Building Bridges: Strategies to Help Paraprofessionals Promote Peer Interaction

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"I thought it was my job to sit next to Alex. If I wasn’t sitting directly next to him, I was worried that others would think I was not doing my job."—Doug, Paraprofessional

"Before I saw my relationship with the student as the most critical; now I understand that it is my responsibility to help Becca build relationships with other kids, not with me."—Susan, Paraprofessional

"I make decisions about when to remove Bryce from class every day. I think it is my responsibility to determine when he is becoming bothersome to the classroom teacher."—Lynn, Paraprofessional

The preceding quotations from paraprofessionals show the complicated relationships and challenges that can develop with their students and with other educators. Many of these challenges involve social situations.

Many students with disabilities, some by the nature of their disability, have difficulty with social interaction. They may misunderstand social cues, can be unaware of how to begin a conversation with a peer, or have trouble navigating turn taking in a social interaction. When we pair these students with adult one-on-one support, these difficulties with interaction can actually intensify. In some cases, the relationship that should occur naturally between peers is developed instead between the student and the paraprofessional (see box, “What Does the Literature Say About Paraprofessionals in the Classroom?”).

This article summarizes some of the difficulties that students who are supported by paraprofessionals often face, and provides strategies that paraprofessionals can use to minimize the social problems associated with one-on-one support.

Challenges in the Classroom: Effects of Paraprofessional Support on Peer Interaction

Although paraprofessionals can have positive effects on the students whom they support in many areas including academic and physical needs, a growing body of research documents the negative social effects of paraprofessional support. These negative effects generally derive from excessive physical paraprofessional proximity to students, and frequent removal by paraprofessional of students with disabilities from their peer groups.

Paraprofessional Proximity

One of the biggest problems with the use of paraprofessional support is that unnecessary close paraprofessional proximity can have an unintended negative social effect on students with disabilities (Giangreco et al., 1997). The following are examples of paraprofessional proximity:

- Maintaining physical contact with the student.
- Sitting directly next to the student.
- Allowing the student to sit on the paraprofessional’s lap.
- Accompanying the student everywhere in the school setting.

Documented effects of such close proximity include interference with the general educator’s sense of responsibility for the student, an overdependence on adults, a reduction in the number of peer interactions, and loss of personal control for the student (Giangreco et al., 1997).

Depending on the nature or severity of a student’s disability, and the familiarity of classmates with the student, peers may have varying levels of comfort interacting with the student with disabilities. When this possible discomfort is paired with the presence of an adult to support that student, it is much more likely that peers in the general education classroom will avoid the student with a disability.
Additionally, when peers try to support or help a student with a disability, at times the paraprofessional unintentionally rebuffs the student helper. This is illustrated by the following example, from a fourth-grade classroom: When the students were leaving the lunchroom, Larry, who is a student with autism, was walking out of the lunchroom. A peer began walking with him. When the paraprofessional caught up to the students, she said, “Oh, thanks, I’ve got him” and took Larry’s hand. The peer walked away and joined other students.

Paraprofessionals can also inadvertently interfere with group work. When students are supported by a paraprofessional and the class is doing partner or group work, a common practice is for the paraprofessional to act as the partner of the student with a disability. This practice not only takes away a valuable peer interaction opportunity, but also interferes with the aims of planned group work in which children are supposed to be learning from one another.

In other cases, peer interaction is impeded because the paraprofessional dominates conversation with general education peers. Sometimes this occurs because the general education peers are fond of the paraprofessional and enjoy interacting with him or her. However, that interaction can take the place of natural interaction students with and without disabilities might have.

Another problem demonstrated in research is that the paraprofessional may actually stop social interaction that is occurring naturally by redirecting the student with a disability. An example that we have observed was that while several students in the classroom were casually chatting while doing their work, a student who is supported by a paraprofessional was also chatting with a peer. The paraprofessional approached the girls and told them to “stop talking and get back to work.” No other students in the classroom were asked to stop talking (Causton-Theoharis & Malmgren, 2005).

