

Peer Instructional Supports

Module 21

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Keith is a 10-year-old fourth-grader who has been diagnosed with emotional disabilities (ED). Although he has been placed in a co-taught general education classroom, with one special education teacher and one general education teacher, he continues to perform below grade level in reading, is inattentive and off task during class, and can be noncompliant when asked to read aloud. Based on formal assessment, Keith performs on a second-grade reading level and has hyperactivity, impulsivity, and conduct problems.

Due to Keith's difficulty remaining on task during most academic activities, he is often rejected by his peers because his disruptive behavior leads to negative consequences. Most of Keith's behavior occurs during reading class and independent work times. Behaviors of concern include: (a) taking materials from peers without permission (b) making fun of others when they read by making oral comments, (c) uses profanity when he mispronounces a word when reading aloud, and (d) slams his book on the desk when he cannot answer a comprehension question.

Despite his teacher's best efforts, Keith's behavior has escalated, especially during reading time, to the point where he is regularly sent to the principal's office. After trying many more punitive measures, Keith's teacher decides to focus on a positive intervention that addresses peer interactions and academic success. The teachers decide to use Peer-Assisted Learning (PAL) to address both his reading failure and his inappropriate behavior.

To ensure Keith's success during the process, his teachers first taught and practiced the specific skills that would be needed for the intervention. First, they paired Keith with a student that was more advanced in reading. This provided him a model which increased his chance for success. Then the teachers provided the "tutor" training on the use of corrective feedback and praise. In addition, the

teachers decided to include a point system for the pair. Each member could earn points for correctly following the procedures.

After implementing the program during reading for several weeks, Keith's teachers began to notice that not only had his behavior improved, but he was making some gains in reading as well. PAL has allowed Keith to appropriately engage in talking with his peers, received positive attention for his behavior, and is more motivated to try new tasks. Using PAL has provided Keith the opportunity to be successful in reading and reduced his off task behavior.

Description of Peer Instructional Supports

Research shows that students with emotional disabilities (ED), along with disruptive behaviors such as non-compliance, aggression, disruption, and antisocial responses, often have academic deficits (Levey & Chard, 2001; Nelson, Benner, Neill, & Stage, 2006; Pierce, Reid, & Epstein, 2004; Strong, Wehby, Falk, & Lane, 2004). These deficits are a major predictor of larger failures academically and socially in school and beyond school (Scott & Shearer-Lingo, 2002; Strong et al., 2004). Unfortunately, research shows that by the time most students with ED reach high school they are performing almost 3.5 grade levels below their peers (Trout, Nordness, Pierce, & Epstein, 2003). In the absence of proactive strategies to help identify and manage academic and behavioral deficits, these students often find it difficult to be successful in school.

Across time, researchers have suggested a variety of means, including academic and behavioral interventions, to address the learning and behavior problems of students with ED (Kern & Clemens, 2007; Lewis, Hudson, Richter, & Johnson, 2004; Sutherland & Snyder, 2007). With effective instruction, that ensures academic success for the student, behavior problems can be ameliorated (de Lugt, 2007). In addition, integrated interventions capable of producing both academic and behavioral outcomes may be more effective and less costly than separate, individual approaches (Ginsburg-Block, Rohrbeck, & Fantuzzo, 2006; Ramsey, Jolivet, & Patton, 2007). In light of the need for these integrated approaches, teachers are beginning to look closer at interventions that address both academic and behavioral outcomes. One such classroom wide teacher-implemented instructional approach, that has benefited many students with ED, is Peer-Assisted Learning (PAL).

Peer-Assisted Learning (PAL) is an umbrella term that includes dyadic peer tutoring and instructional principles and practices (Ginsburg-Block et al., 2006; Promising Practices Network, 2005). PAL is a class-wide peer tutoring program that consists of the teacher identifying and pairing children who require help with specific skills (academic or behavioral) with children who are the most appropriate to help other children learn those skills (Promising Practices Network,

2005). The PAL program uses peer-mediated instruction, where students work in pairs to provide tutoring in academic strategies while providing consistent behavioral encouragement and feedback. PAL has several key elements including the use of cooperative learning, highly structured peer interactions, focus on key grade-level skills, and reinforcement of academic behaviors. By participating in PAL students with ED have opportunities to improve both peer relations and academic skills (Ramsey et al., 2007).

Research in Support of Peer Instructional Supports

Several reviews have shown the effectiveness of PAL interventions in producing academic and nonacademic outcomes for students with disabilities. These reviews have demonstrated positive effects on academic behavior, self-concept, and nonacademic achievement. In a study completed by Wehby, Falk, Barton-Arwood, Lane and Cooley (2003), the researchers investigated the effectiveness of a structured reading program and a supplemental reading program (PAL) on the reading achievement and social behavior of young children with ED who exhibited significant deficiencies in reading performance. The results of this study show that the combined intervention was effective in moderately improving some of the students' performance on measures of sound naming, blending, and nonsense words. In addition, some individuals in the study showed some improvement in time spent attending.

