



Pillars of Peer to Peer

What is a Pillar?

A pillar is an important part of a building that holds up a roof or ceiling. Pillars make a building strong. Peer to Peer also has pillars, they are ideas rather than physical objects. The pillars of Peer to Peer are ways to run a program that make the program strong and high quality.

The Pillars of Peer to Peer

First and Foremost, Create a Participation Model

One of the most critical components of designing a successful Peer to Peer program is grounding it in a “Participation Model” mindset. Students who want to be peer partners/LINKs are not interested in taking on the role of teacher, teacher assistant, or parent. Keep in mind that kids are kids, they want to be kids, and should be given the freedom to be kids. Replace words such as “mentor,” “mentee,” and “role model” with “peer,” “friend,” and “LINK” as you develop program materials and as you train staff and peers. The shift in philosophy and practice from “help” to “participate” will yield powerful outcomes. The goal of Peer to Peer is authentic inclusive opportunities that promote belonging. Teach, advocate, and continually revisit with staff and students what participation means, what a LINK is, and what a LINK is not.

Peer to Peer isn't One More Thing, it is the Thing

If you could choose just one evidence-based practice that would have a far-reaching effect on the quality of life of students, choose Peer to Peer. It is not just an evidence-based practice, it is a way of being together that focuses on shared experiences in which peers have the opportunity to connect, and build communities where belonging is a priority. When implemented with fidelity, no other “thing” has the potential to be as broadly impactful, having lifelong impact on students, families, teachers, schools, and communities.

All Means ALL

All means ALL in two ways. First, ALL students on the autism spectrum will benefit from well-designed and effectively implemented Peer to Peer programs. Students should not be excluded from Peer to Peer based on their educational programming or perceived strengths and needs. All autistic students, with their unique combination of autistic traits and in all types of educational settings, need to be given the opportunity to participate in Peer to Peer.





Second, ALL students in the building have the opportunity to be peer partners. Historically, the practice of recruiting students with a specific social and academic profile has been commonplace. While honor roll students, athletes, and other established student leaders can be wonderful LINKs, it is critical to have a broader view. Seek out and include ALL students, including those who may be considered behaviorally, socially, and/or academically “at risk.” These students absolutely have the capacity to be amazing peers and will rise to meet high expectations. Additionally, unintended benefits including fewer behavioral reports, improved attendance, and increased academic successes have been documented. Peer to Peer may just be the “one thing” for these LINKs as well.

Recognize the Strengths and Embrace the Differences of All

Peer to Peer connections must be grounded in the belief that all people have value and make meaningful contributions to their school community. By celebrating each other's strengths, appreciating each other's differences, and respecting each other's perspectives, Peer to Peer participation models can be a mechanism for counteracting ableism - the discrimination toward and unfair treatment of people with disabilities. Ableism can be replaced with appreciation when Peer to Peer leaders and participants embrace neurodiversity, accept disability as a natural part of life, teach that we have a shared responsibility to understand each other, and believe that we make each other better.

Focus on Developing Medium of Exchange Opportunities

Friendships can and often do happen when kids are allowed to be kids and opportunities to engage in shared experiences are provided. Early in the Peer to Peer connection, adults may have to organize and facilitate activities to support students as they get comfortable with each other. Once the peer relationship has a foundation, the students will naturally discover new mediums of exchange resulting in authentic connections through common activities.

Be Intentional but Allow for Natural Connections

When scheduling your LINKs, be mindful of common interests. The basis for any friendship is rooted in such shared connections. However; be willing to replace the “perfect match” mindset with one that allows for natural connections to occur. By modeling respect, passion, and joy, you are setting the stage for unplanned and perhaps unexpected connections to be made.

Understand that Peer to Peer is an Evidence-based Practice

Peer to Peer has a broad research base and has been identified by the National Clearinghouse on Autism Evidence and Practice (NCAEP) as an Evidence-Based Practice (EBP) for students with ASD. Research shows that Peer to Peer participation models have led to positive outcomes for students with disabilities in numerous areas including social, communication, academic, and play skills. There are reciprocal benefits as well. LINK students grow in compassion, kindness, empathy, confidence, understanding, and other areas as well as they become advocates for inclusion, equity, and belonging in their school community.





Start Somewhere - and Start Now

Waiting for the perfect time or for the perfect plan will prevent your team from getting your Peer to Peer program off the ground. It is okay to start small, but do start now. The details of your Peer to Peer story will be uniquely yours and can be written and edited as you go.

References

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