The paraprofessional responded by talking directly over Andrew’s head and replied, “He is doing pretty well.” This is problematic because in this situation the paraprofessional is perceived as Andrew’s spokesperson, denying Andrew an opportunity to interact with peers.

Physical Removal

A second major challenge that students who are supported by paraprofessionals face is that they are more likely to be physically separated from their peers by the paraprofessional. This commonly plays out in two ways: (a) a paraprofessional may remove a student for logistical or convenience reasons; and (b) the student may be allowed or directed to

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**Paraprofessionals are an essential support that allows a student to be educated within an inclusive classroom environment.**

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*What Does the Literature Say About Paraprofessionals in the Classroom?*

**Movement Toward Inclusion.** Students with a variety of disabilities are being placed in general education settings with increasing frequency. Across the nation, there are over five and a half million students with special needs, and over half of them are supported in the general education setting for the majority of the school day (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). One of the reasons for this movement toward inclusive education is that the general education classroom is considered to be a rich environment for students to interact with one another as they learn together and from one another.

Student-to-student interaction is considered a critical component of learning (Cullinan, Sabornie, & Crossland, 1992; Johnson & Johnson, 1991). As general education placements are becoming more common, educators are seeking out innovative and effective ways to support students with disabilities placed in classes alongside their peers without disabilities.

**Paraprofessionals as Supports.** One of the most common support strategies used in the general education classroom for those students who many school personnel find to be the most challenging (i.e., those with severe disabilities or emotional behavioral disorders) is to assign a paraprofessional to work one-on-one with the student (French & Pickett, 1997; Giangreco, Broer, & Edelman, 1999; Giangreco, Edelman, Broer, & Doyle, 2001). Undoubtedly, paraprofessionals are a valuable asset to the field of education. They are often the essential support that allows a student to be educated within an inclusive environment.

Although the assignment of a paraprofessional is intended to have a positive effect on the student, often the presence of a paraprofessional can also have negative social effects on the student being supported (Brown, Farrington, Knight, Ross, & Ziegler, 1999; Giangreco, Edelman, Luiselli, & MacFarland, 1997; Marks, Schrader, & Levine, 1999).

Fortunately, however, several strategies exist for helping paraprofessionals to facilitate interaction between students with and without disabilities. Use of these strategies can increase the number of peer interactions for students with disabilities instead of hindering them (Causton-Theoharis & Malmgren, 2005).
participate in an individual activity as a reward for positive behavior.

These practices, coupled with the fact that many adults view independence with adult support as a goal for students with disabilities instead of interdependence with peers, lead to even more social isolation.

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**Educators and other professionals can use proven strategies to minimize the social problems associated with one-on-one support.**

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Paraprofessionals have a great deal of responsibility for making decisions about when to remove a student from the classroom (Giangreco, 2003). A common support technique is to remove a student with a disability from the general education environment when the student is perceived by the paraprofessional as being disruptive (Marks et al., 1999). This decision results in students with disabilities being removed from rich social environments.

Even within inclusive settings, our research has demonstrated that paraprofessionals are often de facto responsible for providing or denying opportunities for interaction based on where a student is physically placed (or not placed) in the classroom. For instance, paraprofessionals often work with a student away from other students (e.g., the back table), which removes the student from opportunities to interact with peers.

An even more extreme situation occurs when a paraprofessional needs to stop at the office, or run some other school errand, and he or she takes the student with a disability along, once again removing that student from the natural social environment of the classroom.

Another situation that results in the frequent removal of students from the general education classroom stems from choices about the use of rewards and consequences. Often the consequences that students with challenging behaviors receive for misbehavior involve social isolation (i.e., time out, sitting outside the room, going to the office). On the other hand, when students’ behavior is good, they are frequently also rewarded in ways that are also socially isolating (e.g., independent computer time, lunch in the room with the paraprofessional, time in the music room to play the drums without other students present). This is problematic because these activities reduce the amount of time that students have available to interact with peers at school and does nothing to alleviate any difficulties these students already have with peer interaction.

