions, offering choices, and supporting participation in activities. Finally, teachers should reinforce and acknowledge the positive behavior of both students involved in the intervention, and particularly the peers need to know they are valued for their assistance. Teachers should be sure to acknowledge the partners and their successes, even when the progress may be incremental.

Cautions Regarding Peer-mediated Interventions

Despite the demonstrated effectiveness of peer-mediated interventions, there are circumstances in which peer-mediated strategies may not be the most pragmatic approach. First, in order to be successful, peer interventions may require a great deal of teacher time with training peers and providing reinforcement or prompts to maintain peer helping behaviors (Vincent, Houlihan, & Zwart, 1996). The need for sufficient time to prepare peers varies from three hours per week with a weekly 15 minute booster session (Sugai & Chanter, 1988) to weekly sessions 30 minutes in length for a nine-week period (Graubard, Rosenberg, & Miller, 1974). Second, peer-assisted interventions often require ongoing monitoring of peer interactions in order to assure treatment integrity. Available literature does suggest that some peer groups will require adult prompts throughout the program to ensure fidelity of peer interactions (Gable et al., 1994). Finally, peer interventions may be hindered by a well-established peer network that is resistant to change (Vincent et al., 1996). It is important to remember that generalization of newly acquired behaviors will not be maintained if they do not produce desirable social responses in the natural environment (Vincent et al., 1996). Overall, compared to traditional forms of teacher-mediated instruction, research has confirmed that peer-mediated programs increase both academic and behavioral outcomes for students with emotional disabilities, along with other students with and without disabilities.

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Website Links

National Center on Accessible Instructional Materials. Retrieved from:

http://aim.cast.org/learn/historyarchive/backgroundpapers/peer-mediated_instruction

University of Kansas, Special Connections. Retrieved from:

http://www.specialconnections.ku.edu/?q=behavior_plans/classroom_and_group_support/teacher_tools/peer_assisted_interventions