Another study completed by Sutherland and Snyder (2007) also shows success of students with ED with academic and behavioral problems when using a PAL approach. The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of an intervention consisting of reciprocal peer tutoring (PAL) and self-graphing of reading data on the disruptive behavior, active responding, and reading fluency of students with ED. This study indicates that during the intervention phase students' disruptive behavior decreased, while their active responding increased from baseline data. Overall, the results of these studies show that the use of PAL is beneficial for helping students with ED improve their academic and behavioral performance (Sutherland & Snyder, 2007; Wehby et al., 2003).

When to Consider Peer Instructional Supports

Research has shown that Peer-Assisted Learning (PAL) has been used successfully with individuals with a variety of disabilities, including learning disabilities, English language learners, and emotional disabilities (Wehby et al., 2003; Rafdal, McMaster, McConnell, Fuchs, & Fuchs, 2011; Wayman, McMaster, Saenz, & Watson, 2010). In addition, several studies suggest that students at all grade levels (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Kazdan, 1999; Rafdal et al., 2011), and in both general and special education classrooms, can benefit from self-monitoring interventions (Ginsburgh-Block et al., 2006; Ramsey et al., 2007).

Guidelines for Implementation of Peer Instructional Supports

One of the keys to successfully using PAL with students with BD is explicitly teaching and describing the steps in the process. Ramsey, Jolivet, and Patton (2007) describe the steps needed for students to be successful in using the PAL intervention. First, explain to the students that PAL will help them with both academic and peer interactions. It is important for teachers to

stress that practice and being “on task” is crucial to the partnership. Next, the teacher should discuss how Peer-Assisted Learning will work within the teams. They should explain that each pair will have a “tutor” and a “tutee” (make sure the more proficient student is chosen as the tutor first), and that the roles will alternate with each activity so each will have a chance to be the tutor. Again, remind the students that working together and teamwork helps *both* students to be successful. Next, the students should be taught the routine for preparing their work areas for PAL. This means that the students can clear their work areas, gather materials, get into their assigned partner groups, and arrange the materials so each student has access.

Once the students are prepared, teachers should take the time to go over what behaviors are expected of the tutor and the tutee. Expectations should be modeled and practiced to ensure student success in the intervention. These behaviors should include practicing acceptable behaviors for giving and accepting corrective feedback. In addition, students should practice how to give encouragement and praise for trying a difficult task and accomplishing the task. Next, teachers should discuss the difference between constructive and nonconstructive pair behavior with the students. Explain that constructive pair behavior looks like two students who are on task and giving each other encouragement and praise; whereas, nonconstructive behavior is when students are playing and off task, or are arguing and calling each other names. To help ensure constructive behavior many teachers develop a reinforcement plan with the students through a behavioral contract or a list of things to accomplish during the activity. Students would be able to earn points for completing the required items and for appropriate pair behavior. Points then would be able to be exchanged for a variety of reinforcers. Finally, teachers should always remember to reinforce, praise, and acknowledge the student’s hard work and correct behavior after completing a PAL session.

Cautions Regarding Peer Instructional Supports

The Promising Practice Network is a unique resource that offers credible, research-based reviews of programs that are proven to improve outcomes for all children. In 2005, the Promising Practice Network ranked PAL as one of its promising practices. This means that the program has gone under a rigorous review process and met the high standards to be considered a “best practice” or “model program.” Although research has shown that PAL interventions have many academic and behavioral benefits, there are still areas to consider based on research when implementing this approach.

First, it is important to understand that this approach should not be used as the sole academic and/or behavioral curriculum. According to the Promising Practice Network (2005), PAL has been designed to complement, not replace, existing curricula. It should be used to enable teachers to circulate around the classroom and observe students, provide feedback, and remedial lessons where necessary.

Another area that could be a challenge is the limited number of pairing options for teachers when implementing the program in a special education classroom. Sutherland and Snyder (2007) note that teachers implementing PAL in the general education have a wider range of students to choose from when determining the dyads. Often special education classroom have fewer students, which makes grouping more difficult. In addition, social skills deficits, attendance due

to suspension or refusal to participate, and emotional variability can impact the teacher's ability to effectively implement the intervention.

Overall, Peer-Assisted Learning has many benefits for students with ED. Research has shown that when used effectively students increase their academic skills, are more motivated to interact in the classroom, increase their social skills, and decrease disruptive behavior (Ginsburg-Block et al., 2006; Sutherland & Snyder, 2007; Wehby et al., 2003).

PAL is just one of several empirically-supported peer-mediated strategies. Others include classwide Peer Tutoring and Peabody Classwide Tutoring. Readers are encouraged to explore the use of peers to improve both academic and non-academic skills of classmates.

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Website Links

- Promising Practices Network: <http://www.promisingpractices.net/program.asp?programid+143>
- What Works Clearinghouse: <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/>
- Peer-Assisted Learning – Vanderbilt Kennedy Center: <http://kc.vanderbilt.edu/pals/>