In terms of overall goals for students with disabilities, “independence” is often viewed as highly desirable. When complete independence is not viewed as an immediate obtainable goal, it is then

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### Figure 1. Ten Strategies to Promote Student-to-Student Interaction

1. Ensure that the student is in rich social environments.
2. Highlight similarities between the student and peers.
3. Re-direct student conversation to the student with a disability.
5. Use instructional strategies that promote interaction.
6. Teach others how to interact with the student with a disability.
7. Make rewards for behavior social in nature.
8. Give the student responsibilities that allow for interactions with peers.
9. Systematically fade direct support.
10. Make interdependence a goal for the student.

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It is important to understand that we all rely on natural supports in the environment in our everyday lives. Using complete independence as a criterion results in students practicing skills in isolation of existing natural supports (i.e., peer support). In turn, students with disabilities end up spending time alone practicing those skills deemed prerequisites to independence.

An example of this involves a student who is learning to dress independently. This student spends 15 minutes each day in the therapy room with a paraprofessional, practicing zipping and unzipping her coat. We suggest that instead of considering independence as the ultimate goal for students, consider interdependence as a substitute. Interdependence in this context refers to situations in which the actions of more than one student are combined and required for success.

Interdependence infers that tasks or goals are accomplished through cooperation; it does not infer that one student is completely dependent on another. A goal incorporating interdependence would potentially use peer supports and might look like: “Before recess, after attempting to zip her coat on her own, Jackie will ask a peer for help.”

### Potential Solutions: Strategies to Promote Student-to-Student Interaction

Despite the potential problems that exist with paraprofessional support for the social interaction opportunities and abilities of students with disabilities, many strategies also exist to counter these potentially negative consequences. In considering solutions, however, it is important to acknowledge that paraprofessionals do not carry out their duties without supervision. General and special education teachers play an important role in directing and sharing information and feedback with paraprofessionals. Many of the problems described previously, and the following solutions...
suggested, may be carried out by a para-
professional, but are ultimately deter-
mind by the team of teachers who are
accountable for the education of each
student. In the following section we pro-
vide several simple strategies that teams
of professionals can use to build social
bridges between students with disabili-
ties and their peers (see Figure 1).

Paraprofessionals often
inadvertently isolate
students with disabilities
from their peers.

Ensure That the Student Is in Rich
Social Environments

Students with disabilities should only
be removed from the general education
environment when it is absolutely nec-
essary. In fact, paraprofessionals should
be encouraged to look around the class-
room for natural gathering places. They
can also help students go to places in
the school environment where others
are interacting. During work time, stu-
dents with disabilities should be kept in
close proximity to other students.
Paraprofessionals should not take stu-
dents on errands within the school
unless they are functional in nature and
part of the student’s educational goals.
Consider the layout of the classroom;
think about where the student would
be placed if he or she did not have a dis-
ability and place her there.

Highlight Similarities Between the
Student and Peers

In general education classrooms, stu-
dents are continually talking and shar-
ing stories about things not necessarily
related to the curriculum (i.e., extracur-
ricular activities, hobbies, interests).
One strategy for increasing peer inter-
action is to highlight similarities between
the target student and his or her peers
(Ghere, York-Barr, & Sommerness,
2002). The best way a paraprofessional
can do this is to be conscious of con-
versations going on around the student.
When the paraprofessional notices a
similarity, she can point it out.

Some examples of highlighting simi-
larities include: As a conversation about
soccer is taking place, the paraprofes-
sional could point out that “Markus’s
sister also plays soccer.” Or, as students
are settling down after library time:
“Both of you really enjoy stories about
dinosaurs. You should look at your
dinosaur books together.” Another
example is after students have had a
common experience, ask them “What
did you think about the play you saw in
Spanish class?”

