Quarterly Newsletter

October 2026

Peer Support in Building Friendships with Students with Autism

By Raedean Van Werven, Autism Impairment Specialist

Autism is defined by deficits in social communication and the presence of stereotypical behaviors (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). Students with autism have deficits in social reciprocity, nonverbal communication, and developing, maintaining, and understanding relationships. Stereotypical behaviors include repetitive motor movements, insistence on sameness, fixations, and sensory differences.

Between social communication differences and stereotypical autism behaviors, there is often a delay of neurotypical peers initiating interactions with students with autism (Sam & AFIRM Team, 2025). The barriers of relying too much on paraprofessionals and using functional skill curricula in the general education classroom while peers are accessing the general education curriculum have also been identified as a limit to social interactions with non-disabled peers (Carter et al., 2009).

One specific evidence-based practice for students with autism is Peer-Based Instruction and Intervention, or PBII (Sam & AFIRM Team, 2025). PBII includes many different supports that utilize peers working with their classmates with autism to work on goals for communication, social skills, joint attention, play skills, and more. Using peer models, direct instruction, and other peer-based interventions, in addition to focusing on the general education curriculum in the general education classroom, all of the students acquire new skills and learn academic content. Other benefits of PBII include social interactions in the classroom leading to other settings, and students with disabilities feel like they belong, which helps build a community focused on how students work together and are similar, rather than focusing on their differences (Carter et al., 2009). Getting peers involved in intervention is naturally reinforcing as students get older, as it reduces adult interference and leads to enjoyable exchanges between peers of the same age. Increasing the number of interactions a student has and improving social skills while promoting positive social ties helps guide students to understand relationships and can help them make friends as they generalize the skills they learned to new environments (Sam & AFIRM Team, 2025).

Peers in these roles are identified for age-appropriate skills, ability to follow directions, history of positive interactions with the student with autism, willingness to be a peer model, and more. They get instruction, monitoring, and feedback, as well as provide feedback to the team on how they feel the intervention is going. Common supports they may provide to their classmates with autism include supporting participation in the general education classroom by working together on assignments, modeling how to work in a group, helping to gather materials, giving feedback, and providing a model of the work task. For social skills and communication goals, PBII supports turn-taking, models age-appropriate social skills, reinforces communication attempts, provides scripts to peers to redirect off-topic remarks, makes introductions, takes the interactions to the playground, cafeteria, outside of school, and promotes building self-advocacy.

Additional Resources:

Afirm Module: Peer-Based instruction and Intervention (PBII) https://afirm-modules.fpg.unc.edu/Peer-Based-Instruction-Intervention/content/#/

Available in the Anne Freitag Library:

Teaching Social Skills to People with Autism: Best Practices in Individualizing Interventions by Andy Bondy and Mary Jane Weiss

Peer Support Strategies for Improving All Students' Social Lives and Learning by Erik W. Carter, Lisa S. Cushing, and Craig H. Kennedy

References:

American Psychiatric Association. (2022). Autism spectrum disorder. In *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (5th ed., text rev.). doi.org

Carter, E. W., Cushing, L. S., & Kennedy, C. H. (2009). *Peer support strategies for improving all students' social lives and learning*. Paul H. Brookes Pub.

Sam, A., & AFIRM Team. (2025). *Peer-Based Instruction and Intervention.* The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute, Autism Focused Intervention Resources and Modules. http://afirm.fpg.unc.edu