

# 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



intensify. In some cases, the relationship that should occur naturally 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.

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

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

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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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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

### 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).

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 last problem associated with paraprofessional proximity is that their peers interact with the paraprofessional instead of speaking directly to the student with a disability. For example, in a kindergarten setting where Andrew (a student with cerebral palsy who is highly verbal) is supported by a paraprofessional, another student approached the

paraprofessional and asked, "How is Andrew doing today?"

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

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

**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.
4. Directly teach and practice interaction skills in natural settings.
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.

common for educators to write IEP goals that state, "With adult support the student will \_\_\_\_\_." Frequently, the paraprofessional is the one giving that support.

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 paraprofessional, but are ultimately determined by the team of teachers who are accountable for the education of each student. In the following section we provide several simple strategies that teams of professionals can use to build social bridges between students with disabilities and their peers (see Figure 1).

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## **Paraprofessionals often inadvertently isolate students with disabilities from their peers.**

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### **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 necessary. In fact, paraprofessionals should be encouraged to look around the classroom for natural gathering places. They can also help students go to places in the school environment where others are interacting. During work time, students with disabilities should be kept in close proximity to other students. Paraprofessionals should not take students 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 disability and place her there.

### **Highlight Similarities Between the Student and Peers**

In general education classrooms, students are continually talking and sharing stories about things not necessarily related to the curriculum (i.e., extracurricular activities, hobbies, interests). One strategy for increasing peer interaction is to highlight similarities between the target student and his or her peers (Ghere, York-Barr, & Sommersness,

2002). The best way a paraprofessional can do this is to be conscious of conversations going on around the student. When the paraprofessional notices a similarity, she can point it out.

Some examples of highlighting similarities include: As a conversation about soccer is taking place, the paraprofessional 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 paraprofessional 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 classmates attempt to engage the paraprofessional in conversation, the paraprofessional 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 supporting: "Have you ever been to a beach before? Tell Diana about it."

### **Directly Teach and Practice Interaction Skills**

The general education classroom is fertile for interaction. However, many students with disabilities need direct instruction in order to interact successfully with peers. Students with disabilities also need to be able to practice newly learned interaction skills. Paraprofessionals can provide explicit instruction in interaction with peers and opportunities to practice in natural settings throughout the day. Some examples of such strategies include the following:

- Teach students to invite other students to play, work, or socialize with

them. For example, asking the student 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 communication 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 programmed 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 maximizing 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 learning for all students is a practice that is the cornerstone of many effective and

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**Paraprofessionals should be conscious of conversations going on among the students and make efforts to include students with disabilities.**

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popular instructional interventions. 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 stu-

dents 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 dis-

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**Peer supports and pairings can help all students build social skills; paraprofessionals need to encourage these natural supports.**

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ability. 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

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**Instead of considering independence as the ultimate goal for students, consider interdependence as a substitute.**

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### Figure 2. Ten Behavioral Supports That Are Social

1. Shoot baskets with a peer.
2. Invite a friend to sit with you at lunch.
3. Go to the movies after school with other students from class.
4. Make bead necklaces with a friend during study hall.
5. Select two peers to have lunch with the teacher.
6. Play a math game with other students.
7. Play computer games with friends.
8. Pop popcorn with a peer and deliver it to the class.
9. Read with a selected friend in the library.
10. With a friend, play a game of Uno™ against the principal.

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 sup-

port 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/transferring 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.

### Figure 3. Ten Interactive Student Responsibilities

1. Return books to the library with a friend.
2. Recycle with a rotating buddy.
3. Straighten books in the library with a friend.
4. Stuff mailboxes in the office or the classroom with a friend.
5. Water plants with a friend.
6. Prepare snack with a buddy.
7. Pass out papers with a partner.
8. Collect homework, books, or music with a partner.
9. Buy supplies for home economics class with a friend.
10. Sharpen pencils with a partner.

## Providing behavioral supports that are social takes some creativity and extra planning.

### 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.

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