Re-direct Conversation to the
Student Being Supported

When peers engage the paraprofes-
sonal in conversation about the student,
(e.g., “What will Chloe have for
lunch?”), the conversation should be
redirected to the student. For example,
“I don’t know, ask Chloe.” When class-
mates attempt to engage the paraprofes-
sional in conversation, the paraprofes-
sional should try to involve the student
with a disability in the conversation. For
example, if a student (Diana) is telling
the paraprofessional about her trip to
the beach, the paraprofessional could
ask the student who he or she is sup-
porting: “Have you ever been to a beach
before? Tell Diana about it.”

Directly Teach and Practice
Interaction Skills

The general education classroom is fer-
tile for interaction. However, many stu-
dents with disabilities need direct
instruction in order to interact success-
fully with peers. Students with disabili-
ties also need to be able to practice
newly learned interaction skills.
Paraprofessionals can provide explicit
instruction in interaction with peers and
opportunites to practice in natural set-
tings throughout the day. Some exam-
ple of such strategies include the fol-
lowing:

• Teach students to invite other stu-
dents to play, work, or socialize with
them. For example, asking the stu-
dent with a disability, “Who do you
want to play with at recess? How can
you ask them?” For students who are
nonverbal, the paraprofessional can
provide pictures of students in the
classroom and allow the student with
a disability to point to a picture of a
peer. The peer could then be
approached by allowing the student
with a disability to use either a com-
munication device or something as
simple as an index card with the
words “Do you want to play with me?”
written on it.

• Draw attention to missed social cues
and model acceptable responses for
students. For example, “Ella just said
hello to you, how should you
respond?” Or “Oops, you accidentally
bumped into Josh, what can you
say?” For students who are nonverbal
and use a communication system,
make sure that social greetings and
age-appropriate sayings are pro-
grammed into the device.

Use Instructional Strategies That
Promote Interaction

Interactions between students may or
may not occur during all academic
times based on how the instruction is
designed. Some strategies for maximiz-
ing interaction between students with
disabilities and their peers come from
pedagogical choices, where educators
create opportunities for interaction
through their choice of instructional
strategies. Some examples of interactive
instructional strategies that promote
interaction follow.

Use Peer Supports. Using peers to
support and enhance classroom learn-
ing for all students is a practice that is
the cornerstone of many effective and
Paraprofessionals should be conscious of conversations going on among the students and make efforts to include students with disabilities.

The efficacy of various forms of cooperative learning and peer tutoring, for example, has been documented in many research studies (see McMaster & Fuchs, 2002 and Rohrback, Ginsburg-Block, Fantuzzo, & Miller, 2003 for examples of reviews of this literature).

Paraprofessionals can capitalize on some of the positive elements of peer support during instruction by enlisting partners for a student with a disability in tasks that lend themselves to that format. During academic times, it may be possible to pair the student with a disability with a peer, even if their ability levels differ. An example of this would be asking one student to check or correct math problems with a calculator while the other student solves math problems manually. In this case it is important to have students switch roles and rotate partners frequently, so that all students in the classroom get an opportunity to be a partner.

**Say Something Strategy.** (Harmin, 1994). This is a paired reading strategy that can be used when students are expected to read independently. To use this strategy, pair two students together. As they come to an agreed upon spot in the reading, direct them to turn and say something to each other relating to what they have just read. If one of the students is a non-reader, the student who can read will read the passage aloud, and both students can still then be required to “say something.”

**Turn and Talk.** (Harmin, 1994). This strategy forces students to interact about some particular part of the curriculum. For example, before asking students to write a story, ask them first to turn and talk to a peer about the story idea.

**Teach Others How to Interact With the Student With a Disability**

Paraprofessionals can also directly teach peers how to communicate with the student with a disability. For students who use a communication system, the paraprofessional can teach the student’s peers how to use and program the electronic communication system.

Another option is to directly teach peers the signs that a student may use. The paraprofessional can also interpret the behavior of the student with a disability. For example, peers can be taught that when the student throws his pencil down, the best response is to ask him if he needs any help.

The paraprofessional can also demonstrate for students how to provide physical support to a student with a disability when appropriate. An example of this would be directly teaching peers how to support a student as they walk up the stairs: “The best way to help Chiquita up the stairs is to stand by her left side and hold her elbow.”

The paraprofessional can ask other students to provide support and then show them how and coach them through the process. For example: “Steven cannot open his milk or lunch containers without help. Would you be willing to do that for him? If so, let me show you how I do it.”

At the same time, it is important to teach peers when to seek adult support. For example: “If Tonya starts to get too rough, please find an adult.”

Sometimes, support provided by a peer may need to be redirected. Sometimes peers will be too helpful, or provide too much support. Additionally, peers may initially talk to the target student in age inappropriate ways (i.e., talking to a high school student as if he or she is a young child).

In both of these cases, it is important to reshape the behavior of the student who is helping. Some examples of how to have these types of conversations follow. For the student who is providing too much support, provide them with corrective feedback: “Julia can hold her book by herself, but if you ask her a question about what you just read that would be helpful.”

For the student who is engaging the student with a disability in age inappropriate ways, let them know how the student with a disability should be talked to: “Markus is an eighth grader just like you. You can talk to him like you would talk with other eighth graders.”

These kinds of interventions are important because they give peers who are providing support some skills to help the target student become more independent while still using peer support.

**Make Behavioral Supports Social in Nature**

Providing behavioral supports that are social takes some creativity and extra planning. However, providing students with awards that are social in nature can be more fun for all the students involved and have the added benefit of...
allowing students to learn and practice social interaction skills naturally. See Figure 2 for “Ten Behavioral Supports That Are Social.”

Give the Student Responsibilities That Are Interactive

Giving students responsibilities within the classroom and school environment often addresses functional skills, but also helps build community and a sense of belonging. Paraprofessionals can take a role in assigning these responsibilities and in teaching students how to carry out new responsibilities. Responsibilities that are social in nature increase opportunities for interaction between students in positive ways.

Some ideas for roles and responsibilities that can be carried out in conjunction with a peer are detailed in Figure 3, “Ten Interactive Student Responsibilities.”

Systematically Fade One-on-One Support

One of the simplest, yet most effective ways to increase interaction for students is to fade the assistance of the paraprofessional. Fading assistance means actually reducing the type and level of support given to students in a systematic way. Reducing support not only promotes independence, but also interdependence and interaction with peers.

One question to ask when providing support to a student is “When is it absolutely necessary to sit next to a student and provide one-on-one support?” (e.g., when providing medical assistance or lifting/transfering a student).

Another question to ask is “Are there times in the student’s day when I could be providing the student with less support?” And if so, “When?”

Make Interdependence a Goal

A goal that we often have for students with disabilities is that they are independent (e.g., put on jacket independently, eat independently, etc.). If students are unable to complete a skill independently, we assume that an adult has to provide them with support.

A different way to think about this is to make interdependence a goal for students, explicitly using peer supports. Most of us rely on friends to help us with certain tasks. Giving students the skills to seek peer support is a valid and important, lifelong skill.

An example of a goal that a student might have would be: “With peer support, Tyrone will get his lunch tray and find a seat at the table.” These kinds of goals not only encourage, but demand, interaction with peers.

Final Thoughts

The strategies described in this article can be used to help students with disabilities make and maintain relationships with peers and will hopefully mitigate problems associated with the use of paraprofessionals in general education classrooms.

Teams of educators should use these strategies as tools to help paraprofessionals to build bridges between students with disabilities and their peers, which should then help facilitate the appropriate and supported inclusion of students with disabilities so that their full academic and social potential can be reached.

References


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